

# Clarence Acox, a giant of Northwest jazz, leaves a lasting legacy at Garfield High School as he retires

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*1 of 4 | Clarence Acox, shown here in 2010, leads a rehearsal of the Garfield High School jazz band. (John Lok / The Seattle Times)*



*2 of 4 | Clarence Acox leads Garfield High School's jazz band during a celebration earlier this year of the life of Waldo King, founding father of Seattle's high school jazz programs. (Jim Levitt)*



*3 of 4 | Clarence Acox in 1992. (Harley Soltes / The Seattle Times)*



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By

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*Special to The Seattle Times*

After 48 years, a titan of Seattle jazz education is leaving the band room.

Come fall, for the first time in decades, Clarence Acox, the 71-year-old, nationally acclaimed jazz band director who played a huge role in putting Seattle jazz education on the map, will not be leading a band at Garfield High School. Instead, he is retiring.

“I figured 40 years of doing jazz band and 48 years at Garfield — that’s enough,” the veteran director said Thursday.

Acox’s retirement was noted even in New York.

“I have unbelievable respect for what Clarence has achieved,” said Wynton Marsalis, artistic director of [Jazz at Lincoln Center](#), where the Garfield High School Jazz Band has excelled at the prestigious Essentially Ellington competition. “Clarence brings a clarity and feeling to the kids, and a love of the music. That’s why they played at such a high level for so many years. We all love him. All the other band directors love him.”

Earlier this year, Acox had said he would probably teach one more year, but he recently changed his mind, though he did not say why.

Indeed, Acox stayed on longer than most. The staff this past year at Garfield was “completely different,” he said, from the year he started.

That was 1971, when Acox was recruited to jump-start school spirit with a marching band. A native of New Orleans, Acox attended the Crescent City’s St. Augustine High School, which had a top-flight marching band, as did Southern University, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he studied classical percussion and music education, before moving to Seattle.

“Inner city schools were hurting,” he told The Seattle Times, looking back, in 1991. “They wanted someone to come in to make it happen, try to be creative, make an environment for these kids.”

In 1979, after marching band, came jazz band, Acox’s first true love, and Garfield soon rivaled the older program at Roosevelt High School, trading top honors at student competitions such as the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival, in Moscow, Idaho; the Reno Jazz Festival, in Reno, Nevada; and the Northwest Jazz Band Festival at Mt. Hood Community College, in Gresham, Oregon.

In 1999, Garfield earned, for the first time, one of 15 finalist slots at Essentially Ellington, the most prestigious competition in high school jazz. Since then, the band has [taken first place four times](#), a festival record that stood until [Roosevelt tied it this year](#).

Even before Essentially Ellington, the Garfield band was getting invitations to perform at European jazz festivals. Of the many aspects of his job he will miss, said Acox, the festival jaunts and victories in New York loom large.

“But it’s the everyday activities, too,” he said. “Working with the kids. Putting it all together.”

Acox actually retired in 2001 from his full-time job as director of all the bands at Garfield — including marching band and concert band — but he retained responsibility for the school’s jazz programs.

Starting this fall, all band programs at Garfield, including jazz, will be directed by Jared Sessink, who has taught for three years at Washington Middle School. Sessink, 28, said in an email that he was “deeply humbled” to step into Acox’s shoes.

Many former Garfield High School Jazz Band members have entered the jazz mainstream, including former Bruce Springsteen trombonist Clark Gayton, who played in the first Garfield jazz ensemble; flutist Anne Drummond; trumpeters Riley Mulherkar and Tatum Greenblatt; pianist Carmen Staaf; and drummer/producer/MC Kassa Overall, who performed at this year’s Capitol Hill Block Party.

As successful as Garfield jazz has been, Acox recognized early on that some kids, for a variety of reasons — income, race, gender or poor elementary school music programs — would not have access to jazz education. To address



this, in 2010 he co-founded the nonprofit school [Seattle JazzED](#) with Laurie de Koch and Shirish Mulherkar, both parents of jazz students. Acox directs the Quincy Jones Big Band for JazzED, which served 1,300 students this year and is on track to move into its own building in 2022.

“I am deeply indebted and grateful to a man who has given so much to this community,” said de Koch. “He brought up several generations of jazz musicians, including my own kids. He inspired them to become better musicians and also better human beings. He’s an incredible force in this community and deserves enormous respect.”

Acox has been honored often. He received a Mayor’s Arts Award in 2007; and Earshot Jazz, a Seattle-based nonprofit presenting organization, named him Musician of the Year in 1991, and in 1994 inducted him into the Seattle Jazz Hall of Fame. Acox also has been recognized as an outstanding teacher by Down Beat magazine and the Seattle Music Educators Association.

Though he no longer performs, Acox played drums for 27 years with the late Floyd Standifer at the New Orleans Creole Restaurant and has released two CDs of his own music, “Joanna’s Dance” and “Indigenous Groove.”

Acox also co-founded, with saxophonist Michael Brockman, the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra, a local all-star group that celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> season this fall.

Acox does not plan to disappear into the woodwork after retirement. He will continue to teach at JazzED and at Jazz Port Townsend — where just last week, he served as a big band coach — and also to serve as artistic director of the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra.

*This story was updated to omit the name of a musician who was mistakenly listed as having attended Garfield High School.*

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