

Jazz Ink

Peer to Peer Jazz Education: A Week in Minnesota

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by Andrea Canter

Take six exemplary high school jazz artists under the direction of one of the nation's leading jazz educators. Mix in the performance and teaching talents of one of the world's most acclaimed alto saxophonists and a fast-rising vocal dynamo, augmented by a new national jazz curriculum. Bring these musicians together for a week in residence in one of the jazz-friendliest metro areas of the Midwest, with concerts and clinics at five urban and suburban high schools. Close out the week with a student jam and two nights on the bandstand of a world-renowned jazz club. A fantasy recipe for ensuring the future of jazz? This concoction is the reality of the new Peer to Peer Jazz Education Program, one of the many programs of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and recently executed in area classrooms and on the bandstand of the Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis.

A nonprofit educational organization, the Monk Institute was established to honor the legacy of pianist/composer Thelonious Monk, himself a mentor for many young jazz artists. With an overall goal of inspiring and nurturing the next generation of jazz musicians, the Monk Institute provides tuition/expense-free fellowships to a select number of students through the University of Southern California as well as a number of educational programs that reach out to public elementary, middle and high school students throughout the nation and worldwide, bringing master artists face to face with aspiring musicians. The Institute programs, including its new free internet curriculum ("Jazz in America"), seek to "use jazz as the medium to encourage imaginative thinking, creativity, a positive self-image, and respect for one's own and others' cultural heritage." A new component of outreach education is the "Peer to Peer Jazz Education Program" which brings accomplished student musicians together with other students their age, providing opportunities for mentoring, interaction, and mutual exchange of their passions and talents.

The Peer to Peer Program was launched in Minneapolis in March with a week-long residency of the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts (LACHSA) Jazz Sextet, sponsored locally by the Dakota Foundation for Jazz Education and the Children's Music and Arts Foundation. Six of the most talented teen jazz artists in Los Angeles (or anywhere else), under the direction of Monk Institute Vice President for Education, bassist/educator J.B. Dyas and the guidance of LACHSA Jazz Director Dan Castro, joined forces with alto sax star Bobby Watson and extraordinary vocalist Lisa Henry. Watson (on the jazz faculty of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music) and Henry (a Kansas City-based clinician and educator) served as guest instructors, working both with the LACHSA sextet and with the high school bands and choirs during daily "informances" and clinics.



*The LACHSA Sextet
with Lisa Henry and Bobby Watson*

The “peer to peer” concept is based on the simple assumption that students will more likely listen to and be inspired by the words and music of other students, that successful students as mentors will have more credibility than adult educators alone. But beyond the modeling and interactions of the “peer to peer” activities, the week in Minnesota also offered each of the LACHSA musicians a unique opportunity to experience the life of a professional touring musician and to learn from two established performers. Some lessons were learned through predictable challenges, while others came unexpectedly. And based on the level of musicianship displayed at the final sets at the Dakota, and from the words of the young musicians themselves, it is clear that these were lessons that will well serve these outstanding young men for the rest of their careers.

On behalf of the Jazz Police, I was honored to accompany the LACHSA Sextet throughout their week in the Twin Cities, and offer an inside glimpse of the program through the following highlights.

Impromptu Performance, Monday

The sextet, along with Dan Castro and J.B. Dyas, arrived on a delayed flight in the wee hours of Monday morning, barely catching a few hours sleep before heading to their first school visit at St. Paul Harding High School and meeting for the first time with Bobby Watson and Lisa Henry. The evening was set aside for some relaxation, attending Stanley Jordan’s gig at the Dakota. But Jordan was suffering from tendonitis, and by 7 pm, Watson, Henry, LACHSA pianist Kris Bowers and trumpeter Gregory Diaz found themselves on stage with Jordan’s bassist and drummer. There was no rehearsal, and save the bassist and drummer, these musicians had never performed together. But this is what jazz is all about—improvising, going with the moment.

Watson is always a fiery performer and wasted no time reminding the audience that this was no “back-up plan,” spiraling through a rubato opening on “Just Friends.” With little time to be nervous in his first major venue performance, Gregory Diaz launched into a bustling trumpet solo on “I Remember April” (although I am willing to be that he will never forget this March!). Somewhat hesitant in his first foray, young Kris Bowers gained confidence rapidly, and by the end of the set, had become an eloquent and facile spokesman on such gems as Tyner’s “Passion Dance,” Henderson’s “Record-a-Me,” and a samba-infused “That’s All.” The set closed with a pair of crowd-pleasers featuring the powerful voice of Lisa Henry. She blew away the blues with a delicious, sassy romp through “Big Fat Daddy” and gave “That’s All” a high energy jolt. The night proved to be a grand preview of the scheduled performances for the upcoming weekend (see below). And when Jordan was forced to cancel the next night, owner Lowell Pickett was quick to encourage patrons to forgo the refund and enjoy serendipity.



*Bobby Watson and Gregory Diaz at the Dakota
Clinic at St. Paul Central, Tuesday*

The real work of “peer to peer jazz education” was the daily series of “informances” and clinics held at area high schools. Each day was spent in an interactive demonstration/performance for the study body (“informance”), followed by band and choir clinics led by Watson and Henry. The clinics are all about learning—for everyone, as the LACHSA artists served as mentors to their Minnesota counterparts, sitting in and demonstrating, to sitting back and observing, offering suggestions. In the band room at St. Paul Central High School, Bobby Watson worked with the school jazz band to refine their efforts on “Yardbird Suite.” “Do you hear how you are all missing each other?” he asked the horn section after running through the same passage a few times. “Think about that blend.” After a few more trials, Watson smiled. “Now, that’s a brass moment.

Down the hall, Lisa Henry introduced the Central Girls Chorus to the basics of jazz singing. They sang a straight version of “Twinkle Twinkle,” and then, to “jazz it up,” Henry gave them a simple syncopated rhythm; now it sounded more like a jazz tune than nursery rhyme. To make it more interesting, Henry divided the chorus into thirds, teaching each a simple but different phrase. The girls sang the counter-harmonies while Henry added her own scat. Everyone smiled. Jazz is fun.



Bobby Watson with the Central High School Jazz Band

Rehearsal

Along with travels to area high schools, Watson, Henry, and LACHSA Sextet prepared for their weekend showcase gigs. Perhaps no rehearsal could replace the lessons of the unexpected performances Monday and Tuesday night, yet the planned practices on the Dakota stage were clearly significant learning experiences. Thursday afternoon, the rehearsal focused on the sets to be performed with Lisa Henry. On the practice stage, Henry seemed as relaxed and open with these young stars as with the high school choirs she directed in the school clinics. As the rhythm section got ready to launch into “All of Me,” Lisa encouraged her protégés: “I’m not going to tell you



Rehearsing with Lisa Henry

what to do—use your own creativity” After running through the Monday night crowd-pleaser, “Big Fat Daddy,” and a slow and sultry “Body and Soul,” Henry was quick to point out to the young musicians that “a chick singer got you out early.”

But there was more to practice, now on the tunes the Sextet would play with Bobby Watson, and J.B. Dyas wanted to work on the out choruses “so it’s tight.” Working through Bobby’s tunes was challenging these young musicians to play on the very top of their game, and Dyas held them to a high standard. But by the end, he praised them for “a good rehearsal, everyone played very well.” It was time for a break before dinner and an evening “just listening” at the Dakota.

Informance and Clinic at Minneapolis Henry High, Friday

Later the LACHSA students would compare the experience at St. Paul Central, where they worked with a jazz band, to the afternoon at Minneapolis’ Patrick Henry, where there’s no arts magnet program and the school fields a generic marching band. Despite the lack of a core of committed jazz musicians, however, the concert and informance at Henry were well received by the 200 or so students who piled into the auditorium. The opening performance by the Sextet with Bobby and Lisa got off to a late start as local Channel 5 responded to an invitation with a camera crew and reporter who interviewed Kris Bowers and Max Wrightson. Finally things got underway, as J.B. Dyas told the Henry students that “Jazz is America’s original music, born in America and invented by Americans through the African American experience.” In the audience, the largely African American, Hispanic, and Hmong students nodded their heads. Moving on to the concept of improvisation, “the most important element in jazz,” J.B. noted that “jazz musicians use music to express themselves and it is not written ahead of time,” much as we express ourselves through conversation—we “improvise” as we listen and react. Heads nodded again.



Lisa, Bobby and the Sextet performed at Henry High School



Henry High School students swing with the Sextet

Illustrating improvisation, the Sextet with Bobby Watson played “ETA” and “Canteloupe Island.” The Henry students responded more readily to Lisa Henry’s romp through “Kansas City.” They dig the blues, and soon they were standing in the aisles and dancing with the music. J.B. then presented a short lesson illustrating the concepts of chords, chord changes, and the structure of a jazz tune, using Sonny Rollins’ “Tenor Madness” as the example while the rhythm section demonstrated how a basic melody

becomes a jazz tune. Finally they ran through the full AABA form, the students now able to count off the bars. “Play another song,” someone shouted, but it was time for Bobby Watson’s version of the history of jazz, a fable about a “perfect” saxophonist who turns mistakes into improvisation in playing “Amazing Grace.” It was a familiar tune for the students, and again they asked for more music. But the class period was over. I wondered how many had even thought about jazz before this afternoon. They were eager to hear more. It’s not in the school’s budget.

Informance and Student Jam, Saturday

Saturday’s noon event provided an opportunity for students and others in the greater Twin Cities community to enjoy the same demonstration and discussion presented at the five area high schools earlier in the week. For an audience of mostly teen musicians and their parents, J.B. Dyas described the Monk Institute and this first tour with the Peer to Peer Jazz Education program. Jazz can be used as an opportunity to teach teamwork, Dyas noted, as it embodies the concepts of “unity, democracy, and individual freedom with responsibility to the group.” Nothing makes a point better than live music, and as at the schools, the LACHSA Sextet demonstrated these concepts, starting out with Ellis Marsalis’ tune “Swinging at the Haven” with Bobby Watson. Noting the student musicians in the audience, Watson suggested that they start taking notes. “If you hear something you want to know, go find out what it is!” After the sextet grooved through “Canteloupe Island,” J.B. presented his now-familiar “Anatomy of a Jazz Tune,” again using Sonny Rollins’ “Tenor Madness” and the assistance of the LACHSA rhythm section. And as he had done with each informance, Bobby Watson presented his “Story Time” and his fable about the birth of jazz. “If you make a mistake, make it loud, and repeat it!”

A lively Q&A session followed. Was clarinet a good choice for a jazz musician? JB advised that “all clarinet players should learn sax and flute—to find work!” Why are there so few female instrumentalists? J.B., Bobby, Lisa and members of the audience tossed out names of women jazz artists, particularly sax players, who defy the stereotype that women in jazz are primarily vocalists and sometimes pianists. How long have you been playing jazz? Each of the LACHSA sextet responded, most indicating they had discovered jazz in the past 4-5 years after first experiencing more traditional music. Usually a music teacher had first introduced jazz, while such legends as Coltrane, Parker, and Blakey were original sources of inspiration. I asked what they thought were the important lessons they had learned over the week in Minnesota. The opportunity to play with veteran musicians Bobby and Lisa topped everyone’s list, along with the importance of adjusting to new situations on stage or in rehearsal. As Max Wrightson noted, they learned that when “in front of an audience, come out with a positive attitude, forget everything else, and smile!” And, as Gregory Diaz learned from Bobby, “give 110% and play like it is the last time!”



Bobby Watson advises young musician at the Twin Cities jazz students jammed with Bobby Watson



Twin Cities jazz students jammed with Bobby Watson

All this was the preface, however, to the Student Jam. Jazz students were encouraged to come with their instruments, and soon Bobby had organized a loose group of middle school and high school students into several waves to jam on stage. Not surprising, there were a lot of sax players among the crowd, as well as a sprinkling of trumpeters, bassists, drummers, and pianists. It seemed that just being on stage with Bobby Watson was as much inspiration as these young artists needed to overcome any initial shyness. At the end, the entire group jammed on “All Blues,” and they were joined on stage by two area vocalists, Ginger Commodore and Rhonda Laurie, who with Lisa Henry and Bobby Watson, provided a burning finale to a very enjoyable afternoon.

Weekend on Stage

The scheduled weekend shows (4 sets) at the Dakota gave the young Sextet members plenty of memories and career-affirming experience. In varying combinations, they played with Bobby, Lisa, and with just their own configurations; each had an opportunity to talk to the audience and introduce a tune, including some original compositions. Using three bandmates for his quartet, alto saxophonist **Daniel Richardson** spewed out his lines like a vet, his composition soared with a spiraling head and twisting embellishments; over the weekend he proved equally adept on tenor. **Gregory Diaz**’ “Certain Uncertainty” was a clearly articulated ballad, far more maturely executed than his seventeen years would predict; on more uptempo selections, he blew great puffs of steam with tight angular phrases that would climb and fall, twist and snarl. On the last night, more relaxed than ever, he played a volcanic solo on “Swinging at the Haven.” Although delighting the audience with his Tatumesque chops, **Kris Bowers** demonstrated that he can slow it down considerably without losing his Oscar Peterson sense of swing; he also proved many times to be a creative improviser, often using repeating vamps that never lapsed into mindless noodling.

Bassist **Garret Lang** pulled out the stops on a rhythmically choppy “I’m Beginning to See the Light” and swung madly through “Quiet as Is Kept;” Bobby Watson’s “Beattitude” offered a steel-string playground for guitarist **Michael McTaggart**’s languid solo, while he played with simmering intensity on “Wheel Within a Wheel.” Also on “Beattitude”, drummer **Max Wrightson** exhibited a steady, crisp attack with snappy punctuation, while his solo on “ETA” reflected a diverse repertoire of lessons learned.



Gregory Diaz soloing at the Dakota

Guest artists Lisa Henry and Bobby Watson had to stay on top of their game to keep up with the Sextet. **Lisa**, who totally seduced the audience (if not the Sextet) with an utterly soulful “Body and Soul,” rocked the roof with the Sextet on “Big Fat Daddy” and “Kansas City,” doing her best throughout the weekend to involve the audience.

The last set Saturday night closed with the powerful “Wheel Within a Wheel,” and six young men—who seemed to have grown into professional musicians over the past five days—took their final bows with Bobby and Lisa. Bobby had a final word for his mentees: “Your talents are what God gave you. What you do with your talent is what you give the Gods.”

Postscript

A month after participating in the Peer to Peer Jazz Education program, the St. Paul Central High School jazz band performed “Yard Bird Suite” at a high school jazz festival in Minneapolis. The “blend” was there and it was a “brass moment” that would have pleased Bobby Watson. As for the LACHSA musicians, they were preparing for May performances with the school’s full jazz ensemble at Catalina’s Jazz Bar in Los Angeles and as part of the Essentially Ellington Festival at Jazz at Lincoln Center (one of 15 selected bands). This jazz ensemble also was awarded first place at the first annual KJAZZ High School Jazz Festival in Los Angeles, and the full music department was one of seven programs selected as a 2006 National Grammy Signature School “Gold” recipient.



“...with all the negative press today’s youth gets, it was refreshing to see young people working together, learning from each other, being doers -- and with such an artistic topic no less. It gives me great hope that the future of our music, as well as our future in general, is in good hands.” – J.B. Dyas

“Impromptu Performance” is excerpted from an article posted on the Jazz Police website, March 7, 2006 (www.jazzpolice.com). More information about the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and the Peer to Peer Education Program is available at www.monkinstitute.com