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CHS students make music with Jamaican visitors

By [Candace Paris](#)



CHS musicians pose for a group photo with their guests from Jamaica.

The story below appears in the Citizen's 29th annual Salute to the Fine Arts, an 8-page special section included with this week's print edition.

This spring, CHS band/orchestra leader and music instructor Brian Thomas coordinated a day of special musical activities that memorably illustrated the power that music has to bring people together and break boundaries.

Thomas, a trombonist, has been immersed in Jamaican music for years. Before he came to teach at Canton High 11 years ago, he worked full-time as a touring professional, playing the varied forms of Jamaican music: mento, ska, rocksteady, and reggae. He has continued to play during off hours with a Boston-based Caribbean jazz group, the King's Highway. Through fellow band members, he became involved with Alpha Institute, a traditional music vocational school in Kingston, Jamaica.

In February, three King's Highway members traveled to Jamaica to visit Alpha Institute, kicking off an international exchange sponsored by Jamaican nonprofit March for Music Education. For the second half of the exchange, Alpha students Rohan Mitchell and Patrick Garrell, along with their instructor Clayon Samuels, came to New England. Stopping first at Berklee College of Music, the group then spent a full day on March 5 at CHS, the only high school they visited.

The time in Canton was jam-packed. Mitchell, Garrell, and Samuels participated in music activities with Thomas's students, playing American music, including jazz, and Jamaican folk songs along with the concert band, orchestra, and jazz ensemble. Thomas said the CHS students had been studying the forms and history of Jamaican music and its evolution — including influence on American doo-wop and jazz — since independence from Great Britain in 1962. Thomas noted that Bob Marley and reggae are fairly well known in this country, but the other forms less so.

The Jamaican visitors attended all of Thomas's classes and got a chance to try out composition software in music technology class. The day culminated in an exciting informal jam session after school. Thomas said that the CHS jazz ensemble and the slightly older Mitchell and Garrell (both college age) developed a great musical relationship. Everyone was so enthusiastic that they played for two and a half hours until he finally had to end the fun at 5:30.

Some CHS students were also able to attend a King's Highway performance in Boston at The Beehive in the South End. Thomas said the Jamaicans played with the group and "slid right in" despite having no time to rehearse. Following their stop at University of Rhode Island, the visitors flew home "just in the nick of time," Thomas said, relieved that they were able to return on schedule to Jamaica just before the pandemic ramped up.

Although school activities are largely on hold now because of coronavirus restrictions, Thomas is looking forward to the next stage of the Jamaican music cultural exchange and further cementing the bond. "The next step once we have funding is to take Canton students to Jamaica," he said.

Thomas said that he had known CHS students would appreciate the exposure to Jamaican music, but he was thrilled to hear some of them playing an old mento song they had taken the initiative to learn from the internet.

The students in Jamaica are now also on lockdown for the pandemic, but they left an enduring impression.

"The day will go down as one of my most memorable days as a teacher," Thomas said. "I enjoyed watching the power of music show itself as my students in Canton instantly connected with Clayon, Patrick and Rohan. While I've had the opportunity to regularly experience that through my own musical opportunities, it was amazing to see my students have the same experience."

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