

Arts and Entertainment**Local teachers keeping students 'jazzed'**

by Brenda Saylor

Local music teachers are striving to keep a traditional American genre of music alive in a digitized musical era—and judging by the success of jazz programs in the Centre Region, they are doing a good job.

Each week, band rooms around Centre County are transformed into jazz clubs as students let creativity flow through their instruments in ways usually restrained by traditional concert band conventions.

The passion for jazz radiating from students stems from the unbridled passion for the music shown by their teachers. At the epicenter of jazz in Centre County, which includes programs in Bellefonte, Penns Valley and Bald Eagle, is Richard Victor in the State College Area School District.

“Jazz was a product of my upbringing,” said Victor, State College Area High School Band Director, who is expected to retire next year after 35 years with the district. “To me, being in high school and having a great jazz band just went hand in hand.”

Victor grew up in Bucks County playing in

what he called “one of the finest bands in the state” and started the jazz program at the high school almost immediately after being hired in 1976.

“I thought, ‘These kids need to know jazz,’” Victor said.

What began as a small stage band expanded into a larger jazz band within its first year. Eventually, a second band was added to accommodate the overwhelming interest.

Today, the State College Area High School Jazz Band is the school’s premier jazz band, and has been recognized internationally for its superior talent. The group has performed in Europe several times, has been ranked as finalists in the Essentially Ellington Competition in New York City, and has received top ratings at adjudication festivals around the country and in Canada.

Victor said a young student who sees the band’s achievements is inspired to learn jazz in their early years.

“Students in fourth grade see the success of the high school jazz band and say, ‘Wow, I want to do that when I get to high school,’” said Victor.

Young people are exposed to the genre as early as elementary school, when “Jazz II” es its annual school tour, but they first have the opportunity to play in a jazz band at the middle school level.

Kovalchik, Mount Nittany Middle School band director, assistant to the high school marching band and its Jazz II director, started the jazz program at Park Forest Junior High in 1978 after spending seven years teaching elementary school.

“To me, it was just part of the curriculum,” Kovalchik, who is also retiring next year, said. “I enjoyed it personally so much that it was a natural sequence of events to start a jazz band when I started teaching.”

One of the biggest challenges, Kovalchik said, is getting students comfortable with improvisation (playing an instrument with no written music) at a young age.

“Improvisation is the heart and soul of jazz,” said Kovalchik. “If a kid is glued to a book all the time, they learn to be technical



Photo by Shelly Mato
State College High Band Director Richard Victor shares his enthusiasm at a recent rehearsal.

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Ken Burns speaks on passion, polarity and baseball

by Shelly Mato

“I am the one honored to be here,” said filmmaker Ken Burns at the opening of a press conference held prior to his commencement address. “Lives have been transformed here at Penn State,” said Burns.

Burns was on hand May 15 to give the commencement address at the graduation ceremony for the College of Communications and receive an honorary doctorate from Penn State. This was Burns’ first visit to State College, “but not my last,” he promised.

Burns, who has been making documentaries for more than 30 years, said, “I feel like I have the same passion for my work as I did at first.” He admits his passion for a project becomes a mission, like getting more people to visit, appreciate and support our national parks. “We invented this system of preserving land for the public use,” he said, and now that practice is global.

“I was walking with the superintendent of

Gettysburg (National Military Park) and as he reached down to pick up a wrapper he said, “This is all your fault.” The park’s attendance had gone up after ‘The Civil War’ aired.”

That ability to affect change was one of Burns’ messages. “You can, through your efforts in writing, in film, in the media produce action in others,” said Burns.

The nature of the media and what it communicates was another of Burns’ messages.

“Students in communication must realize what’s out there,” he said, pointing out that the country is increasingly polarized. “We talk over each other,” he explained, “and there’s money to be made in the argument.”

Burns warned that this polarity is a danger, quoting Abraham Lincoln that “the greatest threat comes from within.”

Burns, who said he planned to “describe the abyss if we do not mitigate this tendency to focus on differences and divisiveness,” has not shied away from difficult



Photo by Shelly Mato
Filmmaker Ken Burns talks about what drives his work during a his May visit to Penn State.

topics in his work. Yet he sees his films as “fundamentally patriotic because they are willing to question many assumptions and to bump into issues that many of us would rather ignore, disguise or distort.”

A winner of four Emmys and two

Academy award nominations, Burns has covered such wide ranging topics as the Civil War and World War II, jazz, the national parks, and Americans including Jack Johnson, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Huey Long. His latest film, scheduled for release in September and entitled “The Tenth Inning,” is a sequel to his nine-part series on baseball.

“I vowed never to do a sequel,” Burns said, “but there has been tremendous action in the last 20 years. It was irresistible.” The film will look at the last two decades’ controversies in baseball such as drug use among players and the temptations of money.

“Baseball is such a surprisingly precise mirror of our society,” said Burns. “Baseball becomes a kind of Trojan horse” for examining the complicated dynamic of American life, he said.

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and they don't learn to use their artistic and musical side. When you throw jazz in, they learn to be creative."

Kovalchik holds an improvisation class at Mount Nittany Middle School for students to become comfortable playing without music.

"My job here is to get them over the fear of failure. All of a sudden, you're closing the book and taking the music away from them—but when the light goes on and a kid plays an improvised solo that's really good, it's pretty neat."

Kovalchik is notorious for striking terror in the hearts of middle school students and for his rigid work ethic and booming voice on the marching band field. But he is also reverently known for incorporating life lessons into his teaching to produce not only good musicians, but also good citizens.

"I was never one for false compliments," he said. "I wait until something really posi-

tive happens, and when I give the kid a compliment, they know it's genuine."

Kovalchik's more laid-back demeanor in jazz band sometimes comes as a surprise to his former middle school students.

"Concert band and jazz band are way different—I know I surprise a lot of people in jazz band," he said with a laugh.

He also plays the tuba with The Tarnished Six, a local Dixieland band that has recorded CDs and played around the country, and can be heard swinging at various venues around Centre County including Friday nights at Hi-Way Pizza where band members invite high school musicians to join them.

"It's a type of music that has been so much fun for all of us," he said. "A lot of people have fun listening to it, and people respond."

Kim Lenaway, Park Forest Middle School band director, also teaches the importance of improvisation to students at the beginner jazz level. The Park Forest Middle School Jazz Band performs classic jazz standards, ballads, and rock and roll hits at various concerts and

school assemblies.

Victor and Kovalchik bring their long friendship to the success of State College's music programs as well. Having first met in the Penn State Blue Band, they began their teaching careers around the same time and worked together to build up the program's excellent reputation.

Both teachers are confident the jazz program will continue to excel after they retire.

"I don't want this to be considered the 'golden years' of State College," said Victor. "The greatest gift the future students can give us is to keep performing at the level they're performing."

His first year at State High, Victor launched a high school jazz festival that gave State High, Penns Valley and others a new venue in which to perform. That festival, which continues today, helped spawn jazz programs in Bellefonte and Bald Eagle, bands that formed and joined the festival in its first dozen years, Victor said.

Victor said that one of the most gratifying

parts of his long career has been hearing from former students who have gone on to apply their lessons learned in music, whether playing professionally or simply applying the principles to their everyday lives. Staying in touch has become easier through Facebook, where Victor has connected with hundreds of former students.

Students who continue their education at Penn State have more opportunities, through the jazz program built and supported by teachers such as Dan Yoder and Ronnie Burrage. Yoder recently credited Victor and his annual jazz festival for keeping jazz alive in the region.

Building a successful music program might seem daunting, but Victor said it has been "not really a challenge, just more of a process."

"The opportunity was always here. It was just a matter of plugging away with it, hiring good people, and trying to develop a curriculum that gave every child a chance to succeed in music," he said.

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"There have been lots of catastrophes in baseball, and each generation says baseball's done," over issues such as the Black Sox scandal and the inclusion of black players, he said. "Yet it is the only game that has accompanied every generation."

Burns has other projects in the works as well, including films on Prohibition, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, the war in Vietnam, and the Central Park jogger case.

"My projects choose me," said Burns, noting that he is mostly interested in a good story. "History atrophies because we forget

to tell stories," he said, and in telling the story, there is a responsibility to "focus on sincerity."

"I make elemental films," said Burns, "they are done authentically and finally, honorably."

Seeing the game of baseball as a microcosm for America, said Burns, means that just like baseball needs to regulate itself, America too must examine itself. "We made ourselves the richest nation on earth by each giving something up," he noted. "What is the America that you envision, and then how are you going to get it done without common sacrifice?" he asked.

His passionate answer is that we will not.



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Swincinski brings organic designs to items for home

by Veronica Winters

Printmaker-textile artist Annie Swincinski is a smart, young woman who takes bold steps towards her goal of becoming a fully independent artist. Annie creates and sells her art on Etsy, the social commercial website for handmade and vintage items. Her “organically inspired designs” are made by making one-of-a-kind prints on fabric.

Swincinski makes simple organic designs, hand sews and hand prints those on beautiful pillows, placemats, scarves, pouches, purses and towels. The artist also creates original, affordable screen prints and woodcuts as well as large mixed media paintings on canvas.

Originally from Windber, Pa., and a graduate of the Savannah College of Art and Design, Swincinski has just moved her studio from a basement of her home to the top floor of the Gamble Mill restaurant in Bellefonte.

The artist greets every visitor with a smile, showing her new space and her original product line she has been developing for years. Being a printmaker, she creates original woodcuts and also uses one of several printmaking techniques to do hand-printing on fabric.

Swincinski starts her creative process with a sharpie drawing on paper. Those images are very simple, fluid and organic. They are made of single lines in black and are reminiscent of whispery blades of grass or elegant flower buds, little curvy tree branches, wind turbines and chirping birds.

“I enjoy observing the natural surroundings here in rural Pennsylvania, translating them to bold graphic pattern that can be incorporated into modern and contemporary interiors. I also look toward modern trends in color and textile design,” she said.

The artist scans her black-and-white drawing into her computer to resize the image and clean up the lines using Photoshop. After that the artist prints her design on a transparency and the image is ready to be transferred onto silk screen.

Silk screen looks like a piece of semi-transparent fabric hand-stretched on bars, looking similar to a stretched painting. She transfers her design onto silkscreen with a

In the studio

pencil and then blocks out all the negative space around her image with acrylic screen filler. After that, she coats the screen with emulsion paint in a darkroom and lets it dry. In her next step the artist exposes the silkscreen to the light for 45 minutes and washes it out.

“I learned this process in high school,” she said.

The artist reaches her final step of screen printing by placing clean, ironed fabric underneath her screen and running acrylic fabric inks through the screen with a squeegee. When the printed design is completely dry, she finishes up the project by hand-sewing it into pillows, purses or scarves.

The amount of work and the cost of materials put into each project are quite impressive but the artist is hesitant to raise her prices on hand sewn pillows, purses and woodcuts just yet. “Dwell in Style” is a company that began with the stifled creativity of a graphic designer and a dream to make affordable, organically inspired designs for the everyday dwelling.

“My main philosophy is to deliver original art for cheap so everyone can afford it. Printmaking is the perfect outlet to make unique original works of art in multiples and small editions,” Swincinski said.

There is another side to her designs. Swincinski’s original, oxidized brown-red-dish paintings have a minimalistic approach to their subject matter and are painted with true metallic pigments. They get oxidized to create various hues of rusted iron, patina copper and bronze. The artist also uses silver leafing and sometimes creates acrylic textured surfaces on them as well.

“I truly believe the atmosphere within our home is critical to who we are and how we live our daily lives. A well-chosen piece of art can reflect the individuality and character of its owner and perhaps prompt a smile or moment of pause in the thick of our busy lives,” Swincinski said.

For her time-management the artist came up with an idea of creating a magnetic wall, using one of her white walls. She intends to

spray magnetic paint and chalkboard on it to be able to make constantly changing notes and deadlines written with chalk.

The artist often exhibits her paintings in State College and shows her other original prints and hand-made designs in juried national festivals throughout the East Coast as well as at Modern Printed Matter in Warren R.I., and the Driftwood Alley Art Gallery in Montauk, N.Y.

Swincinski’s designs have been featured in blogs and magazines, including Apartment Therapy, Kaboodle, London’s Daily Telegraph, Stylehive, the NYC issue of DIY city MAG, the Centre Daily Times, the Daily Collegian and Etsy’s own Storque. She was most recently published in Dorit Elisha’s new book, “Printmaking + Mixed Media” 2009, Interweave press.

For more information about the artist and her product line, go to www.etsy.com/shop/DwellinStyle.



Photo by Veronica Winters
Artist Annie Swincinski creates on-of-a-kind prints at her new studio, Dwell in Style, in Bellefonte.

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TEMPEST STUDIOS
106 W. BISHOP STREET, BELLEFONTE
www.tempeststudios.org | info@tempeststudios.org
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