

LifeTimes^{Living well after 50}

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The sound of *music*

Members of the **New Horizons Band of Gulfport** expand their musical education through live performances and practice, practice, practice.

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Banding Together

The New Horizons Band of Gulfport gives adults the opportunity to expand their musical skills and put on live performances. For the organization's members, it's music to their ears.

Photos courtesy New Horizons Band of Gulfport



BY ERIN FEITSMAN
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In the wise words of Paul Simon, "Music is forever."

The members of the **New Horizons Band of Gulfport** would certainly agree. The local band has given many of its senior members an opportunity to learn a new instrument, expand their existing musical skills or rediscover an instrument they used to play.

The New Horizons Band of Gulfport began at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg under the direction of Eckerd professor David Irwin. In 2016, the group moved to Gulfport and now meets weekly on Tuesdays at the Gulfport Senior Center to rehearse.

The New Horizons Band of Gulfport is one of over 200 bands worldwide affiliated with the New Horizons International Music Association, a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1991. The organization is the brainchild of Dr. Roy Ernst, who launched the first New Horizons Band at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Ernst now lives locally and occasionally plays with the Gulfport group during their live performances.

"His idea was to give adults, especially retired adults, an opportunity to continue to play music in a band setting," said Jo Van Voorhies, 80, of Gulfport. Van Voorhies is the board president and performance coordinator for the

local organization. "The philosophy is that you're as good as you can play."

The New Horizons Band offers multiple avenues for adults looking to embrace and expand their musical side. There is the organization's green band, a beginners' group that doesn't put on performances but is, rather, a way for newcomers, or experienced musicians taking up a new instrument, to learn how to play. An instructor or director helps teach these band members, Van Voorhies said.

The green band, led by director Bryan Alspach, is designed so its members eventually move onward



Above, Band members in the New Horizons Band of Gulfport's concert band prepare to perform at the Gulfport Holiday Tree Lighting ceremony in 2021. Upper left, the New Horizons Band of Gulfport's flute ensemble performs in concert.



The New Horizons Band of Gulfport's concert band rehearses in the Gulfport Senior Center's dining hall.

and upward to the New Horizons Band of Gulfport's concert band. The concert band is ideal for musicians who are skilled enough to play in a live performance setting. The group plays marches, rock tunes and even songs from popular Broadway musicals like "The Music Man" and "Wicked."

"I try to incorporate educational pieces as well, so I make sure that they are growing as musicians in their rhythm reading and their note learning," said Ethan Updike, 31, of St. Petersburg. Updike is the New Horizons Band of Gulfport's concert band director as well as

the band director at St. Petersburg's Shorecrest Preparatory School.

The Gulfport group also offers a jazz band as well as a flute ensemble.

John Bauer, 65, of St. Petersburg, plays drums in the jazz band as well as various instruments in the concert band. He is also the group's music librarian, and a member at large on the board. Thanks to the connections and skills Bauer picked up from the New Horizons Band, he is now part of several unrelated music groups in the community.

"It's (been) sort of a launching pad for me as somebody who didn't know what I was going to do in my retirement," Bauer said. "Suddenly, almost by chance, I ended up being a drummer in several different bands. Eventually that led me to trying something different. I started playing the saxophone a few years back during the pandemic. It opened a lot of doors for me in terms of relationships, personal growth and new experiences."

Van Voorhies estimates that the median age range for the Gulfport group is around 55-70 years old. In general, prospective members are age 50 or older.

"Right now, our oldest band member is 88," Van Voorhies said. "As long as you want to play, and can play, there's no age limit."

Some of the New Horizons Band of Gulfport members used to play instruments when they were younger and end up picking up right where they left off.

"People go right back and probably become better musicians than they were in the past, because now they have the time to focus on their music," said Van Voorhies.

Before joining the New Horizons Band five years ago, the last time Martin Himmelfarb, 77, of St. Petersburg, had played the clarinet was in 1963.

"I played that instrument all through high school and junior

high,” said Himmelfarb, the vice president of the board and a bass clarinetist in the concert band. “I put it down after I graduated in ’63 and never thought twice about it ever again until 2018 when my wife, who plays the flute in the band, said, ‘Why don’t you take the clarinet up again?’”

Both his wife Jeanette and the concert band’s then-band director, Bob Schaer, assured Himmelfarb that he’d be able to pick up the clarinet again in no time. After buying one and spending a couple of weeks getting familiar with the instrument again, Himmelfarb joined Gulfport’s New Horizons concert band.

“I had just a wonderful time with it,” he said. “It had been a 55-year gap, and I was able to pick it up. I was so happy. I’ve been with the band ever since.”

Colleen O’Reilly, 64, of St. Petersburg, had a similar experience.

“I retired and had always thought I might pick up my old flute from high school,” said O’Reilly, who is the board’s treasurer and the coordinator of the group’s flute ensemble.

“(The band) is exactly what people need who are just trying to get back into it. We have it written in our bylaws that we are a place where everybody should feel comfortable. We try to go out of our way in this band to welcome people and tell them, ‘Just do the best you can.’ You don’t have to play every

“We have it written in our bylaws that we are a place where everybody should feel comfortable.”

note, you’ll get there eventually. Play what you can.”

Playing music with the New Horizons Band of Gulfport also provides a built-in social cohort for band members.

“It’s very eclectic, all the people that you meet,” said Van Voorhies. “We have lawyers, teachers, people who were involved in the tech world. Everybody comes from all

walks of life, so that’s fun too. You get to meet all of these different people. And they become family.”

The band also provides an outlet for its local members.

“You’ve got to have a hobby if you’re retired,” said O’Reilly. “Or even if you’re not, if you have a passion for something, it’s a wonderful thing to have a place to go. It’s a great thing for people to come together and share their common interest.”

“I’m very grateful that I got to have this experience,” said Bauer. “I didn’t have the opportunity when I was in school (to be in the school band). So, it’s great to be an older adult and have an experience that I never had before and never thought I could have.”

Times Total Media is the sales and marketing division of the Tampa Bay Times. Contact timestotalmedia@tampabay.com with questions.



From left, Concert band director Ethan Updike, New Horizons International Music Association founder Dr. Roy Ernst, and green band director Bryan Alspach take a break from performing for a photo.



The concert band from the New Horizons Band of Gulfport plays together at the Gulfport Casino in 2022 ...

... and at Gulfport Beach in 2023.



Embrace the music ...

There are many ways to get involved with the New Horizons Band of Gulfport. Whether you’re in the crowd attending an upcoming performance or playing in the band, there are several ways you can show your support for this local organization.

Attend a live performance: Attending one of the New Horizons Band of Gulfport’s live performances is an excellent way to both support the group and get a feel for the band if you decide you’d like to join the organization.

Van Voorhies estimates that the New Horizons Band of Gulfport’s concert band plays at least six live shows a year, including spring concerts in April, a Fourth of July concert, a live performance for Veterans Day, fall concerts, and holiday concerts come Christmastime. The next concert band performance is scheduled for Oct. 29 at 3 p.m. in Clymer Park.

For more information on upcoming performances, visit the New Horizons Band of Gulfport online at newhorizonsbandgulfport.org or on their Facebook page at facebook.com/NewHorizonsStPete.

Join the band: Are you interested in learning to play an instrument or becoming a part of one of the organization’s signature groups? Learn more about how to get involved with the New Horizons Band of Gulfport at newhorizonsbandgulfport.org. You can also email nhbkgulfport@gmail.com for more information or visit the Gulfport Senior Center during one of the group’s rehearsals. Find the group’s calendar with rehearsal times for the different bands online under the calendar tab at newhorizonsbandgulfport.org.

Donate: As a nonprofit organization, donations are essential in supporting the New Horizons Band. “One of the ways that people show their appreciation for the band is by the donations that we receive,” said Van Voorhies. To donate to the band, visit the organization’s website at newhorizonsbandgulfport.org.