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The Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School Jazz Ensemble



Welcome to Tone Town!

The JodyJazz-endorsed Brooks Middle School Band raises jazz awareness in Harvey, Ill.

By Hilary Brown

They're the youngest group in history to play the Chicago Jazz Festival. They've rubbed elbows with Orbert Davis and Ron Carter and have their sights set on playing the White House. And after receiving an endorsement deal with JodyJazz, the Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School jazz ensemble is sounding better than ever.

JodyJazz President Jody Espina caught wind of the group from saxophonist Dudley Owens, who is currently endorsed by the Savannah, Ga.-based mouthpiece company. Owens had recently conducted a clinic at Brooks Middle Schools and initially tipped Espina off to the virtually undiscovered Harvey, Ill., ensemble.

"Dudley knew of the band," Espina explained. "They were one of two middle school bands invited to play the Midwest Clinic. They were going to have a show and wanted to print a full-page ad for me in their catalog. They needed mouthpieces, so it sounded like a good deal, but as a low-income

school, I was happy to do it on that."

It was also Owens who sang the praises of Espina's bright, articulate product to Brooks Middle School Band Director Roosevelt Griffin. Griffin said that the group's talent far exceeds the normal junior high repertoire. And for a six-piece saxophone section, which breezes through Count Basie and bebop, and occasionally deviates from middle-school jazz standards, the school-supplied mouthpieces just weren't cutting it.

"Most of these kids are coming from mouthpieces for concert band," Espina explained. "Concert band mouthpieces are very quiet, so they blend in with the flutes. It's a very different sound than you hear in the jazz world. So many

bands are struggling against a drumset, some brass that's blaring and maybe a bass guitar."

Interested in the prospect of helping an underprivileged neighborhood, Espina equipped the saxophone section with a selection of mouthpieces—a round-chambered, traditional design and the brighter, more articulate JodyJazz Classic model—which allowed students to tailor their horns according to their style and skill level.

"I talked to [Griffin], and I do try to customize the mouthpieces to some degree," Espina said. He noted that the jazz mouthpieces, equipped with a removable spoiler for volume, are like "having an instant sixth gear that lets [students] project more. It adds to the collective synergy of school bands."

What resulted from the partnership was an unprecedented amount of public attention—for both the middle school ensemble and Espina himself. The realization came full-circle during the 2010 Midwest Clinic, a prestigious band and orchestra conference in Chicago. The JodyJazz-toting Brooks ensemble—already adept at seamless soloing and improvising—blew away a ballroom of more than 500 people and received three standing ovations. For Espina, the endorsement was a rather unexpected marketing tool.

"Their concert was just unbelievable," Espina said. "The band directors just streamed up to the JodyJazz booth, all wanting mouthpieces for their sax sections." The decision to endorse middle school bands has turned into business as usual for Espina, who recently offered an endorsement deal to Caleb Chapman's Utah-based Super Crescent Band.

Band directors weren't the only ones who noticed a difference. Griffin said that the confidence level of his students has soared, as has the popularity of the jazz ensemble class. "We've definitely grown," said Griffin, whose current jazz band now features a much larger sax section. He also said that even now, after receiving their mouthpiece makeover, the veterans of the original horn section stand a bit taller as they perform.

"They noticed the actual tone was a bit better," Griffin said. "It really opened up their sound. My lead alto player now has two JodyJazz mouthpieces, and he switches them out depending on what type of music he's playing."

Espina added that the change is quite obvious just from looking at the students' faces. "They're having more fun," he said. "And when they're having fun, everything just starts to gel."

The Brooks Middle School Jazz Band's Midwest Clinic fame has affected more than their sound. More importantly, the success has had far-reaching cultural effects. It's revitalized an overall interest in jazz music, not only for the students, but for the entire town of Harvey.

"We've brought a lot of exposure and a lot of good things to the community," Griffin said. "We're trying to bring back jazz as a cultural change to Harvey, and we're doing it starting with the kids."

The band director hopes to bring more per-

formers to the area, and he's received no shortage of offers. Recent visitors and clinicians have included Ari Brown, the Fatum Brothers, Ernie Adams and Greg Ward—an all-star lineup that he's referred to as "a pretty big list."

"We brought out a group recently from New York to the school," Griffin recalled. "A lot of parents came out to the concert who normally wouldn't experience jazz."

The attention hasn't fazed Harvey's unsung heroes, either. If anything, it's only made the ensemble more ambitious. Since the Midwest Clinic, they've maintained a great relationship

with JodyJazz, occasionally appearing in advertisements and receiving performance-priced mouthpieces in exchange. They've also attended the University of Chicago Jazz Academy, and performed at the Illinois NEA Convention. Most of the time, they are the youngest artists on the bill.

The ultimate goal for the Brooks ensemble is to head to Washington, D.C., but Griffin said that the greatest gratification simply comes from giving the students the opportunity to perform. "The community is really backing us," he said.

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