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Hit it, boys

Jazz-A-Ma-Tazz brings quintessential art form to students with a ‘poverty of experience’

By Vivek Kemp

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Hayes Greenfield’s sax rises above the high-top snare, the upright bass and the keys. Soon, the linoleum-lined cafeteria at Immokalee Middle School becomes a New York City jazz hall.

A mellow string of notes curls from Greenfield’s lips. The man on the keys mimics the tune.

Greenfield’s playing a brand of music that few of the students have ever heard. Music that doesn’t get airtime on MTV. Music that isn’t built on bling.

And, yet, this is music that’s at the root of most every pop and hip-hop song these students know so well.

The band stops.

“Jazz,” Greenfield calls out to the middle school crowd, “Jazz is nourishment for the soul.”

Most students seem to tune him out. “This just isn’t what I would like to be doing with my afternoon,” they seem to be saying, collectively.

“Put up your hands if you like pizza,” Greenfield says, ignoring the audience’s apparent disinterest. About 80 hands shoot up.

“Meatballs?” More hands shoot up.

“Sushi?” Most every hand goes down.

“See. Some of that stuff you like more than others. It’s like hip-hop. What about other music: ragtime, Dixieland, boogie-woogie? OK, hit it boys,” Greenfield cries, as the band breaks into a jazz-version of “The Flintstones” theme song.

This is Jazz-A-Ma-Tazz, a program Greenfield created to introduce students to the sounds of one of America’s quintessential art forms. He has worked with students everywhere, from the Bronx to Europe.

The native New Yorker headlines some renowned jazz clubs, including the Blue Note, Birdland, the Knitting Factory and CBGBs. He uses his extensive knowledge of music and art in the Jazz-A-Ma-Tazz program to transform popular music into jazz tunes that students can groove to.

“I’m using jazz as a vehicle,” Greenfield says. “These kids are hungry for this. They need this stimulation.”

He’s aware of the students’ seeming disinterest, but he believes in the persuasive power of jazz. “Sometimes I have a tough time with groups, but by the end they all have a good time and get into the music,” he says.

Greenfield brought his unique program to elementary, middle and high schools in Immokalee last week, as a part of the Miracle Enrichment Program. The program works with students who are at a high risk of academic failure.

Miracle students get an extra 15 hours of instruction per week, explains Janice Paine, program manager for the United Arts Council of Collier County, which funds the program.

“These students don’t always have the resources that kids might,” Paine says. “Parents of Miracle students don’t all own computers or have the ability to go to museums on the weekends.

“It’s not just sheer poverty. It’s poverty of experience,” Paine says. “Parents might not even think of taking their kids to a museum or a play.”

Paine says she uses the Miracle program to bring those cultural experiences to the students. “The arts are part of a well-rounded education for kids. Miracle levels the playing field for kids in the county. So parents who can’t afford private music or dance lessons still have a chance to get their kids involved.”

Beyond being introduced to jazz, Paine says kids learn about more than music.

“I think these students are getting a sense of the real joy of creativity,” she says. “They get to listen to a musician who is well-educated and well-traveled, and they get to meet an artist who is completely engaged in what he’s doing.

“It gives them an idea of an outlet, so in that sense, it gives them a career option.”

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Back in the middle-school cafeteria, Greenfield finishes a tune.

“You know that song?” he asks.

“It’s the ‘Flintstones’ song,” one student answers.

“That’s right. It’s actually the Flintstones melody. We just took it and made it into jazz,” the sax man says.

“That’s what’s so neat about jazz. You can improvise. You can make things up, and we all love to do that, right?”

Part of Greenfield’s appeal is his willingness to take kids seriously. He doesn’t just dismiss silly behavior or poor grades.

“I’m dyslexic,” says the 49-year-old. “I couldn’t describe musical intervals in words. I mean, I’ve studied the stuff so much, but it never sticks. But I can always find the intervals on my horn.”

Greenfield also says, like most kids, he’s very self-conscious. That helps him relate.

“Compared to other musicians, I want to be liked. You know, I’ve recorded CDs, produced films, scored movies. But these other musicians — these cats are good. A lot of times, I don’t think I’m good enough.”

He continues. “I want to show these kids that it’s OK to be vulnerable.” He pauses for a moment. “And maybe that’s my therapy. Maybe working with kids teaches me to let go and be vulnerable.”

The program focuses on the basic element of jazz — improvisation — to help students break free from their tendency to group-think, and to explore their need for self-expression.

“In jazz, everybody is supporting a common goal, working together to create this wonderful music, but everybody also gets a chance for self-expression,” Greenfield says.

With the popularity of TV and glamor magazines, children feel less secure in themselves, the jazzman says.

“They’re afraid to stand out and be different,” he says. “This is a commercial generation, and all they’re getting sold on is blending in.”

He uses call and response exercises to engage the kids, and in his words, “make sure they’re actively listening.”

For example, he’ll skat a line — boo, be, be, bah, tsss ... yeah — and ask for a volunteer to repeat it. “Who likes to take risks? Who likes to do something they’ve never done before?”

He calls on a girl from the front row.

“OK, everyone, repeat after me, ‘Skat me a solo,’” Greenfield says.

He hands the girl a mic.

She laughs bashfully and tries to give the sax man his mic back.

“No. Come on. You can do this.”

The drums start with, “tsss-ts-tsss-ts-tsss.” The keys come next.

After a few minutes of cajoling, the girl finds a groove and some courage. Then, out of some well of creativity she didn’t seem to know she had, she starts in with her own custom skat.

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Throughout the program, Greenfield serves as a salesman of jazz music.

“When you leave here, go home and check out Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins,” he says, over and over. “I urge all of you to explore this stuff.”

Greenfield is aware that a majority of these students will never get into jazz, but he says his program is about more than the music. “It’s about coming into your own,” he says. “Someone should come after me and tell these kids about the history of jazz. I just want to make sure they hear it.”

Like Joslin Alberque, who toward the end of the show was called up on stage to try to keep a green hula-hoop moving around his waist. Accompanied, of course, by the band.

At an age when fellow students can be judgmental and critical, his peers cheer him on instead. They laugh and clap in support. All the while, they're unknowingly being bathed in jazz music, experiencing its beat.

"I think it's interesting cuz I learned something different," Alberque says afterward. "I never listened to jazz like this. I liked it."

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