



Helen Sung
with audience

Taking it to the Streets

ARTIST-DEVELOPED OUTREACH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

By David R. Adler

Jazz education is in full bloom. The old days, when music conservatories dismissed jazz, are long gone; now, aspiring jazz musicians hone their skills in college. And while high school music programs are languishing—if not disappearing—initiatives such as Jazz at Lincoln Center’s “Essentially Ellington” competition have helped pick up the slack. Jazz festivals such as Litchfield and Monterey have made education an integral part of their programming. The Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and the International Association for Jazz Education (IAJE) are among the major organizations doing invaluable, pace-setting work in the education field.

But another front has opened in recent years: Artists are developing grass-roots education and outreach programs of their own. They may have humble beginnings, but these efforts, intended to address needs overlooked by the more established entities, may prove just as valuable in the long run. “The economic machine in jazz has shifted to education, but it’s institutionalized,” says New York-based saxophonist Hayes Greenfield, founder and director of Jazz-A-Ma-Tazz, an interactive jazz show for children and families. “A lot of programs cater to young people who’ve already found

what they want to do, or they teach them to teach. There’s not much for the general population.”

Pianist Eli Yamin of the Jazz Drama Program and H. Benjamin Schuman of JazzReach also seek to engage the broader public in innovative ways. “We jazz musicians deeply involved in education strive to make it an extension of our art,” says Yamin. “I think we’re in an exciting time now—the second generation of jazz education.”

Based primarily at Louis Armstrong Middle School in Queens, the Jazz Drama Program (JDP) showcases students in original “jazz musicals”

rather than the recycled Broadway hits of old. “Jazz in schools is normally limited to the kids who play instruments,” notes Yamin. “We felt that theater was the way to get the whole culture of the school involved.” Through the JDP, students have the opportunity to work with professionals—such as vocal coach Kate McGarry—who help bring the new theatrical productions to life. The program, which launched in 1998 and gained nonprofit status in 2004, has five original plays and 10 full productions to its credit. From instrumental and vocal music to choreography and set design, the shows highlight jazz as “a way of relating to the world.” Prior to the JDP’s involvement, there was no significant jazz education at the school that bears Louis Armstrong’s name.

JazzReach, also based in New York, develops original productions as well. But these are performed by professionals for youth audiences around the country. “I wanted to go beyond the ‘play-talk-play-talk’ model and create larger multimedia pieces,” says H. Benjamin Schuman, who established the program in 1994 and heads up an administrative staff of two. “Putting jazz in cultural and historical context” is the unifying theme of all JazzReach presentations; the fourth, on the history and status of women in



JazzReach Seattle post-show clinic

jazz, is currently in development. “We make the music accessible by putting it onstage with lights and live narration,” Schuman continues. “The music is integrated into the script. It never feels like a lecture; it’s a production. I’m inspired by opera, dance and theater companies and even pop groups in terms of using multimedia applications as integral parts of the show. This is not about construction paper and glitter and glue. We’re playing major performance centers. And the kids are so open and receptive.”

Schuman is too busy with JazzReach to be “on the scene” regularly as a drummer, but he does play with JazzReach’s resident ensemble, the Metta Quintet, featuring saxophonists Marcus Strickland and Mark Gross, pianist Helen Sung and bassist Joshua Ginsburg. The band recently issued its second CD, *Subway Songs*, on the Sunnyside label. Between the quintet’s vibrant, program-oriented music and JazzReach’s ambitious stagecraft, Schuman has found what he calls “a creative life raft.” “I didn’t want to be just a working musician,” he says. “JazzReach gives me a platform to fulfill my vision.”

In a sense, educators like Schuman and Yamin are social activists, encouraging not just music appreciation but also a more critically engaged sense of American history and society. “It’s a cultural issue as much as a jazz endeavor,” Schuman says. According to Yamin, the JDP inculcates the values of “improvisation, risk-taking, nonconforming, team-building, self-expressing—a cosmic all-encompassing palette.”

Other teacher-players, like Hayes Greenfield of Jazz-A-Ma-Tazz, come to jazz education from a social-service background.

Greenfield worked for a time as a mentor at the Door, a highly regarded aid organization for at-risk youth. Several years ago he produced a short documentary called *For the Children* (available at hayesgreenfield.com), which featured Richie Havens, the Woodstock-era icon, singing the original title song. Havens also appears on Greenfield’s *Jazz-A-Ma-Tazz* CD, a hip jazz treatment of kids’ songs like “The Muffin Man” and “Skip to My Lou.” Through his interactive show, Greenfield can reach children that others may find unreachable. “I’ve had incredible success with special ed,” he says. “Nonverbal kids will come up to scat-sing and express themselves. I’ll get kids to have a conversation where they’re just vocalizing, using jazz as a medium for active listening.” (See jazzamatazz.com for a brief video clip.)

Wally “Gator” Watson, whose drumming credits range from Whitney Houston to the Lionel Hampton Orchestra, founded Educational Enrichment through Musical and Cultural Diversity (EEMCD) not just as a music workshop, but also as a confidence builder geared toward the general public. “I might begin by asking my talented people to raise their hands,” Watson explains. “Then I’ll approach the ones who didn’t raise their hands and try to find out why. I want them to see that they have something to offer. We go to a lot of rural towns, and the kids don’t believe they can contribute to the world. I’m telling them it doesn’t have to be that way. Music offers me the ability to do that.” Watson also draws on his powerful life stories: overcoming drug addiction, resisting the lure of suicide

and working as an EMT during the 9/11 crisis and spending three days at Ground Zero. “Surviving that really refocused me,” he says.

JAZZ IS AN ALL-AGES AFFAIR, OF COURSE, AND NOT ALL artist-run programs target kids. For adult learners in the Baltimore-Washington area, there is Jeff Antoniuk’s Jazz Band Masterclass. Antoniuk, a full-time saxophonist, has a clientele with an average age of 50, mainly amateurs looking for the opportunity to play in a live group setting. “They got bored working with play-alongs and wanted to find sessions,” Antoniuk says, “but there wasn’t much for them. So I rubber-banded together a first session of students, and they loved it.” After two and a half years, the program has expanded to include seven student groups as well as a July intensive called Maryland Summer Jazz. It’s the only institution of its kind in the mid-Atlantic region. “I’ve got consultants and lawyers playing in my groups,” Antoniuk adds. “These are high-powered people who run their own lives, and they’re taking this big risk. They’ve got the guts to try something new. And I really hear these folks getting better.”

→ Grace Testani’s Singer’s Center, operating in Manhattan for just over two years, also caters mainly to adults but in particular to the needs of vocalists. “When they come out of my school, they’re musicians,” Testani says, “and they have the respect of musicians. They know how to lead a band and can write a sophisticated arrangement.” A veteran teacher with an affiliation at New York University, Testani focuses on technique, ear training and sight-reading but also such practical skills as booking and promoting a gig, handling a recording session, preparing for an audition and even putting up a Web site. She also notes that the center’s mandate extends beyond jazz. “Singers want grounding in musical theater and other things,” she explains, mentioning the center’s forays into gospel and pop music. Students as young as 16 have enrolled, but most are young adults and older. Some go on to become professionals, but that’s not all that impresses Testani. “It’s great to see development from someone scared to death to open their mouth in the beginning,” she says.

On a more advanced and selective level, the Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music, currently directed by Dave Douglas, is probably the pinnacle of artist-run education for aspiring creative musicians. The annual session, running from mid-May to early June, stresses artistic growth and individuality as opposed to the more regimented, canonical approach that tends to prevail in jazz academia.

In Brooklyn—far from the Canadian Rockies—one can find the School for Improvisational Music (SIM), under the directorship of trumpeter Ralph Alessi. Founded in 2001, the school attracts mostly college-age players looking to supplement

the traditional jazz curriculum. “Our program is about learning to improvise beyond stylistic restrictions,” says bassist and SIM co-director J. A. Granelli. “When we talk about free playing, we’re talking about universal ideas—patience, thinking compositionally, the list goes on. We don’t say, ‘This is a style, and here’s how you play the style.’ We say, ‘This is music.’ All music began as improvisation, and that’s what we’re after.” SIM offers weekly open sessions, Saturday-afternoon workshops with renowned players, a Friday concert series at the affiliated Center for Improvisational Music (CIM) and an intensive workshop that meets for three weeks in August and one in January.

Other unorthodox programs include the AACM School of Music in Chicago, the Jackie McLean Institute of Jazz in Hartford, Conn., and the New School Jazz and Contemporary Music program in New York (conceived by the late alto saxophonist Arnie Lawrence). There’s also the Commission



Asher (center) jamming with Hayes Greenfield’s Jazz-A-Ma-Tazz on Mother’s Day at the Bowery Poetry Club, New York City

Project, founded by reedist Ned Corman in 1994, which funds composer-in-residence programs at schools around the country, commissioning works from noted musicians for performance by student ensembles. The Jazz Museum in Harlem has developed the Harlem Speaks Education Initiative, an eight-week jazz-history program that brings students into direct contact with living masters. The Jazz Mentors Program, launched recently by Joy Anderson (former vocalist for the Glenn Miller Orchestra with Buddy DeFranco), is a New Jersey-based clinic and concert series for teens that has featured Randy Brecker, Peter Erskine, Maynard Ferguson, Phil Woods, Lew Tabackin and others. “This is coming from a very noncynical place,” says Anderson. “The artists leave their egos at the door and put their arms around these kids.”

WHILE THESE ARTIST-EDUCATORS APPROACH THEIR WORK with different points of emphasis, they tend to agree on one

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thing: Arts education is woefully under-resourced and underfunded. "Now they're even cutting back on humanities and history," says Hayes Greenfield. "The kids are really getting shortchanged." Wally "Gator" Watson finds that "schools on almost every level don't acknowledge that music is important." But there is another obstacle as well: lack of media interest and coverage. The jazz community worries about the health and future of the art form, but isn't always attentive to the efforts of those on the frontlines. "Instead of sitting in a conference room at the Hilton talking about new audiences," says Schuman of JazzReach, "our organization is doing something about it. When you look at the number of kids we reach, is that any less



Director Jeff Antoniuk (L) and Tom Liddle (R) in a combo rehearsal at Maryland Summer Jazz, July 2006

relevant than a big, new hyped artist?" Similarly, Eli Yamin cites the Jazz Drama Program's attendance figures and offers this perspective: "If 1,700 jazz fans went to a show in Manhattan, it would be big news. It is big news if you care about the future of the music."

Yamin still marvels at the enthusiastic reception that greeted the JDP's "Holding the Torch for Liberty," an original play focusing on American social history. "The show opens with a ragtime piece—all the music is in the vein of Scott Joplin, W. C. Handy, Ethel Waters. We premiered this show in front of 700 seventh-graders, and you should have heard them cheer—for a ragtime piece about history! I consider it a big triumph. And we need to build on that triumph, for the sake of students and also the American public." **JT**