

A Model Jazz History Program for the United States: Building Jazz Audiences in the Twenty-First Century

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When charged with creating a graduate program in jazz studies at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln (UNL) in fall 2006, our committee determined that a thorough grounding in jazz history would be a crucial curricular component. At the same time, the university decided to take a role in helping jazz students to build audiences; we designed an annual “historical concert” that features music from either a seminal recording or a historically significant artist/group is into the curriculum.

The Jazz History Curriculum

Jazz studies students at UNL take a diagnostic jazz history test upon entry (similar to more general diagnostic tests offered at graduate institutions throughout the United States) and a full year of jazz history courses—origins and development to bebop in the first semester and post-bebop trends in the second semester—with plans for future seminars currently under consideration.¹ Naturally, jazz studies students comprise the chief cohort in the jazz history sequence, but the course is also routinely populated by individuals enrolled in more conventional (read “classical”) performance trajectories.² Such a situation provides both a challenge and an opportunity to the instructor. For example, students more accustomed to the importance of the common score-and-CD anthology materials as necessary tools for analyzing

1. This is in addition to a more general jazz history course offered to non-music majors twice per year that routinely draws well over one thousand students in multiple sections.

2. A common intersection of these separate but related performance degrees occurs in the student—saxophone performance for instance—who desires to be stylistically “bilingual” on one’s instrument and thus uses this class to enhance one’s musical development in the same way that canonical period surveys have been for decades. Ken Prouty alludes to the benefit of such an experience to jazz players by quoting renowned Indiana University jazz pedagogue David Baker’s position that “they [should] do it all” in *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 108–9.

works of the western canon can become frustrated in an environment where discussions of multiple improvisations by a single artist on a single tune across several recordings are (1) routine and (2) can reveal the limitations of a transcription for any of those solos.³ Moreover, in order to heed David Ake's caution against "Europhilia,"⁴ and to expand the musical awareness of both "classical" and jazz artists, one could, for example, treat Middle Eastern musical influences on the Spanish "arrow song" tradition as it relates to Miles Davis's recording of "Saeta" or discuss similarities between George Russell's *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* and aspects of Indian classical music theory. In other words, the more connections the instructor can make between artists, styles, eras, cultures, and trends in both "serious" and vernacular traditions, the more well-equipped the student becomes to succeed in an increasingly diverse and demanding performance world.

Building Audiences

During informal conversations among participants in the Leeds International Jazz Education Conference (2012), many lamented the contemporary state of jazz, evidenced largely through the decline in traditional performance venues and a corresponding civic disinterest in jazz. As David Ake correctly points out, the role of the urban club as the site where jazz is created and consumed has gradually been supplanted by the college jazz program.⁵ This is especially true in Lincoln, Nebraska where the majority of live jazz events throughout a given year are either sponsored by the University on campus (or at other smaller campuses in town) and complemented at various nightclubs by members of faculty and student jazz ensembles performing in private bands or under official (university) auspices.⁶

If the academy is the chief generator of jazz in communities across the country, then the academy must also be a strong advocate for jazz and

3. One wonders if such frustration may have welcomed Lawrence Gushee at his oft-cited lecture at a meeting of the International Musicological Society at Berkeley in 1977. See Lawrence Gushee, "Lester Young's 'Shoe Shine Boy,'" reprinted in *A Lester Young Reader*, edited by Lewis Porter (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 224–54.

4. Ake challenges Stuart Nicholson's plea for increased attention to European styles by noting jazz musicians have been influenced just as profoundly by South American, Indian, and African cultures; Stuart Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead?: Or Has It Moved to a New Address* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 120–23. See also David Ake "Crossing the Street: Rethinking Jazz Education," in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, edited by David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (Berkeley: University Press of California, 2012), 242.

5. Ake, "Crossing the Street," 238.

6. In addition, an interesting merger between sacred and secular spheres occurs at First Lutheran Church in Lincoln where each month "First Friday Jazz at First" finds local jazz talent performing at the church's gymnasium for patrons who gather at the church over the lunch hour.

undertake a concerted effort to reach all audiences, aficionados, and novices alike. As Ake makes abundantly clear:

In some regions, on-campus concerts by visiting artists, student ensembles, and faculty groups represent some of the only live music available and so provide a service to the community while strengthening relations between “town and gown.” Reaching these constituencies goes beyond simple goodwill for many schools. In an era of declining financial support from state coffers, it is no secret that colleges and universities must now raise a significant percentage of their budgets from private sources. Local audiences are increasingly seen as potential sources of that funding. And when institutions on campuses actively integrate their jazz education programs into their efforts to cultivate donor relationships, jazz’s commentators should take note.⁷

The first step towards nurturing these future patrons lies in making their experience as audience members more fulfilling and meaningful. As mentioned above, each year at UNL we present a “historical concert” that features music from either an important recording or a historically significant artist/group.⁸

For two of our “historical concerts”—Duke Ellington’s *Far East* (2007) and Benny Carter’s *Kansas City Suite* (2010)—we decided to incorporate an interactive concert lecture: I interspersed my original commentary, enhanced by audio, video, and photographs, between suite movements. A few examples from the Ellington suite demonstrate the use of such a pedagogical tool. While the audience could read Ellington’s account of “Our Lady of Lebanon” and its inspiration in “Mount Harissa,” such a connection can be difficult to process for listeners, particularly given the movement’s overt Latin American influences. However, when a speaker points out the number’s allusion to the *habanera* and *bossa nova* and connects those dances to other musical depictions of “exotic ladies”—namely the aria “L’amour est un oiseau rebelle” from Bizet’s *Carmen* and *The Girl from Ipanema*—and if the alto saxophonist quotes excerpts from each of those songs in his solo, all amidst projected images of “Our Lady of Lebanon,” Helô Pinheiro, and Gabriella Besanzoni’s performance of *Carmen*, the audience can begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of Ellington’s and Billy Strayhorn’s intentions. Even more

7. Ake, “Crossing the Street,” 249-50.

8. For instance, last year we performed a concert tribute to Stan Kenton with a performance of *Cuban Fire* (in the original instrumentation) as the centerpiece and in 2011 we presented a retrospective of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra (now the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra) with arrangements by both of those bandleaders as well as more contemporary charts performed by the VJO with guest soloist Scott Wendholt (trumpet). For a sampling of those notes please see <http://music.unl.edu/anthony-bushard>.

9. See Edward Kennedy Ellington, “Notes on the State Department Tour, 1963,” in *Music is My Mistress* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 329.

poignantly, because we presented this concert when the United States was more heavily entrenched in military conflict in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the music, accompanied by images, sounds, and eyewitness accounts of a sophisticated Middle Eastern culture that embraced contact with the West, challenged contemporaneous media accounts of a backwards and barbarous society.

In addition to the educational benefits, such community engagement can also foster recruiting inroads, thus reaping rewards from an administrative standpoint. Perhaps more importantly, whenever such a collaboration can connect the historian with the performer together on stage—therefore merging history with practice in real time—it demonstrates jazz education at its best to the student performers and the public consumers as well as provides an opportunity to make vital connections crucial to strengthening jazz history's role in jazz education going forward.