For IMMEDIATE Release

MAY 2, 2014

Don Coates and his wife, Dianne, in Howard Auditorium after his final concert with the ABAC Jazz Band; On stage at the final concert at ABAC for Don Coates were (l-r): Coates, Dr. Susan Roe, Director of the ABAC Music Program; Arts Connection Director Wayne Jones, and Dr. Bobbie Robinson, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts.

Don Coates Made ABAC Music for 40 Years

TIFTON—When Don Coates interviewed for a teaching job in the music program at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in 1974, he had long hair, a beard, and a mustache. Academic Dean Frank Thomas told him that the Tifton community probably wasn’t ready for that particular grooming style.
“I told him I would shave off the beard but I was keeping the mustache,” Coates said with a smile last week when he announced that he was retiring from ABAC after 40 years as a part of the music program.

“I had no idea I would be at ABAC this long,” Coates said. “My goal when I graduated from college was to find a place for a couple of years, get some experience, and move on. When I got the job at ABAC, I thought two years max. Now here I am 40 years later.”

Honored by letters from the United States Congress, the Georgia Senate and the Georgia Music Educators at his final concert with the ABAC jazz band, Coates started almost from scratch and constructed a music program comparable to those at much larger institutions.

During his tenure, Coates served as the College Division Chair of the state board of the Georgia Music Educators Association, served as the State Advisor for the Student Music Educators National Conference, served as the College Chair for District 2 of the Georgia Music Educators Association, and received a Pacesetter award from the ABAC newspaper.

“There had been a music program here before I came,” Coates said. “Dr. Pete (Donaldson) and Ernest Edwards were the two that really got the choir started. I added both the concert band and jazz band in 1974. We had never had a jazz band so that was unique. It really took off in the community.”

Coates said his predecessor, Ted Williams, had “seven or eight students” in an ABAC concert band prior to his arrival and supplemented the group with students from Tift County High School. By knocking on every student’s door in the ABAC dormitories, he filled up the band with ABAC students his first year on the job.
The Florida State University graduate initiated the ABAC Jazz Festival which recently completed its 36th year. Well known throughout the nation, the ABAC Jazz Ensemble has performed in St. Louis and Atlanta for the National Jazz Educators Network Conference. The Jazz Ensemble has also been on three European tours, performing at the North Sea Jazz Festival in Rotterdam in The Netherlands; the Montreux Jazz Festival in Montreux, Switzerland; and at the opening of the Tour de France in England.

“I had a hard time getting them to try the food over there,” Coates said. “They were used to this good, old Southern food. But when those kids came back to Tifton, I saw a remarkable difference in the way they looked at things. That’s the main idea behind a trip like that, to give these kids a chance to see other cultures and grow a little bit.”

Coates will never forget all the Tour de France bicycles whizzing by in London while the band played in an outdoor amphitheater.

“It was amazing,” Coates said. “The London people love jazz. They got up and danced.”

Coates talked with pride about introducing jazz to ABAC students and then seeing those same students get their education and develop jazz bands of their own. Eight ABAC alumni who took classes under Coates now direct their own high school jazz bands.

“There are so many great memories,” Coates said. “The hair styles and the clothing have really changed in 40 years but the kids haven’t really changed. They are still good kids who want to learn. They are very receptive to the music.”

Playing the trumpet has always been a passion for Coates, and he plans to continue to blow his horn for a few special church-related events in the community.
“That’s always been a love of mine,” Coates said. “I enjoy playing at some of the Easter and Christmas services. I hope to still contribute and give some time to that.”

But there’s no doubt about his number one priority in retirement.

“My wife and I have four children and 10 grandchildren,” Coates said. “That’s our first priority. We’re going to see the grandchildren.”