

Practice makes Perfect

by Jim Garvey

World-renowned trombonist
Wycliffe Gordon
has reached the
pinnacle of music success
and now he is
sharing his expertise
with the
music department
at GRU.

HOW DO YOU GET TO GRU'S MAXWELL THEATRE? PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.

At least that's how Wycliffe Gordon, the best jazz trombonist in the world, got there.

After years of teaching at Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music, touring the world with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, performing with symphony orchestras, recording, composing, arranging, giving workshops, lectures and master classes, Gordon was finally offered the job he's been preparing for all these years: artist-in-residence in GRU's Department of Music.

"I've come full circle, teaching at a university in my own town after teaching all over the world," Gordon says. "I'm from here. My high school, Butler High School, is here. My mom lives here. Coming to GRU is like icing on the cake." ▶

“...a full, powerful tone,
then slipping
sliding
slurring
and growling

BUT TRADING IN NEW YORK CITY FOR HEPHZIBAH?

“I had a place in New York for 15 years. I’ve had enough pretty much. I got it. I’ve been there and done it. When I sit down at my mom’s house there are squirrels and birds and quiet. You can’t get that in New York. I’m from here and I love this. Dorothy said it: ‘There’s no place like home.’”

Gordon’s amazing musicianship has won him *DownBeat Magazine’s* critics’ poll as “Best Trombone” three years in a row. In fact, he made the cover of the magazine this past October. “When Gordon delivered a trombone solo,” Frank Alkyer wrote in the cover story, “jaws dropped. Smiles spread wide. Students shook their heads and nodded in appreciation. They uncontrollably shouted, ‘Yeah!’

“During his solo, Gordon locked in rhythmically—displaying a full, powerful tone, then slipping, sliding, slurring and growling with the swagger of the baddest trombonist on the planet—which, arguably, he is.”

Well, if GRU is trying to draw students from all over the country, hiring the baddest trombonist on the planet is not a bad start. Especially because, while his trombone may growl and swagger, Gordon never does. Gentle and soft-spoken, he’s way more inclined to laugh than to growl. His fame is never on display. With his round, boyish face and twinkling eyes, he’s more playful imp than musical phenom.

Still, phenom is what he is.

“Oh, he’s the real deal,” says Tonya

Currier, an opera singer who has sung with enough world-class musicians to know. Now a part-time GRU voice teacher and administrative director of the department’s American Opera and Musical Theatre Institute, she performed with Gordon at the department’s faculty recital in December. She watched him play trumpet, tuba, even a mean piano, then pick up his trombone, give the downbeat and direct the band, which was playing his own cool arrangements.

“He knows what he’s doing because he’s done it all,” she says. During the rehearsal’s inevitable train wrecks, Gordon was always calm, kind and encouraging. “He’s a consummate musician, never a prima donna.”

His fame is never on display. With his round, boyish face and twinkling eyes, he’s more playful imp than musical phenom. Still phenom is what he is.

THEN SHE SANG Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday” in duet with Gordon.

“In opera what’s on the page is what you present. But this was jazz. Wycliffe was creating whatever he wanted around my singing. There is a structure, of course, but improvisation is full of surprises. You have to be in the moment, react to what you hear. It’s scary, but there’s such a sense of freedom. At the end we both leaned in, holding the last pitch together, watching each other, and I’ll never forget the sparkle in his bright eyes. Here’s this very famous man—a rock star!—but he makes you feel like an equal.”



Wycliffe Gordon plays the trombone at Sacred Heart Cultural Center during a fundraiser for the Jessye Norman School of the Arts in 2010.

Those bright eyes will still sparkle on stages beyond the Maxwell Theatre. Gordon’s schedule as artist-in-residence at GRU leaves him plenty of time on the road making music. He’s booked a year in advance. In any given month he may have a concert in Orlando, a workshop in North Dakota, a master class in Arizona, a residency in Chicago, a guest appearance in Portugal. But he’s on campus at GRU at least six weeks each semester doing work he’s passionate about.

“I’ll be building a program leading to a degree in jazz studies. We’re looking to start it for 2015-16. I endowed a music scholarship here several years ago. Now we’re looking forward to implementing a concert and master class series.” The inaugural concert this spring will feature Dion Parsons and the 21st Century Band with its Caribbean-inflected rhythms. The date is yet to be set. ▶



Gordon’s extensive career has included (above top) being named “Best in Trombone” by the *Downbeat* Critics Poll for 2012, (center) Kendor Publishing’s recent release of *Sing It First*, his trombone technique book and (bottom) numerous recordings, including 16 solo CDs and seven co-leader CDs and his most recent release, *Hello Pops, a Tribute to Louis Armstrong*.

Dr. Charles Clark, dean and professor of history at Georgia Regents University’s Summerville Campus, announces that Wycliffe Gordon will be joining the GRU Department of Music as an artist in residence in the fall of 2014.



PHOTO BY EMILY ROSE BENNETT

We have a common goal...
...to come together

make a song
unite *make a tune*



PHOTO BY JON MICHAEL SULLIVAN

Wycliffe Gordon sings during a performance of "Black and Blue," a song by Thomas "Fats" Waller, at the eighth annual Interfaith Service of Celebration, sponsored by the Progressive Religious Coalition of Augusta, at Gilbert-Lambuth Chapel in 2015.

MUSIC DEPARTMENT Chair Dr. Angela Morgan is excited about the possibilities. "One of our plans is to have a residential summer jazz camp for kids from all over the country. Kids would live here for several weeks and study with Wycliffe and with his colleagues. It could become a real destination for young musicians interested in jazz. Wycliffe has the fame and reputation to do that. He is such an amazing musician. And he's quite a showman too."

Best of all, Gordon is a product of this community. He got his start right here, in Richmond County's public schools. He never had a private teacher as he was

growing up. All his instruction came in his band classes. That's why he is troubled by the diminished role of musical education in schools today. Amid all the standardized testing and budget cuts, he thinks kids have lost something vital.

"When I was in school, it was important to be in band or in choir. The majority of students were in one or the other. Now it's almost barren. I think the teachers want it, but in some places, like Florida, there was a mandate that teachers with specialties like music had to teach remedial courses. The band teacher is teaching reading and math. So the music program begins to suffer and

the kids get the message: Music is not important enough to keep as part of their academic day. When I go to visit bands I see a decline in morale for students.

"When I was at Butler, band was really, really important—it kept us off the streets, it was the thing that we had to do. Where were we Friday night? It was the football game. Where were we Saturday? It was the parade or we were taking a trip—the band had trips we looked forward to. There was a band boosters club and the parents really supported it. It has changed a lot—not everywhere—but the general feeling I get is it's really changed and band directors are fighting to survive."

"It's important for the university to be the leader in the community to establish contacts—to be the arm that reaches out in the city and county to band directors."

THAT'S A SHAME because chorus and band teach much more than music, Gordon insists. "I run into people in different vocations, in different professions," he told *DownBeat*, "and I tell students, 'You're never going to forget your days in band. Even if you don't study music in college, you're always going to remember being in a band. Because what are we doing? We have a common goal in mind, whether you're playing the oboe, trombone, trumpet, tuba, flute, lute—it doesn't matter. We're trying to teach people how to come together, to make a song, to make a tune and it's like, 'Wow, if we could just use that as a mantra for how to live.'"

So using his position at GRU, Gordon wants to connect with local schools. "It's important for the university to be the leader in the community to establish contacts—to be the arm that reaches out in the city and county to band directors. That's what I want to do with the performance and master class series, to invite schools onto campus. I can't visit every school, but we'll have the schools come here for a music day with a guest artist, get them to see it at GRU."

Gordon was born in Waynesboro in 1967, but he and his five siblings grew up in South Augusta in a musical household. His dad, Lucius, was a pianist and church musician, so Gordon grew up hearing classical and gospel music. In fact, he never heard a band until the Army band visited his elementary school. The leader of each section demonstrated the individual instruments—alto sax, trumpet,



Gordon is a 1985 graduate of Butler High School and continues to have a passion for encouraging students to follow their dreams. He played an improv piece in 2007 during the inaugural Richmond County High School Talent Show at Butler High School.

trombone. Little Wycliffe watched them all with interest. But when the drummer played, "Wow! That was it. I wanted to play the drums really, really bad."

"Absolutely not," his mother said.

So ended Gordon's career as a percussionist. However, his brother Lucius, older by one year, took band at Segoo Junior High and the director assigned him the trombone. "It came in a case and he came home and he opened it and it was shiny and I was, like, 'I want one!'" The

two brothers were so close in age that normally what one got, both got, "but I really had to beg and beg and beg until I got on my mom's nerves and she finally got me a trombone." The two brothers ended up playing trombone together at Segoo and then at Butler High School.

In eighth grade, Gordon got his first delicious taste of exciting an audience. He and his friend Brian Hillman were given 16-bar solos in the big spring concert. Kids typically just read their solos off the page,

but Gordon had been listening to Louis Armstrong records and he and Hillman decided to make up their solos. He still remembers how it felt to hear that audience roar. "I liked the feeling that I was appreciated, but I really liked that I tried something new and I didn't fall on my face. At that moment I thought, 'I want to do this forever. I like this music thing.'" ▶



Wycliffe Gordon's family

His career was launched...
featured performer
touring

composing
and...
now it's time
to come home



Gordon has learned through his experiences and uses that knowledge to teach others. (Clockwise top: Gordon at Giants Game, Gordon and Wynton Marsalis at Dizzy's Coca-Cola Club in 2013, Gordon with the Disney All-American Band at the Pops in Tops concert for the Louis Armstrong House Museum in Corona, N.Y.)

Oh yeah...and if what you're making is music, practice.

THEN IT WAS OFF TO COLLEGE at Florida A&M. There the visiting Wynton Marsalis heard him play in 1987. He liked what he heard and two years later Gordon was a member of Marsalis's septet. And the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. His career was launched and soon Wycliffe Gordon was known all over the world. He taught at Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music, was a featured performer on Billy Taylor's "Jazz at the Kennedy Center," left the septet and launched a solo career, toured with his own Wycliffe Gordon Quartet, composed for bands and choirs, arranged for ensembles (among his arrangements is the theme for NPR's *All Things Considered*), served on the faculty at Michigan State University, wrote a trombone technique book (*Sing It First*)

and a movie score, completed many commissions and recorded 23 CDs.

But now it's time to come home... and not a moment too soon, says Dr. Rob Foster, founder of the Augusta Big Band Aggregate (ABBA), and the sole jazz teacher in GRU's music department since 1996.

"Right from the beginning, I dreamed of Wycliffe as part of this program, but until now the time wasn't right. Now that he's here, he infuses a very positive energy into the department. It's not just his playing. He's a wonderful person. His interaction with the students and the community has already been beneficial for all of us. And now his brilliant musician friends will be stopping by, he'll be talking about GRU when he

goes to conferences and festivals, and we really could begin to draw jazz students from all over."

Nothing could make Gordon happier. He's ready to travel less and publish more. And he'd love to see Augusta become a destination for jazz. But that will be up to the students who live here now. When they complain that there's nothing to do in Augusta, no venue where they can play, he offers this advice: "Don't talk about what's not here. If you want to do something, do it. If you want a place to play, go create it. You don't have to go to Atlanta. You don't have to go to New York. Before people started making stuff, there was nothing to do there either."

Oh, yeah...and if what you're making is music, practice. *

Don't talk about what's not here...if you want a place to play, go create it.

THOUGH AN ORDINARY KID in most ways, Gordon was unusual in this: "I just liked to practice. It was never work for me. My mother would tell me, 'That's enough. Put the horn in the case.'" At bedtime he'd pretend to be asleep till he heard his mother go off for her job on the graveyard shift. Then he'd sneak into the garage, put the mute on the trombone and practice scales. "Early on I figured out the more I practiced the better I'd get. And I liked

setting goals for myself. I didn't know all 12 major scales. So I set out to learn them. Maybe I'd never play in all those scales, but I learned them. And then I learned all the minor scales. It was just I found something I loved doing.

"Our band director, Mr. Butler, was great about having us try out for competitions, all-county band, all-district band, all-state band." In his junior year Gordon won a seat in the highly competitive

McDonald's All-American High School Band. That summer in New York City he played with the best student musicians from all over the country. They introduced him to recordings of trombonists he'd never heard of, "And I was like 'Wow! You can do that on a trombone?'" He'd go back to his room and practice, practice, practice. Down in Greenwich Village he visited clubs where the live jazz blew him away.



PHOTO BY RAINIER LEHARDT

Wycliffe Gordon, 2010