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Trombone sings the blues with superhuman voice

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When Michael Dease plays the blues, his trombone sounds like a human voice. A superhuman voice, that is.

His lows scrape the bottom of the voice spectrum. His highs soar above a mere mortal's falsetto. With a little music magic, his instrument grows and even hollers to express emotion.

A plunger mute gives his trombone the voice-like quality, Dease told about 500 students at a Jazz Appreciation Clinic this week at Elizabeth City State University. The Julliard graduate and two-time Grammy award winner conducts workshops across the country and was at ECSU for the clinic, master classes and a concert as guest artist for this month's Jazz Festival.

"My main purpose is to inspire them to keep searching and listening to music with an open mind," Dease said in an interview Tuesday. "learning new styles, gaining inspiration from different sounds and learning how to connect emotionally."

Dease was teaching how the trombone can express a full range of emotions to students from Elizabeth City Middle School, Camden High School, Pasquotank High School, Northside Elementary, Sheep Harney Elementary, Pasquotank Elementary, Northeastern High School and a charter school three hours' drive away.

Happy and sad musical sounds are just a start, said Dease. An instrument can express a wide range of emotions, from elation to the kind of surprise that comes from unexpectedly finding a \$20 bill in his pants pocket.

"Jazz forces emotions of all types to work together," Dease said.

Later that day, he went over some advanced harmony techniques with ECSU's Jazz Ensemble.

"Long story short, I am still learning how to play (harmony) over dominant chords," he told musicians, who shook their



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Michael Dease plays with the ECSU Jazz Ensemble during the 6th annual Elizabeth City State University Jazz Festival concert on Tuesday.

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heads in amazement at his methods.

ECSU professor of music Douglas Jackson also appreciated one small, but hugely important lesson Dease taught his students.

Dease purchased some cheesecloth from Walmart and showed students how to clean their instruments. All types of germs and fungus can lurk in the narrow tubes, explained Dease. He learned from a friend who ended up in the hospital that swabs do not always create the friction needed to clean residue that accumulates.

Dease, 33, said he connects with students because he recalls what it's like to fix technique, organize his schedule and take outside lessons to catch up with musicians who started music lessons younger in life.

The Augusta, Ga., native taught himself how to play the saxophone at age 17. He was playing for his high school band when a gift from his mother sealed his love for jazz.

She told him she knew little about jazz, except that every saxophone player needed to know of "Bird," referring to Charlie "Yard Bird" Parker. Listening to the CD was a turning point for Dease, he said.

"I was just blown away by how it was lyrical, emotional and virtuosic all at once," he said.

He moved to New York City in 2001 to become part of the historic first class of jazz students at The Julliard School, earning both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. His experiences include bands led by Christian McBride, Roy Hargrove, Nicholas Payton, Charles Tolliver, Rufus Reid, Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and the Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band.

The Jazz Ensemble's concert Tuesday night was a lively mix of different types of jazz, from swing to bebop and everything in between. The improvisations by the musicians was a crowd-pleaser, drawing applause, waves to fan the musical heat, foot stomping and hand clapping at various points.

Dease's singing trombone with all its fasts and slows, highs and lows, added to the excitement.

ECSU musicians included alto sax players Gilbert Avent and Charles Halcomb; trumpet players John Minott, Justin Norman, Hervey Sherd and Jackson; trombone players Travis Gatling, Bracy Martin and Aldric Raynor; Calvin Motley on drums; David Allen on percussion; Phillip Williams on piano; faculty member Steve Raisor on guitar; guest Dennis Figs on piano; tuba players Ricky Williams, Ryan Beasley and Eric Phelps and Karrell Silver on tubal.

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