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# S E B O &

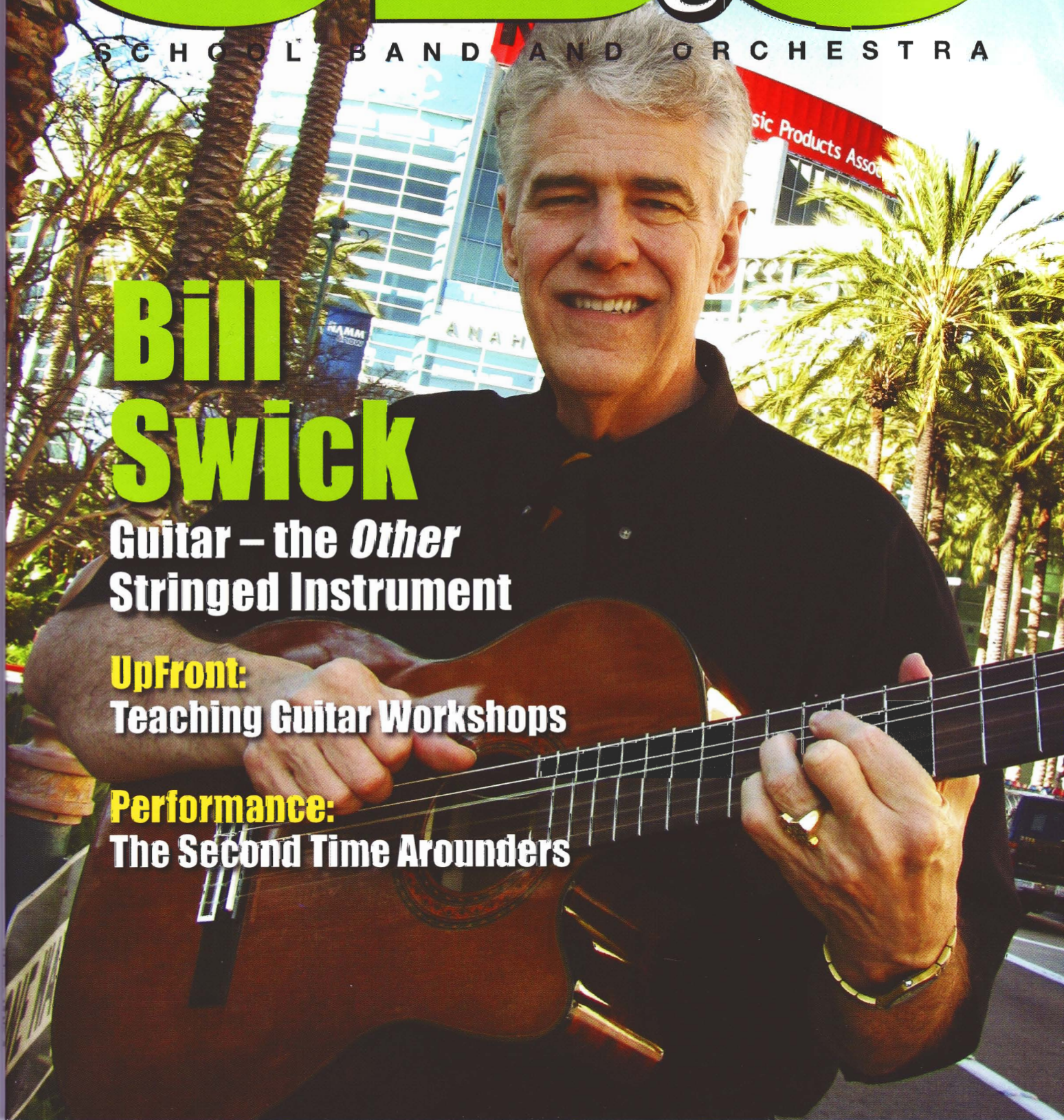
SCHOOL BAND AND ORCHESTRA

## Bill Swick

Guitar – the *Other*  
Stringed Instrument

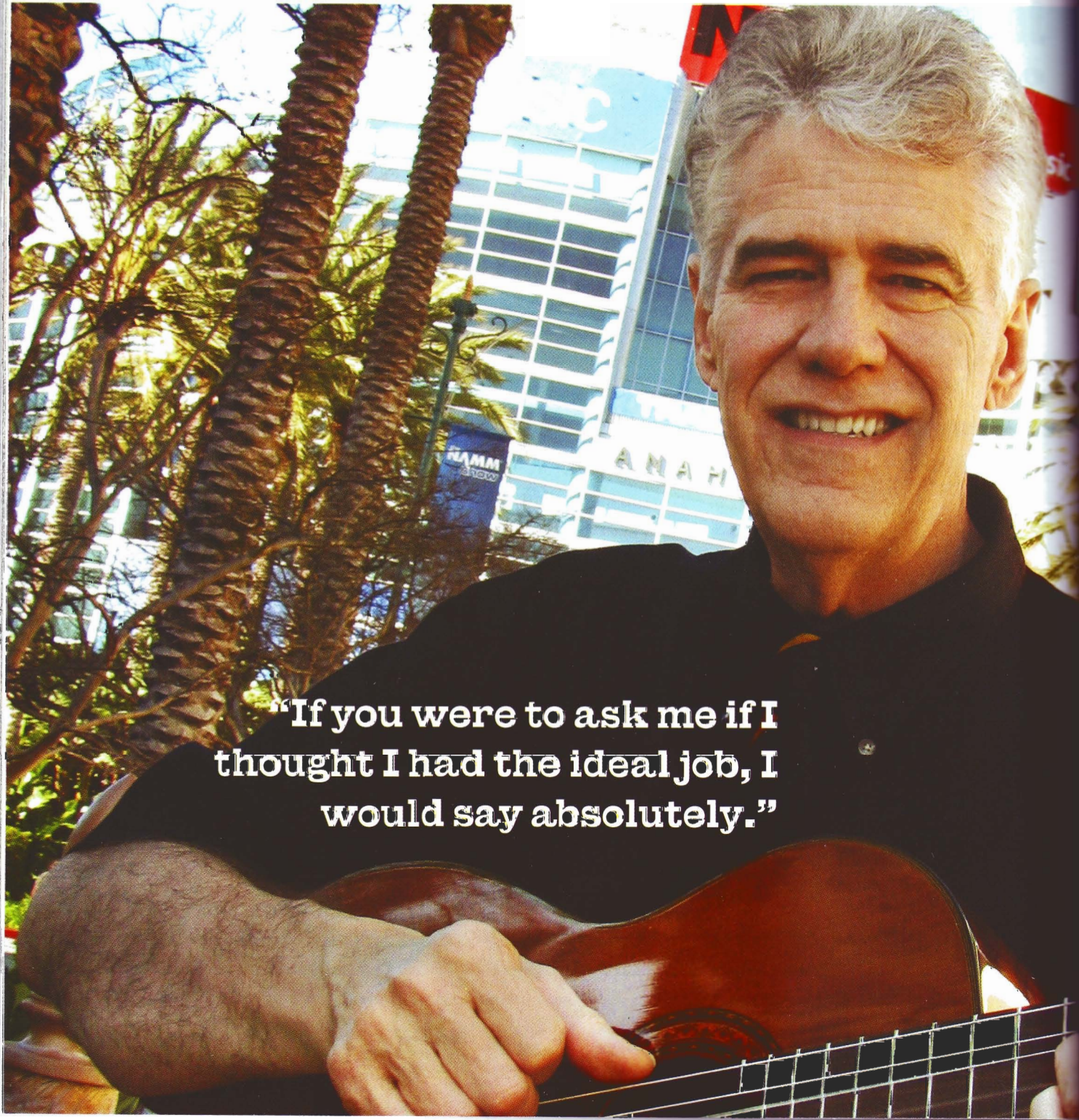
**UpFront:**  
Teaching Guitar Workshops

**Performance:**  
The Second Time Arounders



# Time

## Takes its Place



**“If you were to ask me if I thought I had the ideal job, I would say absolutely.”**

# Guitar in Education

## Bill Swick and The Las Vegas Academy Guitar Ensemble

By ELIAHU SUSSMAN

### It is 8:15am

on Sunday, January 18th and hundreds of music industry insiders – advocates, retailers, manufacturers, publishers, performers – are filing into an immense hall, carrying their cups of coffee and plates brimming with the offerings of the breakfast buffet to the long tables that fill this cavernous conference room. On the stage, a tall man with flecked grey hair stands relaxed, slightly stooped even, smiling out at the audience; behind him, thirteen high school students, dressed in black, each holding an acoustic guitar, take their seats and assemble their sheet music on stands. The Las Vegas Academy Guitar Ensemble is about to perform at the 2009 Winter NAMM Show Breakfast of Champions Session.

As this diverse group of high school-age boys and girls starts to play, the crowd hushes. Thirteen guitars in unison, each playing a distinct part; thirteen sets of eyes glued to the sheet music in front of them; and more than a thousand faces in the audience stunned by the caliber of music being produced in front of them. The first verse of the song, a rollicking calypso, has finished and one student stands for a solo. He plays with feeling, his nimble fingers dancing around the fret board. As he finishes and sits back down, a girl to his left stands up for her lead part. These kids, in spite of their somewhat awkward stage presence, have captivated the audience. The music bends and flows, carrying the crowd with it in every turn. And when it's over, the adults in the audience, each of whom brings years – if not decades – of exposure to professional music in some form or another, leap to their feet and roar their approval amid thunderous applause. The shy high schoolers, dazed grins on their faces, stand and bow, then slowly file out, heading just across the hall to another vast conference room, this one filled with music educators.


The students' second performance of the day, for the assembly of jazz, band, orchestra, and choir directors, is again rewarded with a standing ovation. When the crowd quiets down, Bill Swick, the director and architect of the Las Vegas Academy Guitar Ensemble, addresses his peers and shares a little bit of the back-story about the program that has brought these kids before them. There are audible gasps when Bill notes that his students receive 90 minutes of music instruction every single school day.

Later that day, *School Band & Orchestra* sat down with this man who has been singularly focused on bringing the guitar into music education for the better part of three decades to talk about how his vision for music education has come to fruition.

**School Band & Orchestra: You've been studying, teaching, and advocating for the guitar for decades. How were you first introduced to the instrument?**

**Bill Swick:** I started playing guitar when I was 12 because I was just attracted to the instrument. The Beatles were a big influence at the time, and I remember having an argument with my dad about guitar lessons. I wanted to learn how to play like George Harrison, and he wanted me to learn how to play like Roy Clark.





A performing group that included several guitar players had come to my middle school. For some reason, seeing that performance led me to believe that you could go on and study guitar. I found out later that that was not the case, as the only option in my high school was concert band, which did not contain guitars. So I ended up studying the saxophone during high school, although I did end up playing some guitar in the jazz band.

When I went off to college in 1971, there were very few, if any, schools that offered a major in guitar. When I was a junior, in 1973, North Texas offered a guitar major, so I went to North Texas and got my bachelor's degree in Guitar, and then continued on for a master's in Education and Guitar.

**SBO: Would you tell me about your early teaching experiences?**

**BS:** My first teaching experience out of grad school was at Drake University. They were interested in me primarily because I could play both classical music and jazz. They hired me to run the jazz program and teach guitar, which I did for five years. Economics eventually forced them to start cutting programs, and mine was one of the first ones to go. When that happened, I moved to Las Vegas and started teaching at UNLV. That was in 1982.

**SBO: How did you end up at the Las Vegas Academy of International Studies, Performing and Visual Arts?**

**BS:** The coordinator for the school district in Las Vegas, Marcia Neel, ran the MENC student chapter at UNLV, so she was on campus quite a bit and we knew each other from there. 14 years ago, one teacher at one middle school started one guitar class. The students in that class studied for three years, but when they were going off to high school, there wasn't a program that would allow them to continue studying the guitar. So Marcia approached me and asked if I would be interested in starting something. I talked to my supervisors at UNLV, and

they arranged my schedule so I could do both.

**SBO: How many students are in your program now?**

**BS:** We now have 86 students studying guitar in the Performing Arts High School. There are also several magnet schools at all levels, including elementary and middle schools. At the high school, I have three guitar ensembles: beginning,

**“We don't have the barriers and lines that sometimes exist in comprehensive music programs.”**

intermediate, and advanced. Our beginning ensemble, however, is not full of beginning guitarists; it's really students who have been playing for two or three years, they are just the youngest or newest people to the program. The intermediate ensemble is for the students who've already taken a year of guitar at the Academy. And the students who've already attended the first two years of the Academy are in the advanced class.

**SBO: In your guitar classes, do you incorporate music theory and sight-reading and those types of standard music education elements?**

**BS:** We do a lot of sight-reading and I started something a couple of years ago called Theory Thursday. I teach theory one day a week, but we cover material that specifically relates to the guitar, as opposed to the traditional 17th-century theory with four-part writing. We're learning concepts that are a little more applicable to today's music, and specifically theory that is applicable to the guitar, as opposed to the piano or keyboard.

**SBO: Do you collaborate with the other teachers in the music department?**

**BS:** Our music faculty consists of 12 teachers, and I am the department chair. We *do* work together very closely. We have bi-weekly meetings and we do a lot of collaboration in our concerts. This year, we have had two guitarists play in a string quintet – they did the Boccherini quintets, which are beautiful pieces. We have two guitars playing in the high school musical *The Wiz*. We have orchestra students play with the guitar students for a holiday concert we call the “Trans-Siberian Orchestra.” We are constantly collaborating between the various ensembles. The jazz band works closely with the

dance program. The band and orchestra collaborate with the symphonic orchestra. We don't have the barriers and lines that sometimes exist in comprehensive music programs. We are constantly trying to create opportunities for students to work with each other.

**SBO: What do you think it is about the guitar that is so appealing?**

**Las Vegas Academy of International Studies, Performing and Visual Arts At a Glance**

**Location:**

315 S 7th Street, Las Vegas, Nevada

**On the Web:**

[schools.ccsd.net/LVAISPVA/Home.html](http://schools.ccsd.net/LVAISPVA/Home.html)

**Students:** 1,650

**Students in Music Classes:** 800

**Music Department Chair:** Bill Swick

**Music Programs and Approximate Number of Students:**

- Guitar: 90
- Piano: 80
- Jazz band: 60
- Mariachi: 40
- Orchestra: 200
- Choir: 200
- Band: 160

Las Vegas Academy Guitar Ensemble and Bill Swick on the Web: [www.classroomguitar.com](http://www.classroomguitar.com); [www.billswick.com](http://www.billswick.com)

**BS:** I've always been attracted to the guitar and I don't exactly know why. The students that I have now are attracted to the guitar because they like the instrument. The younger students, though, and this might be a silly thing to say, but I think a lot of them are attracted to the guitar because of the *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* video games.

**SBO: So you think those video games are actually bringing students into the classroom?**

**BS:** Absolutely, without a doubt. And it's not a good thing, necessarily.

**SBO: Why's that?**

**BS:** Because some students sign up for guitar class thinking that the guitar is going to be as easy to play as that guitar-shaped controller. And when they find out that the guitar is a real musical instrument that requires a tremendous amount of discipline to learn how to play well, after about two weeks, a lot of those students just completely lose interest. For us, it's a one-year commitment when they sign up for the class. So these students who came into the class with this misconception about the guitar can prove to be pretty

**“A guitar class will not rob talent from other music classes.”**



disruptive to the rest of the students once they realize what the class is all about.

Also, the music associated with *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* gets the students thinking that all they are going to be learning in guitar class is classic rock or rock and roll. Many of the ninth-graders have never heard of Andres Segovia or Pepe Romero. They couldn't name one piece of music from guitar literature. They have never been exposed to it. I'm not suggesting that guitar education should be classically based. Some schools do want a classical guitar curriculum. However, that's not who we are. We are teaching guitar, and most of us who play guitar know that classical guitar alone is not a complete picture of the instrument. It's just one component of the complete picture, even though I think it's significant and it needs to be taught.

**SBO: Do your students generally have their own ensembles that they play in outside of school?**

**BS:** Many of them are in their own bands. As a matter of fact, we have students that have come through the academy and have been signed by major record labels and even left school to pursue that. A lot of our students have some pretty smokin' bands of their own.

**SBO: Do you provide them with resources or a place to practice or anything like that?**

**BS:** Not exactly. I've gotten several calls from talent agents who are trying to put together a band and need a 17-year-old drummer or a 17-year-old bass player that can really play, so I've made some contacts that can help my students out, but most of our kids really have that garage band thing down. They have a band together, a rehearsal space, and they spend all of their time writing music and playing. I feel like I don't need to teach them about those kinds of thing. I need to teach them things that they don't know anything about.

**SBO: What are the biggest challenges of putting together these classes?**

**BS:** The biggest challenge for me personally was creating a four-year program that I felt was absolutely comprehensive and well balanced. There are so many things that I can teach that may or may not be relevant to a 16- or 17-year-old. Really the challenge is getting the right balance of materials in terms of reading skills, classical guitar literature, being able to play solo and improvise, playing a wide variety of ethnic music, and understanding the difference between various types of Latin music and different traditional styles. Trying to put together a curriculum that incorporates all of that is quite a challenge. The biggest thing is that there are very few resources for students that play at this level.


GAMA and the Teaching Guitar Workshops have done very well at identifying music that is great for beginners. When it comes to starting a program, and having beginning classes, that's pretty much outlined and almost anyone in music education can do it because there are enough resources and there is enough help out there to guide teachers through the process. But we've created a level of skill at the Academy that doesn't exist in many places in public schools.

**SBO: Do you have any words of advice for music educators who might be thinking about starting a guitar class in their programs?**

**BS:** I have started guitar classes in six schools in the past 10 years. I can say from my experience that there will be students signing up for guitar who would never take a music class such as band, choir, or orchestra. In all of my experience, only a handful of students have left band or choir to take guitar. For the most part, a guitar class will not rob talent from other music classes. On the other hand, with a good teacher, the guitar classes may grow faster than any other discipline.

The key to a successful guitar program is having a teacher than can teach intermediate and advanced concepts. Many schools start a guitar program with a teacher just one step ahead of the students. As the program grows, it can be problematic if that teacher is not capable of handling an intermediate or advanced class.

**SBO: As far as your motivation here, what are you getting out of this program? What's the highlight of your day?**

**BS:** I get up at 5:00am to go to school, and I look forward to every single day. If you were to ask me if I thought I had the ideal job, I would say absolutely. I get to teach guitar all day long to some of the most talented students in our school district. We have an extremely supportive administration that allows us to do all of the performances that we do. We have students that are eager to learn and want to learn, and they push me to teach them. We have created a community learning environment so that not only are the students learning from me, but they get together at lunch time and before and after school to show each other new tricks or techniques. The students are very supportive of each other. We have almost zero discipline problems – it's almost idyllic. 

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