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Beloved music director, Bob Athayde, to retire in June

By Lou Fancher



Bob Athayde on the piano at La Finestra's old location in Lafayette Photo Gint Federas

Walk almost anywhere in Lamorinda or stretch your arms wide at nearly every Bay Area location where jazz music is studied or performed, you're likely to bump into a person whose life bears the imprint of Bob Athayde. The Stanley Middle School music director and teacher for more than 30 years - with 45 years teaching in public schools in the Bay Area - will retire at the end of the 2021-22 school year in June.

Athayde has led the music program since 1986 that has expanded into a half-dozen band classes, early morning jazz ensembles, informal, Jazz Cafe concerts and more. Outside or alongside his work in the classroom, Athayde guest teaches, provides private lessons, performs with professional music colleagues, and appears as solo pianist regularly at La Finestra in Moraga. Also in his wheelhouse? A number of CDs, virtual methodologies for studying music he developed in response to the pandemic, founding and leading the annual Lafayette Summer Music Workshop, conducting

and playing in inter-generational performances with the Rossmoor Big Band, and collaborations with his children, Kyle Athayde and Juliana Athayde, both of whom are professional musicians.

Athayde's successor at Stanley will be Todd Minson, a former student of Athayde's who is a professional trumpeter, French Horn player, drummer and vocalist. "He was teaching middle school in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District. He has great people skills, he's good with kids and he is a fabulous musician. He has one foot in the past and one foot in the present as a music teacher. That means he's good at Mozart and good with digital music programs." Eric Price, Stanley's string teacher, will be leading orchestra and those courses. "He also attended Stanley so these two guys understand Lafayette and the community."

Athayde's approach has always veered toward "ready, fire, aim." Students, volunteers and music professionals appreciate the strategy because they can present a problem and a solution and receive a rapid green light. "I don't tell them I'll think about it and have them come back later. My happiest times are when I don't try to control anything. I just sit down and let them play."

He recalls one time when a person working with him in the late 1980s grew annoyed and said, "You don't even know what's going on around here." Athayde told him, "It's better that way," noting that his goal is to get people to work together. "My stubbornness wasn't fun for the administrators, but I don't put up with nonsense," he said. "I'm responsible for giving the kids in Lafayette the best music education I can, so I'm not doing things that don't make sense."

Fortunately, most of what Athayde has been doing for more than four decades does make sense. Professional bassist Dewayne Pate was a student of Athayde at Pinole Valley High in the late 1970s. The successful studio and touring artist has performed and recorded with 10-time Grammy winning trumpet player Arturo Sandoval, Tower of Power, Blues musician Chris Cain, Huey Lewis & The News, Boz Scaggs, Maria Muldaur and others.

Pate says Athayde taught him to focus on maintaining a broad repertoire of jazz standards, mastering the ability to play every tune in multiple keys, and "basic professionalism as in showing up on time with a positive attitude and open mind." His favorite memory is a secret, coded greeting they enjoy whenever their paths cross. "We joke about this day when he suspended me from high school for yelling an obscenity to a fellow band mate in symphonic band. The funny, ironic part is that he didn't hear my band mate yell the exact same obscenity at me two seconds earlier. So now it's our secret informal greeting whenever we're on a gig together."

Acalanes senior George Rogers, a former student of Athayde's, plans to pursue a double major at the Oberlin Conservatory and College of Arts and Sciences in Ohio this fall, studying Jazz Saxophone Performance and Psychology. "From Mr. Athayde, I learned that the most important thing in music, whether it's an audition, rehearsal, or performance, is that you're having fun. As long as that's true, you can't go wrong." Rogers has adopted and been helped by Athayde's all-the-time, anywhere philosophy relating to music. "I remember Mr. Athayde telling us about how when he wasn't practicing music, he was listening to it in the kitchen or while reading. If he wasn't listening to it, he was thinking about it. I have learned to do the same."

Athayde says he is "not going to just disappear" in retirement. "I've taught 45 years in the public schools and with a generous grant underwritten by the Julia Burke Foundation, I'll be able to go into schools next year and help schools in need. There's no reporting to an administration: it's just teaching pure music. I get to do what I do best."

Putting his "ready, fire, aim" philosophy into action, Athayde has already visited schools in the state of Washington and Alaska. With schools in New York beckoning and locally, teachers in Concord, Oakland and San Jose asking for help - not to mention the summer jazz workshop and his three-nights-a-week appearances at La Finestra continuing - Athayde's retirement calendar is definitely busy.

Tributes are planned to honor Athayde and his musical mark on the community at the free Concert at the Res from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. May 14 at the Lafayette Reservoir Stage and at the free Jazz Café concert from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. May 20 at Stanley Middle School.

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