

All This Jazz

By [Ashley Kahn](#), Photos by [Pamela Springsteen](#)

Published Jul 1, 2011 8:00 AM

The Jazz Studies Program is a jewel in the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music's crown. And now, the Thelonious Monk Institute's prestigious graduate-level program is uniting with the university. But Westwood's influence on this seminal music genre extends way beyond academics — and has done so for more than a half-century.



Sixty years ago this coming semester, as the summer of 1951 drew to a close, returning UCLA students perusing the university's course guide would have discovered a new and unexpected addition. There were no drum rolls or brass fanfares — though such musical elements soon would be heard aplenty. For the first time at the university — in fact, at any major institution in the country — it was possible to study the history of jazz and receive credit for the effort.

The instructor was Nesuhi Ertegun — a jazz enthusiast and record producer who eventually joined Atlantic Records and became one of the top movers of the modern music industry. The syllabus and other details of the course may be lost to the sands of time, yet it's clear that it helped set in motion a fruitful and enduring relationship between UCLA and the music that continues to be hailed as the only truly American art form of the 20th century.

Herbie Hancock, Herb Alpert and jazz at UCLA

Legends of jazz catch a taste of a new generation of UCLA jazz jammers.

Video by Aaron Proctor

Today at UCLA, jazz is presented and practiced, studied and celebrated in myriad ways. Modern jazz masters perform as part of the school's music festivals and concert series, while various student jazz ensembles — big bands and small combos — play on and off campus, incubating new musical talent. *Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World* is the title of the new, primary exhibition at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, featuring photographs of the many American jazz greats — from Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman to Dizzy Gillespie and Dave Brubeck — who brought their music to the world on State Department-sponsored tours.

"There's been a long timeline of jazz at UCLA — including a large, undergraduate, general-education course, to instruction for student musicians," says Tim Rice, professor of ethnomusicology and director of the Herb Alpert School of Music. UCLA's jazz program, housed within the Ethnomusicology Department, draws world-class guest lecturers like keyboardist Herbie Hancock, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, trumpeter Terence Blanchard and bassist Ron Carter, and boasts a faculty led by renowned guitarist Kenny Burrell.

"Jazz is a serious, world-respected art form, one of the major gifts from the United States to the world, and it should have all the serious attention that other forms of music have," says Burrell, whose association with UCLA began in the mid-'70s. "I'm certainly glad to be a part of that."

A Bigger Gig

In its current state, the jazz studies program welcomes eight to 12 new undergrads each year. But that tune is changing in a major way. In 2011 — the same year that ethnomusicology at UCLA celebrates its 50th anniversary and Burrell turns 80 the Thelonious Monk Institute's prestigious master's-level studies program joins forces with the Herb Alpert School of Music. In essence, two of the country's leading jazz institutions will form a partnership that will elevate UCLA's jazz program to a level and range of study few jazz schools can claim.

Herbie Hancock, chairman of the Monk Institute and a longtime supporter of UCLA's jazz endeavors, notes that with the institute's "track record of identifying, nurturing and launching the careers of young artists," the new, powered-up program "represents the future of jazz." He is particularly enthused that the institute's program will provide students access to UCLA's unusually wide and varied curriculum — from courses in music business and technology to film scoring and global musical traditions.

"Jazz has always functioned as a strong bridge between people of different cultures and different ethnicities," he adds. "The Monk Institute isn't just to train musicians. It's designed to expose jazz to the world and all of its aspects."

If those words sound heady, one must understand that the passion for jazz can be a profound driving force. It is for famed trumpeter and record executive Herb Alpert, whose active involvement with the Monk Institute steered its graduate-level studies to UCLA.



"I think jazz is the perfect art form," Alpert explains. "It's speaking for people all over the world. I think what's happening in the Middle East right now, people looking for freedom and self-expression — that's what jazz is all about."



Herbie Hancock

It was Alpert's gift in 2007 — through the foundation he runs with his wife, singer Lani Hall Alpert — that provided the means for UCLA to establish a financially sound music school, benefiting all departments and programs.

"I didn't want to make it a lopsided music school," he explains. "It's full-service, classical, ethnic music and jazz — the works."

"The works" includes great teachers such as James Newton, an award-winning bandleader and flutist whose experimental approach marks him as a member of the jazz generation that succeeded Burrell's. He echoes the contention of the school's namesake that teaching students what to do with a jazz education is a necessary part of the curriculum.

"I think it is very important for the program to understand the challenges and struggles that the students face when they graduate," Newton notes. "Some of the students here get on tours even while they're still studying. They're playing jazz in clubs in Los Angeles or playing other kinds of music ... Los Angeles is different from a lot of other places because here, you have the opportunity to work."

Newton sees UCLA's jazz program both benefiting from its new association with an institute named for the father of modern jazz piano, and adding to its duties.

"There's a responsibility that comes with that name — I mean, Thelonious Monk's language was so distinct, so well-honed, and he had that spirit of being an individual, of taking chances with the music all the time," Newton says. "He's one of the highest models I can think of for the students to be accessing as they move through the process of discovering themselves and learning about the nobility of the music."

First Notes

It's safe to say that the future of jazz — as a means of self-expression, and as a way of understanding and uniting the world — is in good hands at UCLA. Yet it wasn't always that assured, nor is it easy to pinpoint a time before Ertegun's accredited course on jazz history when the music was warmly welcomed on campus.

If one had to pick a year when UCLA first opened its doors to jazz, it might as well be 1936. That was the year the Gershwin brothers — George and Ira, composers of countless standards as well as the first jazz-based opera, *Porgy and Bess* — visited campus and, reworking an old melody, performed the fight song "Strike Up the Band for UCLA" in the university gymnasium. In the audience was a freshman named Norman Granz '60, M.A. '65, who soon developed an ear for jazz and a plan to present and record it.

It could be said that Granz — whose college career was interrupted by World War II — was UCLA's first and arguably most illustrious gift to the jazz world. A tireless advocate and visionary businessman, he took one concert — a 1944 all-star jam he dubbed "Jazz at the Philharmonic" (later known simply as JATP) — and grew it into a touring, recording and management empire. Granz enterprises included the legendary Verve Records label devoted to jazz greats like Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald,



Stan Getz, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker and Art Tatum.

As jazz evolved from the swing era of the '30s and '40s to bebop and other modern styles in the '50s, UCLA's appreciation of, and support for, the music matured. In 1951, the Theater Arts Department created the documentary *Introduction to Jazz*, the first of its kind. In the ensuing decade, historic campus concerts featured such pioneering headliners of the day as the Modern Jazz Quartet (in 1964), Charles Mingus (1965), the Preservation Hall Jazz Band (1967) and Miles Davis (1968).



Kenny Burrell

Perhaps the most lasting and popular evidence of jazz interest at UCLA during this period was a series of survey classes taught from 1964 through the '70s by trombonist Paul Tanner '58, M.A. '62. Author of the textbook *A Study of Jazz*, Tanner was also known for his hip and humorous quips.

"Professor Tanner, did they have groupies in the swing era?" a student once famously asked. Tanner's reply: "Yes — your mama."

(A worthy footnote: Tanner, who was also proficient on the theremin, the eerie-sounding instrument most commonly associated with sci-fi movie soundtracks, made pop music history in 1966 when he played it on the Beach Boys' blockbuster hit "Good Vibrations.")

"Tanner was one of the legendary figures of jazz at UCLA, and his courses were very popular," says Rice. "He had been a big band trombonist, with Glenn Miller and Les Brown. Then around the same time, there began a tradition of a UCLA jazz big band, a sort of swing era-style band populated mainly by music majors. The director was our professor of clarinet, who is still here: Gary Gray."

Growing Sound

Not just clarinet, but saxophone, too. Gray's start at the university was an auspicious one: He was the first recipient of the prestigious Frank Sinatra Award, a cash prize given annually to talented UCLA music students from 1968 to 1981.

Gray recalls: "There'd be a competition for these two prizes in the spring of each year, in classical and pop. Sinatra showed up when possible and gave them out himself. They would always use the jazz ensembles I was leading as the house band for the award show."

Though Gray is best known for establishing the UCLA Jazz Band in 1970 and leading it for 20 years, he also launched another jazz first for UCLA.

"The same time they created the jazz ensemble in 1970, they said, 'Saxophone should be taught here, too, shouldn't it, Gary?' I said, 'Well, yes, it was invented in 1847, let's jump on the bandwagon' [laughs]. One of my best-known students was Dave Koz '86. He's a real jazz star now. I had him as an undergrad. He didn't need a grad degree."



Lani Hall Alpert

Gray fondly mentions other students who came up through his groups and classes: "Steve Loza M.A. '79, Ph.D. '85 — he's an expert on Mexican popular music and he's been on our faculty for almost 20 years ... Vanessa Brown '82, what a great jazz drummer, I see her at all the big studio jobs ... Don Davis was a trumpet player here back in the '70s, now he orchestrates for John Williams and Randy Newman '65, and he composed the music for the three *Matrix* movies."

Of all Gray's endeavors, he is especially proud of the UCLA Jazz Band's high-profile gigs, which usually took

place at Royce Hall and often featured major headliners.

"I was pretty good at twisting arms and attracting people," he says. "[Composer/arranger] Oliver Nelson was one of our first guests. We got a nice review from [*Los Angeles Times* critic] Leonard Feather and that put us on the map. Then we had pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi, and in 1980, [trumpeter] Freddie Hubbard and a year later, Kenny Burrell."

During the '90s Gray ceded UCLA's jazz ensembles to the school's marching band director, Gordon Henderson, and jazz composer/arranger Gerald Wilson was recruited to instruct various courses. In 1996, the decision was made to bring jazz studies under the auspices of the Ethnomusicology Department. Burrell — who first lectured at UCLA in 1978, teaching a course on Duke Ellington — was chosen to head the new program.

Burrell was a world-renowned performer and recording artist by that point, famed for a sound that swung with a thoughtful elegance and a strong flavor of down-home funk. His albums for Blue Note and Verve, and collaborations with saxophonists John Coltrane, Stanley Turrentine and organist Jimmy Smith, seamlessly wove together bebop and blues, standards and soul jazz — and had become required listening for all jazz students.

For UCLA, Burrell's appointment helped raise the profile of the jazz program to an international level. For the guitarist, it was the realization of a goal he had set for himself while studying music in the '50s.

"When I was in college at Wayne State, I was disturbed by the fact that jazz was not getting legitimate attention like other forms of music," Burrell recalls. "I made a pledge to myself that if I ever had the chance, I would try to do something to help solve that problem."

Burrell's vision was to not only create great musicians, but also to prepare them for their careers. As he told the *Los Angeles Daily News* when he was named director of the program, "Upon graduation, [students] will be prepared for a diverse range of activities, including careers and graduate study in jazz performance, composition, arranging, research and teaching."

From the outset, Burrell recruited names that helped grow the program's reputation and reach. Drummer Billy Higgins, saxophonist Harold Land, vocalist Ruth Price and pianist Billy Childs were among the jazz veterans who taught students — often on a one-to-one basis — and brought an inspiring sense of jazz legacy to campus.

And the fact that all jazz students were essentially ethnomusicology majors meant a veritable world of music courses — on Balkan folk melodies, traditional Chinese music, Southern gospel, Indian ragas — were within easy reach.

"In 1998, I remember there were four of us — we were the first graduating jazz studies/ethnomusicology students," says singer Gretchen Parlato '98. "It was very, very new, but we loved it. It was the perfect balance of being focused on ethnomusicology for two years, then switching to jazz for the last two."

"Billy Higgins [who died in 2001] was around and just a beautiful spirit. Cheryl Keyes, she teaches African-American and gender studies — I loved her classes, and her energy. My favorite class was Kobla Ladzekpo's music and dance of Ghana. I think that single-handedly changed my life and how I feel music, especially with phrasing and rhythm. I remember it was Thursdays, from 4 to 7."



James Newton

Parlato is perhaps one of the program's best-known graduates, with a promising career and the respect of her colleagues ("a singer with a deep, almost magical connection to the music," Herbie Hancock says of her talent). In 2001, she earned the distinction of being the first singer accepted into the Monk Institute's postgraduate program, then run under the auspices of USC. That it is now part of UCLA's jazz program seems almost script-written for this story.

Play On

If Norman Granz, Nesuhi Ertegun and Paul Tanner could see what has become of jazz at UCLA, their collective amazement would surely become a shared smile.

In the world of jazz, 2011 marks an impressive number of anniversaries at the university, and it would not be complete unless one of them was appropriately and historically celebrated. On Nov. 12 at Royce Hall, Kenny Burrell will be saluted on his 80th birthday in an all-star musical fashion.

Joining the jazz master will be old friends, including guitarist B.B. King, singer Dee Dee Bridgewater and arranger/composer Lalo Schifrin. Reflecting Burrell's stature in music history, Herb and Lani Hall Alpert, producer Quincy Jones and record executive Mo Ostin '51 will co-chair the event.

"There's going to be an orchestral piece dedicated to world peace that's going to be premiered that evening with music by Patrick Williams, John Clayton, Bill Banfield, James Newton and myself," Burrell says. "And we're going to have the UCLA Jazz Orchestra directed by Charley Harrison."



Herb Alpert

Burrell is acutely aware that his personal landmark is being celebrated in conjunction with the program he has led for the past 15 years: "There's a way to look at and treat music and embrace this whole thing at UCLA, and I'm very proud to be a part of it. There have been so many comments and compliments since I started here. Probably the best was one Quincy Jones made when he was visiting the school. He said, 'Jazz is in very good hands at UCLA with Kenny Burrell.'"