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New Garrison K8 Band and old high school director Michael Hutchinson develop relationship, successes

Former high school band director Michael Hutchinson, Garrison Winds developing relationship, success skills

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Michael Hutchinson, Band Director Garrison School of Visual and Performing Arts, directed the Savannah High and Savannah Arts Jazz Bands before moving to Garrison. Richard Burkhardt/Savannah Morning News

By Jenel Few

The Garrison Winds Band has been together for about six months, but former high school band director Michael Hutchinson has already got the middle and elementary musicians thinking and performing like old pros.

The 45-member band performed for its first-ever Georgia Music Educators Association Performance Evaluation on March 10. The event is a huge music festival for middle and high school students throughout the region where bands are evaluated on performance and sight reading. The Garrison Winds earned one "Superior" and three "Excellent" ratings.

Hutchinson, ever the perfectionist, was reluctant to celebrate too much their early success. He wants his students to mature and perfect their fundamentals, before they get too comfortable.

"It's supposed to be an evaluation of what the band has done at that moment in time, it's not a platform for what we are," he said. "It's not something to flaunt."

Instead he allowed the students to critique their performance, and him as well.

"This is our first year together and we've only been practicing the three songs we performed since December. I think it went well," said eighth-grader Kieria Gordon.

She looked over at Hutchinson for a reaction but got none. She continued.

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"Mr. Hutchinson, well, he's a complex person," she said. "But he's a very good

band director and we've learned a lot."

Ultra-serious seventh-grader Euzhe Whitney-Hul, shot his arm straight up. Hutchinson gave him the floor.

"I think we need to be more prepared," he said as he turned to his band mates. "There was far too much talking on the bus ride over."

He looked back at Hutchinson but didn't get a reaction either.

It's an unusual pairing — pre-teens and the brilliant, but cantankerous, 53-year-old jazz musician known for being stoic and intolerant of all things silly.

Tylanna Baker, the band's giggly drama queen, said the band members don't expect any grandfatherly hugs from Hutchinson, nor do they always understand his old sayings and metaphors. But there's an unspoken mutual admiration among them and an expectation that Hutchinson is preparing them for greatness.

"OK! He's always, like, giving me this look," she said with a giggle. "And every class period he gives us one of these talks — I'm not saying they're boring or anything — but he talks about his past experiences and how stuff is supposed to, like, apply to the present."

She giggled some more.

"Well, what spends better, old money or new money?" Hutchinson asked.

Tylanna stared blankly at him.

"It's not a trick question," he said. "It's meant to make you think."

Tylanna giggled.

"You see," she said. "He makes statements like that all the time."

Hutchinson earned international acclaim as a high school band director and earned a reputation for demanding grown-up dedication from his young musicians.

During his 28-year career as an educator and director of the Silver Winds Ensemble and SkyeLite and Blue Light Jazz bands, Hutchinson took his bands to cross-country and overseas performances.

Many of his former students earned honors and college music scholarships. Several work as full-time musicians.

Hutchinson was just two years from retirement when he became seriously ill. After recovering last year, he returned to his celebrated position with the Savannah Arts Academy SkyeLite Band, only to find he had been reassigned.

His new assignment was to develop the band program for elementary and middle school students at the new Garrison Visual and Performing Arts School, which opened during the 2010-11 school year.

"At first everybody just wanted to talk, talk, talk, talk, talk and noise gets on my nerves," Hutchinson said. "Most people don't understand that musicians want to hear music, not noise. But there's a lot less noise now than there used to be."

Beneath Hutchinson's crusty façade is a huge soft spot and his young art school prodigies seem to have hit it. Every member of the Garrison Winds Band said he's already helped them become better, more serious musicians.

"I don't know if everybody gets him yet, but I do," said seventh-grader Alexis Irwin. "He's teaching us to be disciplined. He makes us do stuff over and over again because he wants us to keep trying. He's serious. But he's nice."



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