



FIVE GEMS OF JAZZ EDUCATION

By Terry Perkins

A glance through the expansive list of collegiate jazz programs in DownBeat's "Where To Study Jazz" section will reveal that high-quality jazz programs exist all over the United States—and not just in major metropolitan areas.

Certainly, there are plenty of attractions to attending a jazz program in a big city with a thriving jazz scene, such as New York, Miami, Los Angeles or Chicago. But living and studying in a major metropolitan area isn't the right fit for every music student. For some, it makes more sense to study jazz in small or medium-sized cities that are home to some of the nation's finest universities and conservatories.

What follows is a close-up look at five such "gems" of jazz education.

UMASS Amherst

DownBeat spoke with Jeffrey W. Holmes, director of jazz and African American music studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, during the school's annual Jazz in July Festival, a two-week event that was started 37 years ago by distinguished musical alumni Dr. Billy Taylor.

"Billy modeled Jazz in July on the Jazzmobile program he started in New York [in the 1960s]," Holmes explained. "He wanted to

bring jazz into the Amherst community. Now, we bring in 50 to 80 students each week. The focus is on improvisation, especially in combo settings, with guest musicians and clinicians. It's a great collaboration with the university's Fine Arts Center, with lots of public performances. It's a nice summer counterpart to what we do during the year."

That concept of collaboration is clearly a major focus of the jazz program at UMASS Amherst. In addition to offering bachelor's degrees in music, the department also offers a master's degree, with a focus on composition and arranging.

"From the outset, we have a number of undergrad students who know they want to study writing," Holmes said. "We encourage them to start by writing for combos. And our grad students write for our big bands and studio orchestra, as well as combos. We can bring in students from the classical music department to create interesting instrumental combination that match the compositions.

"As a result, there's a lot of collaboration and interaction by the writers and arrangers with their peers as performers to make sure what they intended is what they're hearing. The bottom line for all our students is that if they write it, we'll find a way to have it played."

There are additional collaborative efforts with four other nearby schools: Hampshire College, Amherst College, Mount Holyoke College and Smith College. Banded together as a consortium, the schools have created additional opportunities for music students at all five institutions. For example, a Five College Jazz Festival showcases the music of student combos, vocal groups and big bands.

Jeff Schneider—who earned his master's degree in music at UMASS Amherst, and now has a career as a composer in New York—pointed to his collaborative experiences there as a key to his development.

"UMASS Amherst provided me with the freedom to make music I liked without fear of being judged for not conforming to one particular style of jazz," Schneider said. "The professors consistently inspired me with new approaches and techniques for improving my craft, both on a macro and micro level. I feel like I 'found myself' as a musician because of the strong, supportive community that exists within the department."

Middle Tennessee State University

Middle Tennessee State University, located in Murfreesboro, is only a 40-minute drive from Nashville, the center of the country music



Bassist David Baker (left), trumpeter Shawn Williams and vocalist Lauren Johnston of the University of Northern Colorado



Musicians in the Latin Jazz Ensemble at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music



Pianist Chris Baymon and members of the UMass Jazz Ensemble I

industry. But there's a lot more music happening in the area than just country, as the growth of the MTSU jazz studies department attests.

According to Jamey Simmons, director of jazz studies at MTSU, the increasingly diverse Nashville music scene—as well as the expansion of the city's music industry—is a key element in that growth.

"There's definitely a growing jazz scene in Nashville," he said. "And there are plenty of other opportunities to play in studios, and in other musical settings as well."

To provide opportunities for MTSU jazz students in all aspects of the music industry, the department offers a music industry degree with an emphasis in jazz. According to Michael Parkinson, director of the MTSU School of Music (who also teaches in the jazz studies department), the combined degree offers students flexibility in seeking a career in a variety of musical directions.

"It's an attractive option, and has really become increasingly popular with students over the last five to 10 years," Parkinson said. "One of the requirements for the music industry degree is that the student does an internship in Nashville with a professional music industry firm. In addition to providing a hands-on look at an aspect of the music business, it can also open a lot of doors, and lead to an opportunity for employment after graduation."

There's plenty of flexibility and diversity in terms of jazz styles taught at MTSU as well. The department has a world-percussion program

that includes a steel drum band, and a salsa band as well.

"Members of our faculty each have a unique skill set," Parkinson added. "And we want to make sure students get the chance to experience that range of skills. That's why the six combos we run each semester rotate among our faculty. Students can learn a lot more pedagogically from that range of expertise."

One guiding principle for the MTSU jazz studies department is a strong commitment to improvisation.

"Getting *everyone* to improvise runs through everything we do," Simmons said. "For example, in our jazz theory classes and jazz style classes, we focus on playing, rather than putting notes on a blackboard. It's a great way [for students] to develop their ears."

Indiana University

The jazz studies program at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University in Bloomington is renowned for several reasons: its founder, acclaimed musician and educator David Baker; famous alumni like Randy Brecker, Chris Botti and Jeff Hamilton; and its resources as part of the second-largest music school in the United States.

Although the program continues to honor its roots and traditions, it's also gearing up for what comes ahead, as the words at the top of the school's jazz studies website suggest: "Honor the Past. Shape the Present. Imagine the Future."

During the past two years, the jazz studies faculty has expanded, with the hiring of bassist Todd Coolman, trumpeter John Raymond and saxophonist Walter Smith III. A state-of-the-art recording studio opened recently, and new rehearsal halls, designed to accommodate larger ensembles, now are in place.

Jazz studies faculty member Luke Gillespie has a long-view perspective on the IU jazz studies department after earning his bachelor's, master's and doctorate in music at Bloomington.

"We now have over 10 jazz faculty in the program, and nine of us are full-time," Gillespie said. "This is a huge change from my days as a student in the 1970s, when it was basically David Baker teaching almost everything. It has allowed current students to have the collective jazz mentorship of their private teacher, plus others who teach improvisation, history, composition/arranging and pedagogy."

Pianist Jamaal Baptiste, who earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in jazz studies at IU, seconded that statement.

"One of the many benefits of the jazz studies department is the accessibility of the faculty members," he said. "Students can work closely with professors and acquire practical performance experience inside and outside the classroom."

Gillespie emphasized that one IU jazz studies tradition—students receiving one-hour private lessons with faculty every week—will not change.



Middle Tennessee State University's Jazz Ensemble I directed by Jamey Simmons

"Private lessons at IU for all majors are with faculty," he said. "No one studies with an assistant, unless it's on a secondary instrument. And this starts from day one as a freshman."

Gillespie explained that jazz studies students benefit from both a large music school with many departments and living in a college town.

"There's a mutual respect between the jazz and classical departments," Gillespie said, "In addition to the diversity of activities within jazz studies, students can compose for almost any instrumentation and find the necessary musicians to rehearse and perform it. This is a great environment to learn and grow in."

Oberlin College & Conservatory

If you're looking for a school in a small-town environment, Oberlin College and Conservatory definitely fits the bill. The Ohio town has a population of about 8,000. But when it comes to jazz education, Oberlin has some amazing resources to offer prospective students, including a top-tier faculty.

In addition to Bobby Ferrazza, director of jazz studies and professor of guitar at the conservatory, the faculty includes saxophonist Gary Bartz, trombonists Jay Ashby and Robin Eubanks, trumpeter Eddie Henderson, drummer Billy Hart, percussionist Jamey Haddad, pianist Dan Wall and vocalist La Tanya Hall.

"The philosophy of the jazz studies department has always been to bring in teachers who are professional musicians," Ferrazza explained. "The concept is to first have musicians who are dedicated to teaching—and who also can relate their experiences as professional musicians to the students. It brings another dimension to the academic perspective."

For Ferrazza, it's just as important that the faculty who come to teach at Oberlin become part of what he calls "the soul of this place."

"We're very proud of having faculty of this musical caliber," he said. "And, in turn, they also

become proud of what the school represents."

Another unique aspect of Oberlin is the faculty's approach to the small-group program. According to Ferrazza, it's student-driven.

"Each semester, students propose a group they want to be in and pick personnel," he explained. "There are certain criteria—they need to register for the class and can't be in too many groups. Once the proposed group is accepted, they get a faculty coach. But in general, we let the students pick repertoire, and they write and arrange for their groups as well. The basic concept is to help develop the artistic vision of our students. They learn from each other, and that's something really important to the program. There's a sense of freedom, but also of responsibility."

Ferrazza emphasized that there are plenty of chances for students to perform on campus, and he especially is excited about the Sonny Rollins Jazz Ensemble, funded by the iconic octogenarian tenor saxophonist, which will debut after student auditions this September.

"It's going to be a performance-based ensemble," he added, "and the fact that Sonny requires the student members to give back to the community in some way fits what we're trying to accomplish here at Oberlin. And the added performance opportunities just add to the literally hundreds of concerts we present each year."

University of Northern Colorado

Under the leadership of Dana Landry, the University of Northern Colorado jazz studies program in Greeley has become a model of consistency in collecting DownBeat Student Music Awards. The program has won more than 100 awards since Landry became director at UNC in 2002, including 10 honors this year.

The overall growth of the program—in terms of students, number of faculty, degrees awarded and number of student ensembles—is on an upward curve.

When Landry arrived, UNC did not award degrees in jazz.

"Gene Aitken, who headed the program before me, had students major in theory and composition since there was no jazz degree," Landry said. "We were able to start the Bachelor of Music with a jazz emphasis [degree program], as well as master's degree [programs] in jazz performance and jazz composition in 2004. And we added a doctorate in jazz studies a decade ago, plus a bachelor's degree with an emphasis in music business. We will have about 100 undergraduates in the program this fall, as well as 25 to 30 graduate students."

UNC now has five lab bands, and Landry directs Jazz Lab Band I. In addition, the program has eight jazz combos, a guitar ensemble and a number of award-winning vocal groups.

"We added a funk and soul band last year," Landry said. "What's great for the students in all these groups is that it creates a lot of performing opportunities for them on campus, as well as at conferences like [the annual Jazz Education Network Conference] and at festivals. They really enjoy that."

The jazz studies program continues to add new classes to the program, including a rhythm section workshop that examines great rhythm sections, specific players and styles throughout jazz history.

"We also have a standard jazz repertoire class," Landry added. "And this fall, we're going to offer a course that [surveys] the history of New Orleans jazz. We're thrilled to be able to offer classes that supplement core curriculum."

Landry is also the artistic director of the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival, which will celebrate its 49th year in 2019. In addition to the many performance opportunities on campus, students can find the spotlight in the nearby cities of Denver, Boulder and Fort Collins.

"There are even a couple of jazz clubs right here in Greeley," Landry said. "It's a great area [in which] to play and hear jazz."