

"JB Dyas has created and single-handedly produced some of the most important educational experiences for young up-and-coming jazz musicians, many of whom have gone on to great careers," says Daniel Seeff, West Coast director for the Hancock Institute.

JB DYAS: A REBEL FOUND A MISSION

By Gary Fukushima Photo Courtesy JB Dyas

On the sprawling, forested campus of UCLA, on the second floor of the Herb Alpert School of Music, is the office of Dr. JB Dyas, vice president for education and curriculum development at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz.

It seems small for such a giant of jazz education. Memorabilia line the walls: a neon sign portraying the likeness of Thelonious Monk sipping a draft of Brother Thelonious Belgian Style Abbey Ale; black-framed prints of Miles, Monk and Bird, indelibly captured by the famed photographer Herman Leonard; and two more exquisite Leonard portraits — of Dyas, whom Leonard insisted on shooting upon learning he was the son of one of Leonard's childhood friends.

There is another photo of Dyas, his newly wedded bride, Cynthia and Herbie Hancock, taken in Paris the day the were married (in 2015, while they were there for International Jazz Day); and one more of Dyas among a gaggle of jazz educators: Dan Haerle, Rufus Reid, Jamey Aebersold and David Baker. All have proved exemplary in their field, the latter two ensconced in the DownBeat Jazz Education Hall of Fame. "And that's why [this] is such an honor," says Dyas, sitting upright at his desk, speaking as he does with earnestness and gentle intensity. "Because I'm joining my mentors."

Dyas' own induction into the Hall of Fame is the well-done outcomes of a long, steady burn as a torch bearer for instructing those entrusted with the future of this century-old art form. He has indeed followed in the footsteps of Aebersold and Baker, quite literally since Aebersold first invited Dyas to teach at his famed jazz camp, where he met Baker, who then encouraged Dyas to pursue a doctorate degree at Indiana University. He began teaching over four decades ago as an up-and-coming jazz instructor in Florida, shifting into another gear in 1999, when he was lured across the country to work for the Thelonious Monk (now Herbie Hancock) Institute of Jazz. Here in Los Angeles (notwithstanding a four-year excursion to Northern California as the executive director of the Brubeck Institute at University of the Pacific), Dyas has found a lasting home.

But he is anything but a homebody. Dyas has traveled throughout North and Central America and to Europe and Australia, spreading the gospel of jazz with his innovative Peer-to-Peer Jazz "Informance" tours, his ubiquitous appearances at jazz camps and conferences, and even as a special consultant to organizations and businesses of every kind (including the Federal Trade Commission) with his "Leadership Through the Jazz Paradigm" program. "I'd especially like to thank Herbie Hancock, the entire staff and supporters of the Herbie Hancock Institute, and everyone at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music who make what I do possible. I share this honor with all of them," he says.

"JB Dyas has created and single-handedly produced some of the most important educational experiences for young up-and-coming jazz musicians, many of whom have gone on to great careers," Daniel Seeff, West Coast director for the Hancock Institute, said in a statement to DownBeat. "He has also been an invaluable support system to hundreds of young students in navigating jazz education."

Indeed, many of the students he has worked with are now a who's who of jazz: Chris Potter, Geoffrey Keezer, E.J. and Marcus Strickland, Martin Bejerano, Kris Bowers, Gerald Clayton, Michael Rodriguez, to name just a few. Students and accolades aside, Dyas is also proud to have managed a successful career through this most tenuous of disciplines. "My dad told me that you can't make a living in jazz," he remembers. His father, James Howard Dyas, was a well-known theater director and producer in New York. He married Dorothy, an actress, and they had a son, James William "Bill" Dyas. Billy grew up in Greenwich Village, immersed in the theater scene, but as a teenager he decided to become a rock 'n' roll guitar player.

His family promptly sent him to a Catholic boarding school in Holland, Michigan. He brought along his rebellious, long-haired persona, his guitar and his 1964 Lincoln Continental hotrod that was so loud he and his buddies had to push the car to the street when sneaking out to see their girlfriends. He started a rock band with other "cool kids" in the basement of their school, and he remembered a devout, well-liked student named Bob telling him, "JB, God has given you a great musical gift. I hope you go out into the world and do something good with it."

After graduation, Dyas was living his dream as a touring rock musician when he found his bandmates in their hotel room listening to Herbie Hancock's "Chameleon." That was the first time Dyas had ever heard jazz. They later took him to a jazz jam session. He remembers, "I just fell on my face, and I said, 'How'd you guys learn how to improvise like that?" His friends said, "We went to community college for a few semesters." Dyas thought, "College! I gotta get me into one of those."

Dyas enrolled at Western Michigan University, eventually earning his bachelor's degree at Florida Atlantic University after moving closer to his family, who had relocated to the Sunshine State. It was one of his mentors at FAU who suggested teaching to Dyas, who was increasingly unfulfilled with life as a gigging musician. While having that very discussion, the office phone rang. It was someone from Broward

Community College, looking for someone to teach guitar. Dyas took the job on the spot, realizing soon after how much he loved teaching. He went on to pursue a master's degree at the University of Miami and landed opportune teaching positions at Miami Dade College and at New World School of the Arts.

Dyas started a jazz camp at Miami-Dade, which enabled him to bring Jamey Aebersold in to work with the students, which led to Aebersold tapping Dyas to teach at his own camp. There, in addition to teaching, Dyas was still learning. "For a couple of years, I went to Jamey's class to watch him teach," he says. "After that, I started going to David Baker's class. That was the advanced [jazz theory] class. And I went every year to that class, and it took me about 10 summers, 10 years of finally getting everything under my fingers. That's how intense that class was. And then, I started teaching the beginning theory class for the last 15 years."

Aebersold and Baker (who died in 2016) have been the guiding lights for Dyas since that formative time in his life. But perhaps they were rather the twin engines that propelled Dyas into his own uncharted spaces of jazz education. He affirms, "I learned pedagogy from both of them, but what I did was [to take] David Baker's philosophy to heart when he talks about transcription. You learn the solos, and that is your point of departure. And that's the same way I feel about jazz education. I learned so much from Jamey, so much from David. But they were my inspiration, they were my point of departure. How I take what I've learned from them informs the way that I teach, but I don't teach like them. Of course, I have some of their licks in my teaching … they were the two best jazz pedagogues I've come across in my career."

One original space for Dyas is his landmark Peer to-Peer program. "It's the Art Blakey [model]," he explains. "We take [students] on the road with a major artist, just like Art Blakey did, when he took Lee Morgan, Bobby Timmons and all these cats on the road … they learn from each other."

He continues: "These kids come in and they're telling kids their same age that they need to check out jazz … but they're also saying, 'We're doing something with our lives. You need to do something with yours. It doesn't have to be music like it is for us, but get into something, get into engineering, or computers, or law, medicine, or sports, or whatever. But find a passion for something.' And if I say those things, they don't hear me. But with these kids … they're seeing them play this wonderful music and they just played a burning tenor solo, and they say, 'Hey, man, put down the video game.'"

Dyas' long career has seen him interact with thousands of students like these, but it has also placed him in the company of some remarkable individuals, such as the namesakes of the two institutes he's worked for, Hancock and Brubeck. Dyas says of the Headhunters chieftain, "[Herbie's] been wonderful, a great person to work for, and he's hands-on with these students here." Regarding Brubeck, Dyas gushes, "I really grew to love this man, not just because of his great genius and playing, but he was [also] a true humanitarian, and truly wise.

"Dave was a family man. Didn't drink, didn't smoke, was married to the same woman, had six kids, went to church. He was a devout Catholic."

And that other devout Catholic classmate of Dyas' who encouraged him to do something good with his talent? "Bob" became Bishop Robert Prevost, who would later become Pope Leo XIV, the first American Pope. Last year, the Holy Father invited his old boarding school classmates to the Vatican, and Dyas was among those who made the trip. Pope Leo, who as Bishop Prevost had already expressed his admiration for Dyas' transformation of his musical gifts into gifts of service, this time had a different message for him: "When I think of you, I think of the hot rod," said the Supreme Pontiff.

From rockin' rebel to celebrated, understated mentor; sometimes the mission makes the man. **DB**