Doug Norwine’s foot starts tapping as soon as music starts, and within minutes he picks up his saxophone and adds his sultry notes to the mix.

About 13 students are gathered on the Anderson University stage. The instruments — including drums, a trombone, a trumpet, a xylophone and several saxophones — fill the space with the sound of the jazz classic “Bye Bye Blackbird.”

“Isn’t this the best job?” Norwine says, looking out over his brown-rimmed glasses. “That’s getting good. I’m hearing more good notes.”

The task, he said, is to teach the students on this stage something about music, about laughing a little at themselves, and about how to have fun while they are playing well.

With him, the students get a fine musician with an impressive resume.

Norwine has 12 gold and platinum records from the Recording Industry Association of America. He has performed and toured with artists such as Frank Sinatra, Bette Midler, Tony Bennett, Harry Connick Jr., Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, and Paul McCartney.

In the early years of the popular animated show “The Simpsons,” Norwine was the sound behind the saxophone playing of the character Lisa Simpson and her mentor, “Bleeding Gums” Murphy.

That is just the tip of it all.

“I am still that little kid who gets excited when he meets his idol,” Norwine said. “I have lived a wonderful life. I’ve learned over the years to shut up and enjoy it.”

Norwine can share stories of playing for some of Hollywood’s greatest celebrities, such as Jimmy Stewart.
“He lived at 913 Roxbury Lane, and had a small vegetable garden,” Norwine said of the movie star. “Lucille Ball lived right across the street. I played jazz combos there at his house. He was the sweetest guy, just a completely perfect gentleman.”

All of this from a man raised in a town of 2,500 people, a dot on the map called Oak Harbor, Ohio. His father was a banker by day and a musician on nights and weekends. His mother was a Sunday school teacher and voracious reader.

“Dad played the saxophone and the drums,” Norwine said. “And he told me I couldn’t go wrong with the saxophone. He said, ‘Everybody loves the saxophone player. He’s like the lead singer of the band.’”

When he was a boy, Norwine would sneak upstairs to their attic, he said, and pull out the vinyl records for big band musicians such as Boots Randolph, Jimmy Dorsey and Artie Shaw. He played those tunes and played in the school bands the first chance he got, which was in the fifth grade. He played his first professional gig while he was still in high school.

He made $15.

“I thought I was the richest guy,” Norwine said.

A concert in Detroit was the event that helped change his life, he said. Miles Davis, Julian Edwin “Cannonball” Adderley and Thelonious Sphere Monk were some of the performers.

“I begged my parents to let me go to the concert,” Norwine said. “Once I got there, that was the tipping point for me. The music there, it all made sense to me.”

Norwine said he went to Bowling Green University and to Berklee College of Music in Boston, and then in 1977, after a short stint in teaching music.

“I thought I hadn’t done anything at that point,” he said. “I didn’t have any business teaching. So I loaded up my car and headed to Los Angeles. I was too stupid then to know how impossible the dream was.”

Truth was, it wasn’t impossible. Because he had a good attitude, knew how to show up to performances and practices on time, and put in lots of hours practicing and performing.
A college friend helped him land a job that would begin to open doors for Norwine in Los Angeles. He said one of his first notable performances on the West Coast was performing for Chaka Khan, who was dubbed the Queen of Funk and is the winner of 10 Grammy Awards. One performance led to another, he said.

He has appeared on countless television shows, including “Frasier,” “Seinfeld,” “West Wing,” “Golden Girls,” “Full House” and “The Tracey Ullman Show.”

On the hit movie “True Lies” with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jamie Lee Curtis, Norwine plays a solo piece for one of the intimate scenes of the movie.

His proudest moment was when he played a solo piece for Ray Charles as Charles was recording his album “My World.”

“Ray Charles was there for the session,” Norwine said. “I played my solo through one time, and he said, ‘Exactly what you did, that’s what I like.’ That was a hit for me.”

Norwine said he spent 28 years in Los Angeles, where he met his wife, Kelley, a native of Liberty, South Carolina.

Both are performers, and eventually her ties here to the Upstate brought them back East.

For a while they worked in Dallas, helping auction valuable memorabilia and collectibles from Hollywood legends. In 2010, they moved to Powdersville, South Carolina. She started working at Anderson University. Before he knew it, Norwine was teaching there, too.

Now, Norwine is the director of the Johnny Mann Center for Commercial Music at the university. Young, up-and-coming musicians flow in and out of his office, stopping to pick up instruments or to ask for advice about classes and schedules.

With his gray hair, tweed coat and still-cool style, Norwine is right at home. He said he lives what feels like a charmed life.

To him, teaching is truly a way to influence a new generation.

“Every good blessing I have had is because some great teacher helped me and inspired me along the way,” he said. “It is an important role, because you can inspire someone to do something. It is time to give back. I just feel like the luckiest guy in the world. I am having the
time of my life.”

Follow Charmaine Smith-Miles on Twitter @Charmaine_AIM

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