

Barton Hills Choir are ACL Fest veterans

By **Patrick Caldwell**

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Levi Liles with the Barton Hills Choir sings a solo during rehearsals at Barton Hills Elementary School last week.

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On Friday morning, for the fifth time in as many years, dozens of students at Barton Hills Elementary will pile into one of the school's buses, shepherded diligently by principal Kati Achtermann, and make the roughly 1-mile trek to Zilker Park. Inside the grounds, the school's music teacher and choir director, Gavin Tabone — the hardest-working man in the elementary school choir business — will have already arrived. He'll prep for the choir's performance alongside a band that includes guitarist Don Cento, bassist Jason Brint and drummer Jake Perlman — who longtime Austin scenesters may recognize as the drummer for beloved local rockers Lions.

"I tell the sound person all the time that we are a sound person's nightmare," Tabone, 40, says with a laugh. "Number one, it's hard to mike a choir. Number two, it's tricky to mike a kid's choir. And three, it's really tricky to mike a kid's choir that's backed by an adult band."

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The stage set, Tabone, the band, and the fifth- and sixth-graders of the Barton Hills Choir — 75 in all this year — will launch into a succession of erupting, exuberant covers of everything from Daft Punk to Wilco to the Beatles to the Flaming Lips to Creedence Clearwater Revival, kicking off the Austin City Limits Music Festival, as they similarly did in 2009, 2011 and both weekends of 2013. Last year, they closed with a booming rendition of Muse's "Knights of Cydonia," hours before the band itself would play the song in an encore to their headlining set.

"It was so great. It was really, really fun," says Ryan Dempsey, 12, who will sing solo on Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Have You Ever Seen The Rain?" this year. "There was this guy there that I have never seen, honestly. He was just dancing around like a madman and having fun and he wasn't a parent of someone, so I was like 'Who is this person?'"

Tabone is something of an ACL Fest veteran. Prior to teaching at Barton Hills Elementary, he led the choir at Palm Elementary School in South Austin, which played the festival on multiple occasions. Tabone grew up playing piano and singing and went to Vanderbilt University for a music degree, eventually working as a TA while playing in bands on the side. ("I was in a classic rock cover band that had too many names for me to remember right now," says Tabone. "One was 'Clinically Grooving.' Is that the worst name ever? Awful.")

Tabone and his wife eventually found their way to Austin, where he found a job as a teacher and choir director first at Palm and later at Barton Hills. Tabone's choir includes students from second through sixth grade, with the fifth- and sixth-graders gaining the opportunity to perform solos and participate in some of the choir's more exciting gigs. Over the last few years, the Barton Hills Choir has performed at South by Southwest and local venues like the Nutty Brown Cafe. In 2012, a group of students performed with Roger Waters at the Erwin Center, singing on "Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2)."

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You can chalk that kind of traction up to the work ethic of both the students themselves — the choir practices multiple times a week, and soloists work with Tabone before school starts in the morning — and Tabone's own enthusiasm, intensity and obvious affection for his kids. He puts news on their website (bartonhillschoir.org), posts videos to YouTube, and generally hustles to promote the choir. A self-professed "control freak," Tabone doesn't just focus on the high-visibility gigs — the choir performs more typical shows at the school throughout the year, sings at the Zilker tree lighting and has a repertoire that also includes showtunes, classic choir numbers and patriotic songs.

"He does a really great job promoting us," says Dempsey. "He just works like crazy for us. He's really great."

Naturally, then, when Stuart Murdoch, the lead singer and songwriter behind venerable Scottish indie pop band Belle and Sebastian, wanted a choir to perform for this year's SXSW screening of "God Help the Girl," his jaunty debut feature based on a suite of songs Murdoch composed several years ago, the festival connected him with the Barton Hills Choir. The songs that provide the spine for "God Help the Girl" are whimsical, yearning and charismatic — perfect, in other words, for the particular talents of a school choir.

"I bought pretty much every Belle and Sebastian album on iTunes, and I loved every single album. The music was incredible. I'm kicking myself now for jumping onto the bandwagon so late," says Tabone. "I have a parent of one of my fifth-graders who sent me a little video of her 1-year-old singing along to the Belle and Sebastian tunes. That's a testament to how musical and how catchy these melodies are. It was not hard for me to get the kids to love these songs."

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The fit was natural enough that before Belle and Sebastian play the festival this year, Murdoch will join the choir for both weekends, singing alongside them on both Belle and Sebastian and "God Help the Girl" songs. For Belle and Sebastian fans, it'll be a chance to see Murdoch, backed by an enthusiastic crew, eight hours before the band itself plays.

It's an experience the kids in the choir are unlikely to forget, says Olivia Navarro, 11.

The Statesman at ACL Fest

"It's something that most kids my age don't get to do. It's a really great opportunity," says

Navarro. "I really like the rush when you get to

the end of the show, and you have everybody standing up and applauding for you. It's a great feeling knowing that all the work you've been doing for weeks has actually paid off."



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