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## Pacoima students learn to come out swinging

By Dana Bartholomew  
Staff Writer

PACOIMA — The Pacoima Middle School anthem ripped through the band room — a “La Bamba” as brash as any sung by the late Ritchie Valens, only brassier.

For the pride of the Panthers, in addition to its beloved Rock and Roll Hall of Fame star, is jazz.

“Stand up and be proud,” George Carganilla, director of the Pacoima Middle School Panther Jazz Band, told 17 award-winning musicians during a recent after-school practice. “Who else is going to do it?”

Who else but the musicians from this working-class community who have long bested bands from privileged schools across the city and state. And who else but the Air National Guard band sax

man who for 26 years has taught his students to swing with military zing.

While jazz powerhouses such as Millikan magnet and Walter Reed middle schools have three and four music teachers, Pacoima makes do with one. And while parents at other schools can afford private lessons for their kids,

Pacoima makes do with Carganilla.

Yet year after year, the Pacoima Panthers burn the brass with a slew of gold and silver heritage awards —

despite being handicapped by the empty chairs of band members who couldn’t afford to compete.

And year after year, they trump the bands of high schools up and down the state.

“They’re terrific,” said J.B. Dyas, vice president of education and curriculum development at the Thelonious Monk Institute of

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Student Cecilia Zimmerman plays the trumpet in Pacoima Middle School's noteworthy jazz band — led by George Carganilla — during its performance of “Sing, Sing, Sing.”

John Lazar/Staff Photographer





At left, drummer Jesse Melgar keeps tempo for the band; music director George Carganilla, center, plays along with the middle schoolers; at right, Jack Sehres plays guitar with the highly rated band.

John Lazar/Staff Photographer

# Stellar young musicians jazz up Pacoima school

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Jazz at the University of Southern California, which this year chose Pacoima among five schools in Los Angeles — including three in the San Fernando Valley — for master classes in jazz.

"Working with a band like this puts your faith in the youth of America. You see kids like this and you see the future of jazz."

During practice, Carganilla coaxes his trombones. Pulls on his percussionists. Points toward his clarinets. And leads his band through certain passages on his own soprano sax.

A crack marksman and member of the 562nd Air Force Band in Point Mugu, Carganilla demands his students be on time. Show up after school three times a week.

And practice.

Each summer, he requires students to switch instruments. Of the band's 22 musicians, 18 are girls and only two play their original instruments of choice.

On weekends, he takes the kids out for kayaking, surf fishing or target practice. And lots and lots of big-band concerts. Through jazz, they learn discipline. Musicianship.

And teamwork.

"Don't worry about playing loud. We'll have microphones. We just gotta get the right notes," he said during a swinging rendition of "Sing, Sing, Sing."

"This song is supposed to sound like you're half-asleep. It's putting me asleep," he added during a soft version of "Don't Know Why."

"The audience knows it's coming — don't just put it in their lap. Make them want to hear it."

The band, in class three weeks, is admittedly a little rough. Some musicians have played only since July. But with noon and after-school practices, the Panthers expect to be an invincible force by spring.

The challenge: to raise enough money to take the band to Boston this April to compete against the best jazz bands in the nation.

"Our parents are poor, low-income," said Assistant Principal Dallas Blair, who transferred to Pacoima from Millikan. "Our entire school is Title I — free lunches. You want to hear something sad? One girl said she

was going to have to stop the music program because she couldn't afford the trips.

"The first time I heard these kids at Pacoima play, I cried."

Despite old instruments. Despite fried amplifiers. And despite a \$1,000 budget for music, Pacoima has not only beat the bands. It has drawn top talent from other schools.

"All the kids love music, you can really see it," said Josef Astor, 37, of San Fernando, whose son Zak transferred to Pacoima from Millikan to play piano with the band.

"Many don't get private lessons. But when they go home, they work hard. And when they

get to class, they're ready to rock."

"I'm really proud of the band. And really proud of my kid."

Like many band members, Sonia Alvarado can't get enough of that booming sound. A first violinist with the orchestra, she switched to clarinet to play jazz. She now practices both.

"When I get home, I start practicing till I go to sleep," said Alvarado, 13, of Arleta. "My mom has to start screaming at me to go to bed."

"We're going to win the gold medal next year."

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