

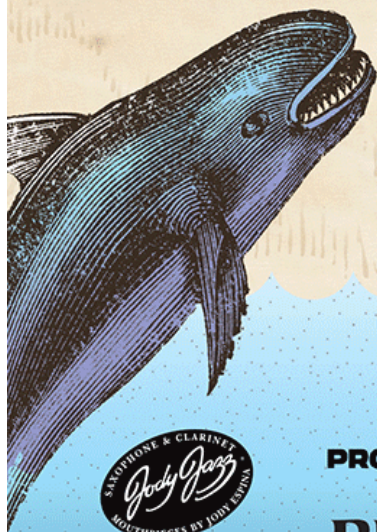
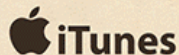


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Jazz Education Hall of Fame

José Diaz

MacArthur High School, Houston, Texas

Developing a Culture of Respect

Fresh out of the master's of music education program at Texas Christian University, José Diaz was being interviewed for the job of assistant director of bands and director of jazz ensembles at MacArthur High School in Houston when a skeptical interrogator asked him—point blank—why he wanted to teach. With his musical abilities, he was told, he could make it as a player and composer.

"I want to do for other people what my high school band director did for me," he shot back.

The answer apparently worked. He got the job and, as his mentor Herbert Yancey did at James H. Bowen High School on the South Side of Chicago, Diaz has been molding at-risk student musicians into powerhouse ensembles ever since—at MacArthur since 1985 and in parallel programs in Latin jazz at Diaz Music Institute, a nonprofit he founded in 2000.

"He's dealing with a lot of low-income kids with social and economic problems and ending up with programs as strong as programs for the well-to-do," said percussionist Ndugu Chanler, a former member of Santana. Chanler has known Diaz and worked with his students for more than 20 years.

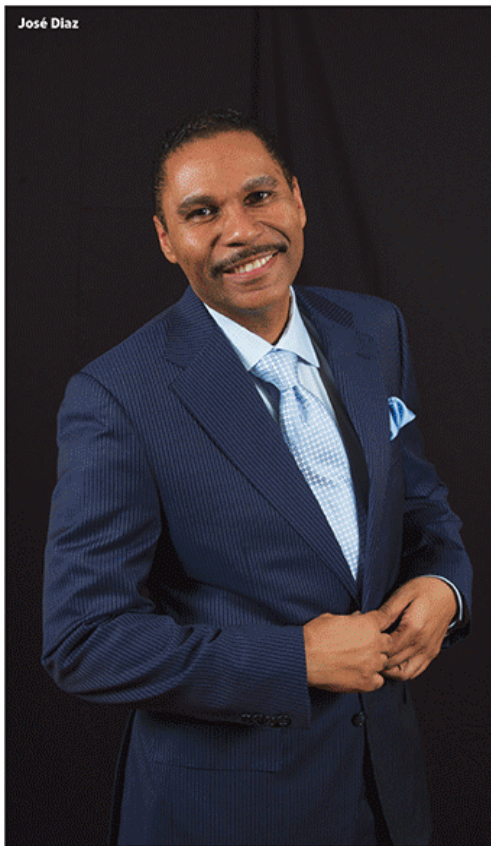
Personal accolades from prominent musicians like Chanler are nothing new for Diaz, who became MacArthur's director of bands in 1993. His ensembles have gained domestic and global notice, performing multiple times for both the Midwest Clinic and the International Association of Jazz Educators. But for all the outside attention, it is the wins in the University of Houston's competitions that most hit home, said Diaz, who is adamant about maintaining his local focus.

When Diaz arrived at MacArthur, jazz-ensemble members garnered little respect; some were even caught up in the subculture of drugs and gangs. So Diaz decided on a strategy of image-shaping. "I had to develop a culture for the music I wanted to introduce them to," he said. "And to do that, the kids who were involved with the band had to be the cool kids in the school."

The turning point came in the early years, he said, when the student body "went crazy" over arrangements he had written of pop tunes that were radio hits. Since then, the band's book of Diaz arrangements has grown markedly, as have the band members' self-regard and the community's respect for them and their leader, said Margaret Guerra, a faculty member who has worked with Diaz for 25 years.

"He doesn't just teach music," she said. "He is a model of how to conduct yourself in public."

Scrupulous attention to public image is one aspect of Diaz's philosophy that has not changed. But, at age 53, he has begun de-emphasizing competitions. Rather than "looking to the trophy" and perfecting no more than eight tunes a year, he said, the MacArthur band has been covering as many as



José Diaz

40 songs. The three-week summer workshop at his institute covers as many as 30 tunes.

"It's more of a realistic approach," he said, "reflecting what they'd be expected to know if they decided to become a professional player."

Three former students have won Grammy awards and alumni have performed with many famous artists, from Harry Belafonte to Beyoncé. The ensembles have welcomed as guest artists a long list of jazz and Latin luminaries, from Terence Blanchard and Branford Marsalis to Johnny Pacheco and Celia Cruz.

In July, Diaz said, Chanler will travel to Houston to be the soloist on "The Drum," part of a suite Diaz is writing for the institute's ensemble. Chanler will interact with the student musicians for several days, as he typically has done for decades.

Percussionist Johnathan Hulett, who played in Diaz's bands for nine years, recalled such visits as high-intensity periods that prepared him for classes at the University of Miami, where he is now a junior studying under trumpeter Brian Lynch, who is scheduled to visit Diaz's institute in June.

"He created an environment where you'd have pride in your work ethic," Hulett said of Diaz. "The only competition you were in was with yourself."
 —Phillip Lutz