



Retrieved from: <https://www.jazzedmagazine.com/articles/spotlight/turning-brilliant-corners/> on 17 December 2021

Turning Brilliant Corners

Jazzed Magazine • July 2012 Spotlight • July 24, 2012

In many ways, the scope of jazz education today is like a dream come true for the fractured ancestors of today's scene. There are experts in every conceivable style at most serious students' fingertips, jazz workshops and camps throughout the country, and programs across the world ready for new students every year. But one thing that organizers at the the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz want to make sure isn't lost on this generation of students is the idea of learning from your peers. In the tradition of Thelonious Monk and Wayne Shorter and all the old-school jazz musicians who came up through clubs and touring bands, the Monk Institute's National Peer-to-Peer Jazz Education Program aims to get some of the country's top kids out on the road. In the program, they perform, they teach, they interact with world class mentors like Christian McBride and Gerald Clayton, and – perhaps most importantly – they learn from each other.

This year marks the seventh year of the program, which sponsors eleven jazz programs at high schools across the country and brings different regional mentors in to each program on a monthly basis, with each mentor coming into the programs weekly. National guest stars visit each program for year-end concerts at each school, while the top two groups (along with another "All-Star" group selected from all schools) go on an additional "Informance" tour.

These "Informance" tours find the students getting deeper than ever into the culture of jazz – serving not only as dedicated students but also as ambassadors of the music to students their own age. The program takes the bands on the road to a host city, where they visit underserved urban and rural schools to perform and to offer jazz clinics, information sessions, and combo class workshops. This year, the students of Los Angeles County High School for the Arts visited neighborhoods in Boston, while the band from the New World School of the Arts in Miami visited Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Meanwhile, the students also work with a different jazz superstar all week long leading up to a performance in a working jazz club (in Minneapolis, it's the Dakota; in Denver, it's Dazzle).

You'd be hard-pressed to find a more immersive experience for any student.

JAZZed had the pleasure of talking with both the Monk Institute's JB Dyas, a bassist and jazz instructor for thirty years who serves as the organization's vice president of Education and

Curriculum Development, and the incomparable Christian McBride. McBride and Dyas were on hand with the Institute's All-Star band in Philadelphia, as they worked through their week's experience on the way toward the final performance at Chris's Jazz Café and a special recording date with Don Sickler at the prestigious Van Gelder Studio in New Jersey.

JAZZed: The Monk peer-to-peer programs seem like one of the most exciting jazz education programs going right now. You just get them right in on the action.

JB Dyas: They do jump right into the fire. That's exactly right. I'm a product of the formal jazz education movement – I have a Ph.D. from Indiana and David Baker is my mentor. But since the movement took hold in the '70s and '80s to the point that every major university has a bona fide jazz program, we've not produced a Charlie Parker type of guru. There's been no Louis Armstrong or Miles or Ornette Coleman. We've produced a lot of great players, but the way that those cats like Monk learned how to play and people like Wayne Shorter and Lee Morgan did was they went on the road with Art Blakey, for instance. Well, Art Blakey isn't on the road anymore.

So we're doing the same thing that Art Blakey was doing. We have a great player like Christian McBride with all these incredible young players, but rather than playing in clubs, we're playing in schools. They have to learn all of Christian's music ahead of time, and then they have to learn all this music that Don Sickler is doing for the recording date. He sends them the CDs and they have to learn it off the records just like at a professional gig. So they get that education.

JAZZed: The effect must be intense on the students.

JB Dyas: Christian is saying the difference between Monday and the following weekend is night and day. In college, at the Monk Institute College Program, even, at the end of the semester, you do see some growth. At the end of the year, you go, "Yeah, I think he's growing, he's getting better." Here, it's unbelievable the difference in just a week.

JAZZed: Can you give us a run-down of how this program works from the ground up?

JB Dyas: We sponsor jazz programs in eleven performing arts high schools in the country. At these schools, I visit the schools a couple times or more a year, visiting the teachers and working with students as well. I mentor the teachers in how to better teach jazz. We also bring in guest artists once a week – resident guest artists. In Dallas, you get a [University of North] Texas guy, there are great guys in Chicago, in New York you get Peter Bernstein, and Steve Turre. They come in and work with the group once a week a month, then we bring in another artist once a week for a month.

They do four sessions in a month with a combo, so the schools get eight or nine artists a year where they learn some of the artist's music and whatever else the artist wants to teach. So they're getting nine different perspectives rather than just that of their band director. One guy might be a modern guy, one might be a traditional guy, one might be a bebop guy. Then at the end of the year, we bring in a national artist to do their final concert. We've had people like Slide Hampton and Antonio Hart and Bobby Watson. Lee Konitz, Benny Golson, Jimmy Heath. It's usually a two or three-day residency where they work with the band and then play the final concert.

For the "Informance" tours, we take the best two groups out on these week-long peer-to-peer jazz tours. Whoever has the top two combos will go, along with an "All-Star" group, who is this year playing with Christian McBride.

JAZZed: How are these bands' visits to the various schools set up?

JB Dyas: We're doing three things at each school we visit. We perform an assembly program for as much of the student body as possible. We always go to a performing arts school, where they'll do a real peer-to-peer session, and then we'll go to the most underserved schools and that could be inner city or very rural where many kids haven't heard jazz before, much less know what it's about. Then the visiting students – 16 and 17 year olds – go into a workshop with the guest artist for the host school's jazz band where they sit side-by-side with their like instrument counterparts. The alto player sits next to their lead alto player. The rhythm section people switch on and off, so they're really learning from each other much like Thelonius Monk did years ago. That's the philosophy. Thelonius Monk said that you learn how to play jazz two ways – you study with a master of the music, and you play with your peers. So that's what we're doing on this tour. The master here is Christian McBride and then you have the students meeting their peers. Then the third is a vocal workshop run by a great vocalist named Lisa Henry and she's a former Monk Competition winner. She does a great job.

JAZZed: What is it that makes this program really work?

JB Dyas: It's because of two reasons. One is the age that they're at. They're like sponges and so eager to learn and so talented. And then, they in turn don't get this opportunity for free. They're teaching their peers around the country about jazz. Now, if I go into a classroom and say, "Hey, there's more to music than rock'n'roll and hip-hop. You guys need to check out jazz!" they're not going to hear me. But if it's these kids who look like them and dress like them and talk like them – they can go out there and do a burning sax solo and a question-and-answer period afterward, and they can teach them all about it. They're teaching about how jazz represents teamwork and unity with ethnic diversity, and the vital importance of listening to one another.

Just the other day, the piano player said to the audience, after they asked him how much he practices, he said "I practice all the time. What you have to do is find a passion for something while you're young, while you're our age. It doesn't have to be music. It could be business or law or anything. But whatever it is, you've got to find a passion for something now and believe in yourself and be persistent. Work at it." It was so great. He said, "The former generation hasn't left us in the best circumstances, so it's up to us. Maybe someone in this room will invent a car that runs on air." The crowd erupted in applause. The vibe was so great.

We go in these places and it's like, "I ain't gonna learn. You ain't gonna make me learn." These kids shuffle in and slouch down. But halfway through the thing, they're sitting on the edge of their seat and asking all these intelligent questions and it's amazing to see the transformation in the audience.

JAZZed: What kind of difference does a visit from these groups make musically for the host schools involved?

JB Dyas: The big thing about this is that it's 360-degree learning. The students are learning from these jazz masters, from their peers and faculty members, and they're going in there and teaching these kids more about their jazz playing than some of their teachers have all semester. Maybe their teacher doesn't know jazz piano voicings or doesn't know how to tell the bass player how to walk reading chord symbols. A lot of times they're reading these big band charts where it's almost concert band with a swing beat. Maybe it's just saying, "Enough of these rock and roll barre chords – try these chords." And after that, just by learning some new voicings and some comping patterns, he sounds so much better and authentic. Guitar is one of those things where if you haven't studied it, there are tons of voicings you don't know.

We understand that most of these students we teach are not going to be professional musicians, of course, but these students in the All-Stars, they're all going to be pros. I'm positive of it. They're all going to go to the top schools like Juilliard and Manhattan and the New School. But the people they're teaching aren't going to be pros necessarily, but the more experience they have with jazz, the more likely they are to be jazz connoisseurs and buy these kids' records and go to jazz clubs and jazz festivals and support and enjoy the music for the rest of their lives.

JAZZed: What kind of traveling have these students from the Monk Institute gotten to do?

JB Dyas: Some of the high schools that have done this are the Gallery 37 Center for the Arts in Chicago. We took them to Salt Lake City. We took the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts to Miami. The Los Angeles County High School for the Arts have maybe gone every year – they're one of the best. They've gone to Anchorage, Seattle, and Denver. The Booker T. Washington High School in Dallas – we took his group to Los Angeles and once to Omaha, Nebraska with Gerald Clayton just last year.

JAZZed: On this current trip with your All-Star group, the students are having a bonus perk of a professional recording session. How did that come about?

JB Dyas: We're going to Van Gelder studio, where so many of those classic Blue Note recordings were made. You know, Herbie and Wayne and Horace Silver and Lee Morgan and Hank Mobley – all those great Blue Note recordings were made at Van Gelder studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. So we're going there and Don Sickler is producing the session. He produced Christian's first two CDs. He does things with the Institute and he's friends with Van Gelder, so he said, "Hey I can get you into the studio." He loves working with young players. In fact he always organizes the rehearsals for the Monk Competition semi-finalists and finalists at the Kennedy Center.

JAZZed: Will there be plans to release the recordings?

JB Dyas: That's up to Don. We'll see – Don says we'll have to see how it sounds. If it sounds great, yes. It's no vanity project – it's pretty serious.

JAZZed: Everything is treated like a pretty professional situation.

JB Dyas: Right. We'll record all day Saturday and half a day Sunday, then everyone flies back to their respective homes that night out of LaGuardia. A piano student of ours named Antonio Madruga left Miami in the morning and his flight didn't get into Philadelphia until 10:30 at night. So Christian was getting in around the same time and when they met up, he told Christian, "It took me over 15 hours to get here from Miami." Christian told him, "Hey man, you've got your first road stripe." What a great thing. So other than feeling so bummed out and bewildered, it made him feel really good about it.

Gettin' to It: Christian McBride on the Peer-to-Peer Program

JAZZed: How special is it getting to see students interacting with each other in this program?

Christian McBride: In the end, it's not unusual. That's how people from every endeavor learn. There are definitely mentors, but the bulk of their time is spent learning from each other.

JAZZed: It seems mixing that interaction with the presence of a seasoned pro like yourself is the core of this program.

CM: That's really what it's all about. Having someone from the outside that's been doing it longer than they have to give them examples or words of wisdom. It could be something that you do or say that you may not think is very significant but they'll take it and run with it. So you never know how you're inspiring people.

JAZZed: Is there an example of anything like that?

CM: I don't know yet. I won't know for a couple years! One of these young men will come up to me and say, "Remember when you said such-and-such?" I'll say, "No." "Well that really helped me a lot!" You've always got to be careful with what you do and say, because they're listening.

JAZZed: It seems like just in terms of leading by example, you have a great background in working with so many different kinds of musicians.

CM: I'm starting to realize that when you work with lots of different musicians, younger and older, the goal is just to be the best musician you can possibly be and to be the best team player you can be. You don't necessarily have to always learn that from an elder mentor. You can learn that from a peer. It doesn't always have to be a world-renowned legend like Herbie Hancock or Wayne Shorter to come in and tell you what you need to do.

Being around these younger musicians, I hear them talk about other musicians. They don't necessarily talk about what that person told them verbally – they watch what they do. I think that's how most of us learn.

JAZZed: Was it that way when you were coming up?

CM: Absolutely. Someone might ask me, "What did you learn from Freddie Hubbard?" That's too hard a question to answer. It's not like I sat in a classroom with Freddie and he said, "Lesson A, Lesson B." Some of these things might not hit you in the heat of the moment playing with someone else. It might hit you later and you go, "Oh, right!" It's really just the musician's job to soak up as much information as humanly possible.

JAZZed: What do you pick up in these situations?

CM: I think the lesson for us, as visiting clinicians, is to understand that just because they're students, it doesn't mean I can't learn something from them either. I think most musicians will live by that rule also. Just because I've been on more records than they have, it doesn't mean they can't show me something. So my antenna's always up.

