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Grammy Award-Winning Musician Returns to Bonita Unified for Concert with Jazz Band

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – Grammy Award-winning jazz musician and band leader Gordon Goodwin returned to Bonita Unified with his world-famous Big Phat Band for a concert that showcased All-District Jazz Ensemble musicians and served as a tribute to longtime Bonita High music teacher Robin Snyder, who is credited with introducing jazz into Southern California school music programs in the 1960s.

Goodwin, who graduated from Bonita High School in 1973, performed double duty at the March 16 Bonita Center for the Arts show, jamming with All-District players during their opening set, then leading a nearly two-hour performance with his 19-member group. In between songs, Goodwin took time to reminisce about his years at Bonita High, and how Snyder helped develop his career.

“This is a true honor for me to come back and play with a new generation of jazz players,” Goodwin said. “When I walked into the Bonita band room after 50 years, it just seemed so familiar, like I had never been gone. It’s surreal to be able to look back at your life and see how it all fell into place.”

Goodwin’s appearance was spurred by a chance meeting in August 2023, when Bonita High freshman and All-District clarinetist Laralei Bennion attended a Big Phat Band performance in Redlands. After the show, Bennion introduced herself to Goodwin and asked him if he would ever come back to the District to play a show with his band. Goodwin was thrilled at the prospect and began working with Bonita High band director Jeff Bird and San Dimas High band director Lance Beckford to set up the show.

“The feeling of playing alongside Gordon Goodwin was so magical, and something I never thought would happen in my lifetime,” Bennion said. “The entire experience gave literal chills to everyone within the All-District band. After the show, I had so much adrenaline that I couldn’t stop shaking. Thank you to Gordon, the Big Phat Band, Mr. Bird and Mr. Beckford for providing this experience of a lifetime.”

During the All-District band’s set, the group played three songs written by Goodwin.

“Seeing our students perform together on one stage with Gordon Goodwin, under the District logo, that’s what music is all about,” Beckford said. “It speaks volumes about how we appreciate each other.”

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Though Goodwin was already composing music at a young age, it was Snyder who introduced him to jazz music when Goodwin was attending Ramona Middle School. Snyder played Goodwin the song “Queen Bee” by Count Basie and told the young student that if he wrote music like “Queen Bee,” the school band would perform it. Snyder was true to his word, and more.

As Goodwin’s music and composing talents developed at Bonita High, Snyder was placing the school band in prestigious music festivals across California. Displaying confidence in his young protégé, Snyder stepped aside and let Goodwin conduct the band at the Monterey and Reno jazz festivals.

Goodwin’s return to the District coincided with the District’s annual Jazz Explosion high school jazz festival, which was held earlier in the day at the BCA. Ten high school bands played short sets in front of a panel of judges, then received a 30-minute clinic from one of the judges. Several bands that performed at the event stayed to see the Big Phat Band perform.

After graduating from Bonita High, Goodwin attended Cal State Northridge before beginning his career at Disneyland. Goodwin began scoring animated films and TV shows in the 1990s, working on Steven Spielberg’s “Animaniacs,” which led to Goodwin winning the first of his three Daytime Emmy awards.

The Big Phat Band made its debut in 2000. Goodwin and the band have been nominated for Grammy Awards 25 times, winning their first award in 2006. To date, the band has won four Grammys, three for best instrumental arrangement and one in 2015 for best large jazz ensemble album, “Life in the Bubble.”

Robin Snyder served as Bonita Unified’s music director from 1966 to 1985, teaching music at Bonita High School and Ramona Middle School. Snyder died in January at the age of 98.

“The All-District band worked hard to make sure they represented Gordon’s music professionally,” Bird said. “It was so much fun to see how inspired they were to work on his material. To see their faces when we finally got to rehearse together with Gordon was priceless.”

PHOTOS:

BUSD_GOODWIN1: Grammy Award-winning band leader and Bonita High School Class of 1973 graduate Gordon Goodwin joins the Bonita Unified All-District Jazz Ensemble during a March 16 performance at the Bonita Center for the Arts.

BUSD_GOODWIN2: Bonita Unified All-District Jazz Ensemble musicians are in sync during a March 16 performance at the Bonita Center for the Arts. They were joined by jazz legend Gordon Goodwin, a Bonita High alum, who also performed with his Grammy Award-winning Big Phat Band.

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