



VAIL JAZZ GOES TO SCHOOL CELEBRATES 25 YEARS

by Sarah Valente

WITH PROGRAM DIRECTOR, TONY GUILIZA

At a time when many schools are having to cut their arts budgets, when learning history takes a backseat to STEM, and when the price of a ticket to a concert has outpriced many young people, Vail Jazz Goes to School is a cultural and educational windfall for elementary school students.

It's also tons of fun! Known colloquially as VJGTS, the jazz education program was founded 25 years ago by jazz pianist, vocalist, and educator Tony Guiliza – Tony G to fans – and Vail Jazz founder, Howard Stone. The program teaches fourth

and fifth graders in the 11 Eagle Valley elementary schools about the history, sound, and instruments of America's unique contribution to the world of music: JAZZ.

Over the course of the school year, Tony G and his co-instructors Michael Pujado, Mike Marlier, Andy Hall, and Michael Gurciullo offer three in-school sessions; for the culminating fourth session students attend a live, fully produced jazz concert at the Vilar Performing Arts Center. Although the 2020-21 sessions were offered online due to the pandemic, live instruction

has returned this year, and that's great news! After all, VJGTS is designed to give students an absorbing, in-person introduction to the sound and atmosphere of jazz music. Cultivating the next generation of jazz performers and, importantly, future audiences, is a primary goal of the program...and a guiding principle of Vail Jazz.

"It's the time of their life when [the kids] should learn about America's music," explains Tony. "That's what is going to keep jazz alive." Mike Marlier adds, "Maybe only a couple of the kids will start to play from this, but the ones that do will

remember [VJGTS] like it was yesterday. There are always one or two who are just sitting there transfixed...you know that kid will probably be joining the band." He speaks from experience: a school visit from the preeminent jazz drummer Joe Morella inspired the then six-year-old Marlier to pursue percussion.

Tony G was also infused with a passion for jazz from an early age. The Omaha, Nebraska native was surrounded by music in his early years, thanks to his father who played the trumpet. Lacking the money to buy a piano, young Tony



RIGHT: Tony G as a young musician.



started out on the accordion. He joined the family trio, the “Gulizia Three,” at age 12, performing three nights a week in Omaha and in neighboring towns.

Tony, his wife, and their sons moved from Nebraska to the Vail Valley in 1992; for the first several years, he “commuted” from Edwards, CO, to Nebraska, playing with his brother, an acclaimed percussionist. The nine-hour, 600+ road trip was grueling, but it helped make ends meet. His “Vail” break came the following year when he landed a regular gig at the Grouse Mountain Grill in Avon. Since then, he has become

a fixture in jazz venues throughout the region, including many years as the headliner at standing-room-only sessions at the Remedy Bar, sponsored by Vail Jazz and the Four Seasons. In addition to performing and spearheading VJGTS, over the years Tony has also taught at local charter schools and hosted a weekly jazz radio program.

Local favorite Kathy Morrow has shared the stage with Tony G countless times and appreciates his collaborative nature. “Tony G. is a magician when it comes to putting people together for a musical event. He has his finger on the

pulse of his band and can deliver a fun, tasty, upbeat performance with little or no rehearsal time. It’s always a treat to work with him because he listens to his fellow performers and knows how to contribute musically with style,” she says.

Among the countless people profoundly influenced by Vail Jazz Goes to School is Alec Mauro, currently performing with an indie rock band in New York. “I began playing the saxophone in second or third grade and becoming a jazz saxophonist player became my goal. Jazz Goes to School solidified my interest in jazz music; it

educated me about some of the important figures, styles, and eras in jazz history. It inspired me to listen to as many recordings made by the jazz greats as I could find.”

Alec started taking private lessons with Tony at a very early age and his respect for his teacher is boundless. “Tony G has been a guiding light in my life, both musically and personally, through his patience, adaptability, kindness, and care. Tony helps young people discover that learning about jazz is fun, collaborative, fascinating, and perhaps most importantly, very cool!”