

New Bedford High School Jazz Band first public performance in a year slated for May 20

By Maxine Dejesus, NBHS Class of 2021 and Kathleen Sprissler, NBHS Class of 2022

The New Bedford High School Jazz Band will perform a free celebratory outdoor concert on Thursday, May 20 at 7:00 p.m. at the Rotch-Jones-Duff House & Garden Museum, 396 County Street in downtown New Bedford. Students hope the public will join them for this milestone event – their comeback debut performance after more than a year of disruption to all of our lives.

In preparing for the concert, Jazz Band members have made good use of time. On Tuesday, April 13, the Jazz Band made their audio recording for the Massachusetts Association of Jazz Educators (MAJE) Virtual Jazz Festival. During this session, the band performed multiple songs at ten feet of distance, with no live audience. MAJE judges will evaluate the group's recorded presentation.

COVID-19 has presented many challenges that everyone has had to face. One group of students impacted especially hard has been in the area of Fine Arts. Instrumental and choral group practice has been limited due to safety precautions. In addition, virtual sessions and rehearsals have added to the challenges students face as they navigate new technology to come together to study music and improve technique.

Jazz Band provides students with an important outlet for self-expression; an outlet that closed to them when the pandemic began. Asked what jazz means to him, senior saxophonist Hongyu Zhao said, "To me, jazz is a form of creative expression where I can create and share my ideas with others through music."

The Jazz Band has not performed for a live audience since their last concert back in March 2020. Instead, members met for limited rehearsals in a hybrid and virtual setting. They also livestreamed productions. As in-person rehearsals were gradually phased back in, sessions have been conducted at a distance of ten feet for wind players and six feet for the rhythm section.

When asked about the impact on musicians, Hongyu said, "I didn't even think Jazz Band would be a thing this year, so being where we are right now means a lot to me."

The loss of normalcy due to COVID-19 has affected all aspects of high school life. However, students and their teachers have found ways to overcome the challenges of physical separation. Dealing with virtual rehearsals, wearing musician masks, and using instrument covers that reduce sound – all require much patience and resilience. Students and teachers agree that the motivation to persevere is the desire for fellowship with those who share similar interests, and in doing so, find some semblance of normalcy in these uncertain times.

Timothy Mason, Jazz Band Director, has worked tirelessly along with the other performing arts teachers to provide students a musical outlet, even if times are very different. Expressing his pride in the group, Mr. Mason said, "It's an honor and privilege just to be making music with students at all. To see them reach the level they are at, with all of the restrictions this year, is really an amazing feat. I am incredibly proud of my student musicians."

When asked about their performance for MAJE, senior clarinetist and vocalist, Jessica Brito, commented, "I feel the recording went well! Although we did perform our songs over again, we used the opportunity to make the best possible recording we could make."

Despite all the challenges, the Jazz Band is excited for their

upcoming concert with a live audience, which will be their first in over a year. Mr. Mason and the students have put together an amazing show; one that will be mostly student-led. More than just the performance, the concert is a student-learning project, which includes planning and logistics, student-run sound, written press releases, photography, and students organizing the setlists and rehearsals. The 15-member ensemble includes 12 students accompanied by two UMass Dartmouth student teachers and an NBHS alumni pianist.

When asked what he is most looking forward to at the RJD concert, sophomore saxophonist, Jayden Santos, responded "Now that we've been okayed for our outdoor performance I'm ecstatic knowing that we can only improve from here, as we start to return to normalcy." His fellow members feel the same – to perform in front of a live audience once again is thrilling.

The RJD Jazz in the Gardens performance begins at 7:00 p.m. and features "Tanglewood style seating" on the lawn and garden area for the public. Bring a picnic, blanket and/or folding lawn chair. Admission is free. Arrive early; space is limited. For more information, contact the Rotch-Jones-Duff House & Garden Museum, (508) 997-1401.