

A Brief History Of Jazz Education, Pt. 2

by Alex W. Rodriguez
Chip Latshaw/UCLA

As a teaching assistant for UCLA's undergraduate course "Jazz in American Culture," I spend much of my time in a scene found on college campuses around the world. My professor, the seasoned jazz guitarist Charley Harrison, lectures eager students on the music's geniuses. In the evening, he directs the college big band through classic Swing Era repertoire and modern reinterpretations of it. Harrison and his colleagues also lead smaller ensembles that take 1960s hard bop as their aesthetic core. His students are deeply committed to honing their skills as jazz improvisers; most were already indoctrinated in high school or earlier. During the summer, many of them play in a nearby summer jazz workshop, where visiting masters further school them in the intricate art of jazz performance.

UCLA is also home to the prestigious Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance, a highly selective graduate program where students receive mentorship from legends like Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, who have just been named UCLA professors. Meanwhile, the Center for the Art of Performance books the campus' resplendent concert venue, Royce Hall, with high-profile jazz artists from the international touring circuit. Recent headliners include the Robert Glasper Experiment, the Vijay Iyer Trio, and the Ron Carter Quartet.

University musical communities have become an unavoidable part of today's jazz world, interacting with other elements of the jazz scene in many ways. Last weekend, hundreds of dedicated jazz students, teachers, performers and advocates converged upon the annual Jazz Education Network (JEN) conference — held this year in Atlanta — to celebrate the central role that "Jazz Ed" has come to play in how these groups overlap in the 21st century.

When I began to trace the history of these institutions for [the first half of this story](#), it became clear that the jazz landscape was changing in the 1960s, with high schools and colleges taking on an increasingly important role as jazz performance spaces. The sheer numbers bear this out. In 1960, there were 30 college jazz ensembles and approximately 5,000 high-school bands; by the end of the decade, those numbers had increased to 450 and 15,000. Whether driven by a desire to legitimize jazz improvisation as more than mere entertainment, to cultivate a new generation of jazz listeners or simply to land a steady gig in a shaky economy, the music's advocates increasingly turned to educational institutions.

The Big Bands

One important moment in this massive growth passed when popular bandleader Stan Kenton hosted the Stan Kenton Band Clinic at Indiana University in 1959. Whereas the Lenox School of Jazz was a fascinating anomaly in the 1950s, Kenton's clinic started a popular trend — the summer jazz camp — that was replicated across the country. Students played in big bands organized by age and skill, and studied improvisation and composition from established performers and arrangers. The legacy of this clinic spread quickly, with new clinics added throughout the 1960s and former clinicians starting their own summer camps. (For me, the Centrum Jazz Workshop in Port Townsend, Wash. — led at the time by a former Kenton clinician, alto saxophonist Bud Shank — provided many unforgettable moments throughout high school.) Two of today's largest summer programs, the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops and Stanford Jazz Workshop, take place on university campuses.

Gene Hall and Leon Breeden, who had both been instrumental in forming the Dance Band Arranging program

at North Texas State College (now the University of North Texas), assisted Kenton in organizing the first clinic. The following year, Kenton heard Breeden's One O'Clock Lab Band — the college's premier student ensemble at the time, and still very prominent today — perform at the nearby Notre Dame Jazz Festival. Throughout the 1960s, Kenton went out of his way to hire North Texas alumni, such as trumpeter Marvin Stamm. The success of Breeden's One O'Clock Lab Band established a paradigm that dominated jazz pedagogy for the next 20 years, with big-band ensemble technique at the core.

Big bands also fed back into the educational system, with outstanding veterans becoming renowned educators. Now, Lovano also teaches at Berklee; Giuffre taught at New York University, The New School and New England Conservatory. Or take trombonist Phil Wilson. After contributing compositions, arrangements and superb trombone solos to the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra, Kenton's band, Herman's Thundering Herd and many others, he joined the faculty at Berklee College of Music in 1965. Within a few years, he had built the college's Rainbow Band into one of the country's most important incubators for jazz talent.

Growing Smaller

This loop of mutual support came at an important time for jazz musicians, as it coincided with a rapid decline in opportunities for performance, stemming in part from rock music's ascendant popularity. It also established higher education as an important ingredient in a successful jazz career. Beyond a relatively safe space for practicing, jazz schools provided aspiring jazz performers with access to many of the music's remaining professional networks. The academic environment also inculcated a sense of jazz as an art form, and the steady salary that university gigs provided shielded successful teachers from the vagaries of the commercial marketplace.

As the jazz marketplace changed, some educators began to explore new models for teaching jazz that shifted the focus away from large ensemble technique. Starting with the New England Conservatory's Afro-American Music department in 1969, schools began to provide training that focused more on small group improvisation, a format that had become much more prevalent since big bands' decline in popularity in the 1940s. These programs brought in faculty who had excelled in a wide range of jazz styles, and gave them opportunities to mentor students more directly. Pianist Jaki Byard — one of NEC's first hires who also taught at a number of other East Coast colleges — quickly developed a reputation as an inspirational teacher, attracting students such as Fred Hersch and Jason Moran from around the country to study with him.

By the 1980s, a number of New York City-area universities were expanding upon this model. William Paterson University started its jazz program under the direction of Thad Jones in 1972; bassist Rufus Reid replaced him as artistic director in 1979. In 1986, The New School in Manhattan raised the stakes, creating an entire jazz school built around the mentorship of working New York-based jazz professionals. Although the school had a long history of openness to jazz — Leonard Feather taught the first jazz history course there in 1941 — this was the school's first attempt to systematize a curriculum for training jazz musicians.

"The New School has always aspired to be everything the 'old school' was not: open to dissenting opinions and the avant-garde in scholarship and the arts and taking its ethos from its Greenwich Village bohemian, socialist, intellectual and modernist influences," says Martin Mueller, the jazz program's Executive Director. "What made the New School vision so unique in higher education was ... having an entire curriculum taught by professional, practicing jazz artists ... an embrace of the small group as the pedagogical model, and teaching concept completely unencumbered by any traditional formal music teaching model or structure."

In many ways, this new development was made possible by the gradual acceptance and development of African American intellectual perspectives: The drive to teach jazz on its own terms was often connected to the vision of a more racially inclusive academy. At Rutgers University, for example, the jazz program began under the auspices of the progressive liberal-arts campus Livingston College, led by jazz bassist Chris White. In Massachusetts, jazz saxophonist and composer Fred Tillis gathered some of the music's most

assertively Afrocentric visionaries — including Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Yusef Lateef and Billy Taylor — to teach and study at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. This legacy lives on in part through the summer camp Jazz in July, which Taylor founded in 1982 on the UMass campus — only a few dozen miles from the site of the original Lenox School of Jazz.

These programs also tended to emphasize small-group improvisation as the core practice of jazz pedagogy. It's not that big bands have disappeared from educational institutions; Bobby Sanabria and Jeff Holmes currently lead top-notch ensembles at the New School and UMass, respectively. (Sanabria also leads a big band at the Manhattan School of Music.) At the same time, the shift toward small groups has been thorough. Though the University of North Texas' early jazz history has earned it a legacy as a big-band breeding ground, its continuing reputation as a top jazz school rests largely on its 30-plus small student ensembles and individual mentorship from faculty members.

If It's Legal

The conflation of "Jazz Ed" with American academia — now no longer limited to the U.S., with jazz programs cropping up around the world — have had a significant impact on how the music is heard today. These programs affect how the next generation of musicians learns to play, how master jazz musicians make a living and even the makeup of the music's audience. At UCLA, for example, a report on one of the student big band or combo concerts is worth an extra credit boost for the undergraduates in the "Jazz in American Culture" survey. Students make up the bulk of the crowd, and for most, it's their first experience hearing live jazz.

Drummer Matt Wilson, who spent his undergraduate years as a music major at Wichita State University, has witnessed the expansion of standardized jazz education firsthand. In his JEN clinic — titled "Audience Decline: Is It Because Jazz Concerts Are Boring?" — Wilson discussed a common critique of the jazz education phenomenon: That the emphasis on learning technique and theory obscures the spirit (and real-life application) that drives the music.

"I'm trying to bring a positive spin, bring new ideas," he says in an interview. "One of the things we have to address as teachers is, how are you presenting the music?" For him, experimentation is key: "Give [students] a little bit more freedom," he says. "I don't know how we teach that directly other than just giving them that opportunity."

School big bands, or small groups, or jam sessions are often just the beginning of the lives that jazz lovers are pursuing into the 21st century. "I think we all know that the world that we are preparing young artists for has changed in radical ways, through an increasingly hybridized landscape of artistic influences and endeavors, and in the challenges and opportunities arising in the breakdown of traditional music business models," says Mueller, who led a panel discussion on the subject at JEN on Saturday. But as long as these programs continue to encourage students to pursue their own voices and listen deeply to each other, there remains reason for optimism. Wilson, for one, believes that educators can remain open-minded. "The answer [can always be] yes," he says. "If it's legal, try it!"