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Music man offers soothing balm through sound

By Diane Claytor



Bob Athayde virtually entertains music fans from the comfort of his Orinda living room. Photo provided

and was formerly involved with the Big Band of Rossmoor. Several years ago Athayde began spending weekend evenings playing the piano at La Finestra Restaurant, entertaining diners as they enjoyed an evening out. As he said back then, "This job is the greatest. I provide background music, playing classic songs . and enhancing the dining experience."

Then COVID hit. The schools shut down, the restaurant closed and the perpetually busy Athayde suddenly had more time on his hands. He attended online master classes, listened to Herbie Hancock's Harvard lecture series and walked the dog more often.

Knowing how much local diners were likely missing their live music, a friend suggested Athayde begin playing on Facebook Live from the comfort of his Orinda living room. "I initially thought it was kind of silly," Athayde admits, but he decided to try it. Apparently it was not a silly idea at all. Hundreds of listeners have been tuning in to his hour-long piano concerts every Friday and Saturday night. Sometimes his son, Kyle, joins him in these performances, playing a variety of instruments. "He's the guy who can play these really phenomenal solos, burning the walls down," the proud father says. "I'm playing the classics, easygoing stuff, the kind of music I usually play for the dinner crowd."

The comments audience members stream in real time while listening to Athayde clearly demonstrate how important this is to them in these difficult times. "Bob is back . and now all is right with my world. . Thank you for keeping us sane and happy!" one wrote. Mika Watanabe, who has eighth-grade triplets in Athayde's music classes, says she always thought he was "a great teacher for my children to have. Watching him during COVID play on weekends . and listening to his music has really created a sense of comfort to my children and me. We are so fortunate to have him and Kyle." Barbara Williams reports that the weekend concerts are a "brief return to normalcy."

Always the consummate teacher, Athayde doesn't simply play the piano. Sometimes he sings. Often he talks off-the-cuff about the music he's playing, the composer, the arrangement, past experiences, his family, the community in which he lives. "There you are, virtually sitting in your friend's living room, maybe with a glass of wine, listening to great music and being led by the best teacher I've ever known who still squeezes in some lessons. Bob is a gift to the community," Williams continues.

Athayde acknowledges that this Zoom-filled year has been somewhat of a technological challenge. "Technology is not necessarily my thing," he notes, "but lots of people who know way more have helped a lot." He has experimented with different equipment before finally finding what he believes delivers the right sound. He does admit that he hasn't been able to keep track of all the live comments coming in. "If someone makes a request, unfortunately I don't see it in real time," he says. "So I'll add it to my list and the next time I play, I'll give a shout out to the requestor and play the song."

Like other educators, Athayde has been teaching virtually which, he says, has been both wonderful and difficult. "I can't wait for August because hopefully we'll be back in person," he exclaims. The 2021-22 school year will be his last, Athayde announces. "I'll have 45 years in and I just think it's time to step aside and let other people teach." Through a generous grant from The Julia Burke Foundation, he plans to help schools and teachers in need. "I can hopefully show these underserved schools many of the mistakes I've made so they can avoid making them. I can still do my music but not be on a regular fixed schedule," he says.

Kahlil Gibran, the famous writer, poet and philosopher, reportedly said, "Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife." Singer Billy Joel said "music is healing ."

During these pandemic times, there's no doubt many of us need way more peace and far less strife. Fortunately, Lamorindans, and, through the wonders of technology, people from around the world, have been able to find some of that comfort and healing from our very own Bob Athayde. The longtime music director at Lafayette's Stanley Middle School has, like so many others, reinvented himself over the past year to the delight of music lovers everywhere.

Athayde is a popular local celebrity. In addition to the thousands of students and families he has touched in his 35 years at Stanley's music department, teaching concert and jazz bands as well as chorus and private lessons, he leads the Lafayette Summer Jazz Workshop

La Finestra's Jeff Assadi has already made sure Athayde will be back at the piano as soon as the state allows the restaurant to serve 50 percent capacity. When that happens, Athayde vows to continue playing on Facebook Live for his now worldwide audience.

To listen to Athayde play beautiful music, go to <https://sites.google.com/view/athaydelive/>.

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