

# GETTING THE BIG SCHOLARSHIP

BY JB DYAS, PH.D.



If there were a category in the Guinness Book of World Records for the person who has served on the most jazz audition panels, I just might be a contender. Throughout my career, I have listened to myriad jazz auditions and juries and been part of and privy to the conversations of the panelists/jurors immediately following. And, I've subsequently seen which students receive the big scholarships or placements in the top groups, and why. This has given me keen insight into how a well-executed audition can reap big scholarship awards. Indeed, I've learned precisely what the panelists want to hear.

Based on these experiences, I offer my advice on how to prepare for and perform your auditions. I also provide pointers regarding letters of recommendation, how many schools to audition for, repertoire and more. Follow these tips, and you just might be going to college for free.

## Preparation

It's impossible to overstate the importance of preparation. For all the schools you're interested in applying to, visit their websites right away so that you know all the critical deadlines. Be sure to learn 1) the application requirements, 2) recommendation letter procedures, 3) due dates, 4) audition requirements, 5) audition procedures and 6) audition dates.

Start preparing *now* for your audition. Listen to definitive recordings, memorize heads and changes, transcribe solos by the masters and practice with play-along recordings daily (just like you were playing a seven-night-per-week gig). Learn as many standards and jazz classics as possible, and play with a live rhythm section as often as you can.

It's crucial to select audition tunes you know

*extremely* well and have been playing for months. (Don't make the mistake of trying out a new tune at an audition.) Play mock auditions for your teachers, family and friends so that you'll be more comfortable when it's time for the actual audition.

Plan to audition for as many schools as possible, including all those within reasonable driving distance from your home. The more you audition, the better you get at it.

For each school on your list, apply early but audition late. The later you audition within the acceptable time frame, the better. This gives you more time to practice and prepare.

Think about the clothes you're going to wear to the audition. Don't wait until the last minute to select a proper outfit. Be sure to dress up: Men should wear a jacket and tie. Women should wear a dress or pants with a nice top.

Work on your sight-reading. Do it *daily*. Two excellent books are *Melodic Rhythms for Guitar* by William Leavitt and *Reading Contemporary Guitar Rhythms* by M.T. Szymczak. Both are good for all treble clef instruments. For bass clef, I suggest *Develop Sight Reading for All Bass Clef Instruments, Volumes 1 & 2* by Gaston Dufresne.

## Letters of Recommendation

All scholarship-granting institutions will require you to provide letters of recommendation with your application. Be sure to request letters from your band director and primary private lesson teacher, plus noted artists who know your playing. (Often the more famous the name, the more clout the letter will have.) Ask for these letters at least six weeks before the due date.

Send your writers an updated copy of your curriculum vitae (CV) that includes all your school and professional experience, awards

won, prominent players with whom you've performed, honor ensembles with which you've performed, tours you have taken and jazz camps you've attended. Make sure that your CV looks professional, with standard formatting and no typos or misspelled words.

Provide your writers with specific instructions on how to submit their letters (e.g., online, via regular mail, etc.) and the due date. Provide them with the exact name, title, mailing address and email address of the person to whom the letter is to be written (e.g., director of admissions) for each school to which you are applying.

Ask your writers if they'd be willing to "cc" a copy of the letter to others who might have influence—each school's dean of music, director of jazz studies and primary instructor of your instrument. Provide your writers with their email addresses as well.

Have as many letters written as possible. For example, let's say a particular school requires three letters of recommendation or three recommendation forms completed online. In addition to those three official letters, you could also ask other people to "put in a good word" on your behalf. You might ask a teacher or musician to email the director of admissions, dean of music, director of jazz studies and/or primary teacher of your instrument. An extra letter or two from an accomplished artist or teacher can make a difference.

Check with each college's admissions office two weeks before the recommendation letter due date to see which letters have been received. For those not yet received, gently and respectfully remind your writers of the due date (via email). Do the same three days before the due date. If any of your writers missed the deadlines, notify them



A student bassist auditions for combo placement at the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshop for bass faculty members David Friesen (left), Tyrone Wheeler, John Goldsby, JB Dyas and Lynn Seaton.

by email that it's not too late—a late letter is better than no letter. Provide them again with the names and email addresses of the recipients.

Send each writer a thank-you note once you know their recommendation letters have been received.

Send an email update to your writers once you've decided on which school you'll be attending to inform them of your decision and thank them again for their help. If you've received a scholarship, let them know and thank them for their part in making that happen as well.

### Audition Repertoire

When it comes to audition repertoire, the best preparation is to memorize dozens of tunes. Fortunately, most institutions help students narrow things down a bit by specifying the type of material they'll be expected to play at their audition. Visit the website for each school to review the required audition repertoire.

When you arrive for your audition, bring very readable lead sheets for piano, bass and drums, just in case a house combo is there to accompany you.

Have at least two tunes memorized in each category for those schools that provide a choice of styles (e.g., uptempo bebop tune, straight-eighth contemporary tune, ballad, etc.). For those schools that provide a specific tune list from which to choose (e.g., two tunes from Column A, two from Column B, etc.), have at least two tunes memorized in each category.

Know at least three blues heads, and be able to play them in both F and B-flat. Know at least three "Rhythm" changes tunes in the key of B-flat.

Quote from other blues and "Rhythm" changes tunes (as well as from solos of the masters playing on these tunes) when soloing on blues and



JB Dyas (right) leads a "What Is Jazz" "Informance" at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music with two of the Monk Institute's Jazz Performance graduate students, bassist Alex Boneham and drummer Christian Euman.

"Rhythm" changes. Do not over-quote (i.e., quote sparingly), but your playing should subtly let the audition panel hear that you know multiple blues and "Rhythm" changes tunes and that you've studied solos by the masters.

Keep in mind that playing well on easier tunes trumps playing poorly on more difficult tunes, and playing well at a medium tempo trumps playing poorly at a fast tempo.

### Scales & Arpeggios

During your audition, you can expect

panelists to ask you to execute some scales and arpeggios off the top of your head. With this in mind, you should know and be able to play the most common jazz chord scales and their related arpeggios in all keys.

When playing scales, start on the root, then ascend to the highest practical scale tone on your instrument, descend to the lowest practical scale tone on your instrument, and ascend to and conclude on the root (the same note on which you started).

When playing arpeggios, start on the root, ascend the chord tones up to the ninth, then



Visiting artist-in-residence Dick Oatts (left) conducts a private lesson with Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance fellowship recipient David Otis.

descend chord tones to and conclude on the root—the same note on which you started. (For a dominant 7 altered arpeggio, play 1–3–#5–b7–#9.)

## Performing/Soloing

Whatever repertoire you choose to play at your audition, make it obvious through your

playing that you've checked out the definitive recording:

- Phrase at least a portion of the head as on the definitive recording.
- Quote a phrase or two from solos on the definitive recording.
- Quote sparingly, but do quote, letting the audition panel hear that you've done your due diligence vis-à-vis listening and transcribing.

Make sure you know the composers and personnel of the definitive recordings of the tunes you play so that if one of the panelists asks you about it, you can answer intelligently.

Also, be sure to *develop* your solo (i.e., start somewhere and take it somewhere). Refer to the melody of the tune you're playing, dropping it in from time to time organically (so it doesn't sound contrived) and developing it. Strive to climax your solo on the penultimate bar of your last chorus, winding it down for the last couple of measures, and ending your solo on the first or second bar of the next chorus on a color tone of the chord, letting it sustain.

Have your solos develop organically from bebop language to contemporary language (in that order). Strive to have your solos reflect not only your knowledge of the language of the idiom, but also the makings of your own unique voice.

Don't solo too long: Two or three choruses on

a medium-tempo 32-bar standard, or five or six choruses on a 12-bar blues, is appropriate. Be sure to listen to and respond to the rhythm section—make this obvious. Be sure to play at a volume that is appropriate for the rhythm section and the room in which you are playing. Play with quality sound, intonation, articulation, time and technique. Don't forget to swing, and, most importantly, be *clear*.

## Recorded Auditions

Many institutions require applicants to submit recorded auditions. Some schools offer this as an option in lieu of appearing in person, often to accommodate students who live a considerable distance from campus.

Do not submit a flawed recording—record as many takes as necessary in the studio to get it right. Record with the best rhythm section that you can afford, and submit the best quality recording that you can afford.

Do not include other soloists on your audition recording (unless you are a rhythm section player demonstrating your accompaniment skills). If you are working with an extant recording of a live performance and you're not the first soloist, here's how to edit it: Fade out after the head statement, then fade up four bars before your solo begins so that there's only a few seconds

## Tips for Rhythm Section Players

In addition to the audition pointers I've provided for jazz students who are applying for scholarships, here are some valuable tips specifically for rhythm section players.

### Pianists

- Make sure you can comp chords to all of the tunes you're playing.
- Be able to comp two-handed voicings when accompanying others, and one-handed voicings (left hand) when accompanying yourself.
- When comping behind a soloist, make it obvious that you are listening and responding.
- Demonstrate the following techniques when soloing: right hand soloing with left hand comping, two-hand unison soloing (hands two octaves apart) and block chordal soloing.
- Prepare at least one *solo piece* (i.e., a standard to be played unaccompanied).
- Be able to play the most common jazz chord scales and their related arpeggios in the right hand while sustaining the related chord in the left hand.

### Guitarists & Vibraphonists

- Make sure you can comp chords to all of the tunes you're playing.
- Comp four-note, rootless voicings for the most part.
- When comping behind a soloist, make it obvious that you are listening and responding.

- Demonstrate the following techniques when soloing: single-line soloing, octaves (à la Wes Montgomery) and chordal.
- Prepare at least one *solo piece* (i.e., a standard to be played as a chord solo).

### Bassists

- Outline the harmony at hand clearly when walking bass lines (e.g., play correct thirds, sevenths and alterations), landing on the roots every time as the chords change during the first chorus. You may land on other chord tones as the chords change on subsequent choruses; however, the root should still be attacked on the first beat of each chord most of the time, especially at crucial points in the chorus (e.g., the first bar of each section), clearly anchoring the form.
- Use skips, drops and triplets sparingly. Use a wide range of the instrument, from low open E up to at least high G (sixth position/G string). Construct lines that are linear (scalar and chromatic) as well as chordal. Play long, connecting notes (legato). Be sure to swing.
- Make sure you can play the head and solo on all tunes. Play at least a portion of your solo in thumb position. Use vibrato sparingly.
- Be able to play each tune with a variety of grooves, e.g., swing (be able to play in 2 as well as 4), Latin (e.g., bossa nova, samba), funk, rock, etc. Make sure you can use the bow on at least one tune.
- Prepare at least one standard to be played completely unaccompanied. For example, play an intro, play the head, walk, solo, play the head,

play an outro.

- Play with a good sound—this is of the utmost importance. If using an amp, carefully adjust the sound before you begin to play. Dig in.
- Play with solid time, a good feel and excellent intonation.

### Drummers

- Prepare to play the following grooves on the drum set at all tempos (in addition to whatever snare drum and mallet requirements there are): swing (including both a 2 feel and straightahead jazz 4 feel with both sticks and brushes), bossa nova, samba, rock and funk.
- Be able to trade fours with yourself (alternating between four bars of time and four bars of soloing). Likewise, be able to trade eights with yourself.
- Be able to trade 12-bar blues choruses with yourself (alternating between 12 bars of time and 12 bars of soloing).
- Be able to play a tune completely solo, stating the head (rhythmically) around the kit, playing time, trading fours or eights with yourself, and playing the head out. Make sure the form is *clear*.
- When playing with a soloist and/or rhythm section, make sure it is obvious that you're listening and responding to the other players. Delineate the form clearly (via fills, playing the bridge differently, changing cymbals for different soloists, etc.). Make it obvious that you *know* the tune.
- Remember: "TGIF" (time, groove, interaction, feel).

—JB Dyas



Composition and Arranging artist-in-residence Billy Childs (right) works with the current class of full scholarship recipients at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

HOLLY WALLACE

before the end of the head and the beginning of your solo; fade out after your solo is over.

## Piano for Non-Pianists

It's a good idea for every instrumentalist and vocalist to be able to play *some* piano. You don't need Art Tatum-level chops—just enough ability to demonstrate your knowledge of harmony and give a sense of your overall musicianship.

So don't be surprised if one of your audition panelists asks you to play a little piano. Be sure you're able to comp two-handed and one-handed voicings for II-V-I progressions in all major and minor keys, blues in B-flat and F, and "Rhythm" changes in B-flat.

Also, I suggest you be able to play all the tunes in Volume 54 of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Play-A-Long series (*Maiden Voyage*) as follows: head with the right hand, comp with the left hand; solo with the right hand, comp with the left hand; and two-handed comping.

## At the Interview

You'll be expected to do more than just play great at your audition. You'll probably have to do some serious talking as well. Practice this. Get together with a teacher to practice talking about your goals as a musician—especially if you are somewhat shy or quiet.

During the interview portion of your audition, be sure to speak loudly, clearly and definitively. When asked about your goals, mention (as applicable) your desire to:

- be a well-rounded, thorough musician in

addition to becoming an artist with your own voice.

- perform, compose, arrange and teach.
- give back; promulgate and perpetuate the art form (teaching, conducting clinics).
- serve the underserved (e.g., participate in school outreach programs that teach young students about jazz and its values, including teamwork, democracy and persistence).

Remember, your audition panelists are people, too. Be personable, serious (but not stiff), confident (but not arrogant), humble and deferential in the way you speak and carry yourself. Do your best to enjoy the experience, and make an earnest effort to learn something about your panelists and the program they represent.

## Tune Learning

It has been my experience that, in general, the more tunes a student knows, the better jazz player he or she is. Having a memorized repertoire of standards and jazz classics gives you more breadth, depth and credibility as a musician. Hence, the more tunes one knows, usually the higher the scholarship award.

A bachelor's degree at a top school can cost about \$200,000 nowadays, so you should aim to get as large a scholarship as you can. Although I haven't conducted an empirical research study on the topic, anecdotal evidence I've accumulated over the past two decades points to a correlation of about \$1,000 of scholarship money per tune learned. For example, I've found that if a student knows 50 tunes, then he or she is likely to receive a 25 percent scholarship (i.e., \$50,000 toward the total \$200,000 cost). If the student knows 100

tunes, then a 50 percent scholarship is the norm. And I've never met a student who knew 200 tunes who didn't receive a full ride!

So start memorizing tunes *now*. It will pay off, *literally*. For a methodical procedure on how to memorize and retain tunes (and which ones to learn), see my two-part article "Methods for Fighting the Epidemic of Tune Illiteracy" in the May 2010 and August 2010 issues of *DownBeat*.

## Performance Clarity

Finally, remember that *clarity* is paramount. Often, the final judgment as to the amount of your scholarship award is based more on how *clear* you are than anything else. This means that your playing should *clearly* demonstrate that you are in the know, that is, you *know* the tune, you *know* the changes, you *know* the language of the style and you *know* the definitive recordings. "Skating" on your solo doesn't fool anyone. Now go for it! **DB**

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### Additional Resources

- "Prepare To Nail Your Auditions," by Geoffrey Himes, *DownBeat*, October 2013
- [majoringinmusic.com](http://majoringinmusic.com)
- [jazzinamerica.org/jazzresources/jazzeducation/college](http://jazzinamerica.org/jazzresources/jazzeducation/college)
- [jazzstandards.com](http://jazzstandards.com)
- [hopestreetmusicstudios.com/articles/100-must-know-jazz-tunes](http://hopestreetmusicstudios.com/articles/100-must-know-jazz-tunes)
- [jobsearch.about.com/od/sampleresumes/a/sampleresume2.htm](http://jobsearch.about.com/od/sampleresumes/a/sampleresume2.htm)