

**EXPERIENCE — JOE ANDERIES, CASTLE ROCK, COLO.
TEACHING MUSIC BEYOND BORDERS
BY GINA JONES, LOS ANGELES REGION #4 BUREAU CHIEF**

Joe Anderies, an SGI member based out of Castle Rock, Colo., is no ordinary elementary school music teacher. Very few teachers in the country even attempt to do what he does, which is open up the world of jazz to beginning-level music students. Most teachers feel that while teaching basic music skills to students — incorporating jazz, which by its nature introduces concepts of creativity and spontaneity — is beyond these students' level of learning. Not so, says Joe.

Almost a decade ago, Joe created the Beyond Borders Project, a unique program that allows students to go beyond the traditional constraints that most people put on that level of instrumental music. In general, he says, "Most elementary-level music students are taught to read music — and the music they're reading is somewhat canned and predictable." While in his program, they're learning jazz rhythms and jazz styles alongside comprehensive instruction in solid basics. They have a chance to be spontaneous and to learn to use their ear, rather than just reading music. Joe actually writes a lot of the music for his program, "creating pieces that are right in their ballpark — where it's within their capabilities, but also a challenge."

The tools of his trade are a little unconventional for grade school teachers as well. His utilization of computer sequencing equipment makes for a unique atmosphere in learning. Computer sequencing technology is basically a digitized recording device, which is set up through a synthesizer. So it is capable of making the sounds of many instruments all at once. One of the many uses of this technology allows for one instrument's part to be selected and recorded alone for purposes of allowing a student to take home a practice-tape. Says Joe: "Sequencing really is what jazz is — a sequencing of musical ideas. So in a way, it has a connection already to the music, even though it's technology based."

In addition, he has created a successful mentoring program. Not only does he utilize professional musicians from the community to come in and work with the students, he also encourages his graduates to come back and work with his current students as well. From the many times the professional musicians have visited to interface with the students: "I've consistently seen just this magnetic unification that happens by setting these professionals right down in the middle of the kids. And immediately it is incredibly infectious. The students' playing rises a couple of levels above where they were before." And the professionals, says Joe, "come out of this experience so excited — a lot of times a progression is taking place right before their eyes. And they feel like they had something to do with it."

Each year for the past 10 years, his students, along with professional jazz musicians, have put on a Spring Concert for between 400 and 500 parents, family and friends of the students. This past year, the event made the local television news broadcast when his smaller jazz combo group went to a local recording studio to cut a CD of their several pieces.

Another interesting tool Anderies uses in his teaching is "call and response." This technique is something of a "drawing out" of the students' capabilities. A more experienced musician will begin by playing a few measures of music — the "call." Afterward, the student will reply — in the beginning by mimicking what was just played, and eventually by playing their own unique response. "Theoretically," says Joe, "these kids don't know a whole lot about jazz yet. But they do have a sixth sense — and most of them have pretty good ears if you give them a chance to use them."

Joe was asked to present a clinic on his innovative teaching techniques at the International Association of Jazz Educators 26th Annual Conference held Jan. 6–9 at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, Calif. Toward the end of the clinic, students displayed “call and response” in a performance-style presentation. One by one students playing different instruments volunteered to team up with Joe, each displaying his or her own unique style in calling out or responding to him and to one another. A contagious wave of excitement seemed to pass through the musicians and audience alike.

Joe began his practice of Buddhism in the early '80s, when he was introduced to it by an SGI member who, interestingly, had only come to tune his piano. Later they went on to create a successful jazz band together, along with several other SGI members, called IMAGES. His band made three recordings, two of which were on the national charts. That experience led to his meeting flautist Nestor Torres and subsequently going on the road in the late '80s with the SGI performance “This Is America,” which toured around the country.

Having spent many years working with the local SGI youth division brass band, he eventually concluded that it was sharing his music with others, teaching others, that brought him the most satisfaction. Though his career as a professional musician was successful, he began to realize that this was not his mission in life. When he returned home from the “This Is America” tour, he finished up his college teaching degree, and began student teaching.

And in his first teaching job as an elementary school music teacher, he immediately began looking for ways to use the tools he had acquired in those experiences on the road with the “This Is America” tour. He was determined to create an environment somehow different from the normal classroom situation. And it was from this desire that the Music Beyond Borders program was launched. Joe is now finishing up his master’s degree in music education this May. “For me,” he says, “continuing to look at ways to grow myself is the reason the kids really want to follow. And I can see that connection all the time.”

Joe takes time before and after class to meet with students who want to excel, which then causes students to “challenge themselves against their own selves — not against the group.” When asked how his Buddhist practice has affected his career most significantly, he talked about cherishing every person — every person’s life. “The main point that I can connect with my faith is valuing each human being,” he explains. “I have always related to SGI President Ikeda on this concept. I love to see how he finds something valuable to nurture in every person.” Despite how overwhelming some days can be for him as a teacher, he says, “I’ve always held onto the concept that every person is valuable and has things to gain here.” Involvement in the elective band and orchestra program at Joe’s schools has skyrocketed in the past few years, with almost every fifth and sixth grade student now participating. “I see this as a reflection of the jazz music, which by nature is so alive and creative,” he says. “Younger students have been hearing these spring concerts every year, watching the student musicians interface with the professionals. When they get the chance to sign up in fifth grade, the response is virtually unanimous!”

When asked whether he would perform again, he explained: “I do occasionally perform and several times a year I also get to play with the professionals who come out to interface with the students. I continue to work on my playing craft in my university studies and on my own. But that’s not my number one focus. When I get home on a Friday night, I want to spend time with my family.” Joe’s teaching career appears to have offered him the perfect forum to express his love of music and his love of people.

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