



CHAPTER 1

Why Teach Jazz?

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Excerpted from the keynote address at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Inaugural Band Director Academy, June 14, 2000, Snowmass, Colorado.

Thank you all very, very much for coming out here. It's a pleasure to be here. This has been a dream of ours for quite some time—to get all the band directors together to talk about the music, and get together on things. I've had many years of experience going to different schools around our country, and the band director is the primary influence on so many kids. When going to a school, I was always careful not to interfere with the band director in any way or attempt to usurp his or her authority. And over the last twenty years, I've never encountered a band director who didn't say, "Hey man, just help my students. It's not really about me; help my students, and then maybe I'll take you to lunch or something and you can leave. Don't worry about me—just do what you can do."

So today I'm going to be talking about why we're teaching jazz, and what makes jazz music an important tool of education. At its most basic, education provides students with a greater sense of the possible. Jazz music expands a kid's horizon of aspiration. We want students to know what's possible and to feel like anything is possible for them. I remember when I first heard Maurice Andre play; I'd be in the front room of my house, trying to figure out how to get piccolo trumpet notes on a regular B \flat trumpet. Bill Fielder, then the trumpet professor at Mississippi Valley State told me, "Man, that's a piccolo trumpet that man is playing. You're not ever going to get that [B \flat trumpet] to sound like that trumpet."

Even though I was ignorant, Mr. Fielder made me understand first, that you could do it, and then you need a piccolo trumpet to do it. But then he also said, "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to get you a piccolo trumpet, and I'm going to let you have this piccolo trumpet, and I'm going to come back in two months, and if you can play it, you can keep it. But if you can't play it, I'm taking it back." So boy, I practiced that piccolo trumpet,

squeaking and squawking; and I really couldn't play it that well, but he let me keep it, so I kept practicing it.

Jazz music gives us an opportunity to give our students a respect for history in a painless way. A lot of the time you are learning facts that are so dry that you memorize them or something for the test, but you never really learn them. Well, if you're learning Louis Armstrong, or you're learning Duke Ellington, you develop an active conception of history. And you start to realize that, while technology may change, the technology of our souls doesn't change. That's why we can still read Homer or see Michelangelo and be moved, inspired, and enriched. The basic human concerns of their day still exist today. Their solutions still work. The best of our music is the same. It doesn't get old. Also, our music shows us the effect that an individual can have on the present time—this is what Booker Little played, or this is what Charlie Parker did. The music gives you a frame of reference for your experiences. I can remember when someone called me to play in the New Orleans Civic Orchestra. I was thirteen or fourteen, so I didn't really want to go, because I thought black people didn't play orchestra music. To not be alone, I called an afro-wearing friend of mine and said, "Show up here at the Jewish Community Center; we're going to have a rehearsal." So we get there and everybody's setting up, and I see the weatherman standing behind the timpani—so I thought it was going to be sad then. But even though my father was a musician and I had heard orchestral music, I really didn't understand that people wrote it down and you played it. It seems like something very basic to understand, but I didn't have a complete conception of what it was. It was just something that people played, that your parents made you go to once or twice in your life, and you were so bored that you couldn't believe it; you just slept and you left.

So, we get into the rehearsal and we're playing the music of Beethoven. Well, it was the worst thing you had ever heard. Our orchestra is unbelievably sad. But beyond all of that poor execution and bad intonation was the mind and the conception, the feelings and the thoughts and the aspirations of Ludwig Van Beethoven.

So I start to just listen, and then it dawned on me: this man *wrote* this—he had to know what they're playing, the notes, and so on. I started to understand the organization of the music.

You know, in orchestra rehearsal, if you play trumpet, you only have one note every forty-five measures or something. You come in, "duh-dum." Most of the time you're just listening to the strings play. If you're a trumpet player, you really don't respect the violin too much. You can just play one note and it doesn't even sound like they're playing. So, every time you start playing, the conductor's hand is up ("Oh no, no trumpet!"). You can see the terror creep over him. But most of the time, you're bored.

But in the course of these rehearsals, I began to understand just how the music was organized, and I began to develop a feeling and an understanding of

this music. I became unbored through listening. And this really stuck with me when I started to be a part of jazz bands. When we would play in a big band, the music was so sad, you couldn't really figure out anything about jazz from playing it. Most of it sounded like a funk tune with a marching band on top of it. So, I would always wonder to myself, "Why is it when I play in youth orchestra, we're playing Ravel's *Bolero*, I mean, we'd murder it, but we're playing it, or we're playing Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, or Beethoven's Fifth, all of these great pieces, but when we come in to jazz band, we're playing something so trite that there's no way you could understand the meaning of the art by playing that version of it?

Sometimes I go into a band, and the band will be playing the worst music in the world. I ask the band director, "Why y'all playing this music?" "Oh, the kids want to play this," he'll say. And I'm thinking, man, I missed out. Do they do that in math class? Are they doing that in English? Where else in the school are the kids determining what they're doing? They have colleges like that? I want to work on my Ph.D., you know, in free throw shooting. So it's very important to make the kids understand that this is part of an educational experience.

Now a lot of the times, the band directors also have the pressure of the parents or the pressure of the principal. The kids in the school, they don't want to hear this; they don't want to hear that. But when the band sounds good, they don't mind hearing it. Sometimes it's important to utilize your individual power: the power of one. As the band director, you almost always know much more about music than anyone else in the school. No way in the world should your taste be defined by those who don't have it.



I think it's important to realize that our music is the best art to teach the most basic of democratic relationships—the rights and responsibilities of individuals to the larger group. This is something that's sadly lacking in our culture in general. We can see it in the polarization that pollutes our national dialogue, and we see it in the level of selfishness that is exhibited constantly. It's always, me, me, me, me, me.

I once went on a tour of colleges. I asked the college students for an example of a democratic act. It was always something that was given to them: I can vote, I can buy what I want, I can live where I want, I can do this. It was never: I have the opportunity to participate in this and give someone else this opportunity; I have the responsibility of providing this.

I always consider the most mature conception of adulthood to be that balance between rights and responsibilities. The more immature you are, the more rights you want. The more mature you are, the more responsibilities you have and the more you are providing rights for others. The most obvious example of this, of course, would be parenthood. Parenthood is all about

sacrifice. I have to do this because I want my children to have this. Many times teenagers are allowed to miss this central and basic fact. And it's something that my father was always great with teaching. He would say, "Man, I want y'all to rebel more than anything in the world, because the greatest rebellion is one that you finance yourself. I want you to get out and finance your own rebellion, and I'm going to sit in your house and let you pay my bills while I tell you what you should be doing.

In jazz you're always put in a position to make responsible choices: How loud are you going to play? How are you going to balance in the section? When it's time for a solo, who's going to solo? How long are you going to solo? How will you correct a mistake?

Our music also demands that we develop our hearing. Teaching students some scientific method of playing on chord changes that deemphasizes hearing the harmonic progression takes them further away from jazz. Even though it's an area that we might not be comfortable with, it's our job to empower students and to teach them to listen and to hear. We should encourage them to get with the harmony, get to the piano, learn three or four basic chords, a blues—it's a great tool to encourage hearing, encourage them to learn solos off of recordings. A lot of them might not want to spend much time working on stuff, and, well, we all have been in that position. We know that feeling. But the philosophy comes from us; we're the directors, and we have much more influence over our kids, no matter how hardheaded they are, than we think we have. In our rehearsals, sometimes we need to stop and say "Okay, this is what happened in this moment of music. The student played this, and you did that to respond, and you did that, and on the drums, did you hear what the soloist was doing?" "Oh no, I wasn't really listening." "That's why it sounded sad." It's important for us to go through the progression of choices that makes a performance succeed or fail.

We have to teach them how to hear, just like you have to be taught to listen in a conversation. Don't run away from training their ears just because we may be deficient in this arena. Teaching hearing also gives us the opportunity to develop our own ears to a higher level.

It's like the experience you have as a parent. How many times do your kids come home and teach you how to use some new technology or beat you at chess, and they're nine or ten years old, and then you start working on your chess game. You don't want to be beat by a nine-year-old. Maybe you take them to a museum, or somewhere you really would never go on your own, but because you have this experience with them, you start to learn new things that enhance your life. We can think of many instances in which parenting forces us to develop aspects of ourselves that hadn't been cultivated.



I want to stress to all our directors the importance of improvisation. We have to teach our students how to improvise, no matter how sad they sound at first. You don't chastise a baby for not being able to speak correctly. But when they say two or three little phrases that you can't distinguish one word from "doo-doo-ba-boo-boo"—"Did you hear what he said?!" So we're always encouraging and supporting their attempts. We have to extend that elementary school band conception into high school and sometimes into college. We have to encourage the students so they'll get over that shyness and learn how to speak this language.

You know, we all can remember the elementary school band or the high school band Christmas concert that was just unbelievably sad. The band all out of tune, you had to play a solo and you messed it up, you were nervous, and yet your mom was still, "Oh, my baby sounded so good." You know you didn't sound good. But it made you *feel* good. We have to continue that tradition, which is not to say any and everything is great, but to say we recognize that each student struggles in some way. We know when one is lazy or one is working hard, and we should encourage all of our students to play and make choices, even when they are not the best choices. Do something.

Improvised music provides a great life lesson for students. Through improvising, kids learn to handle the unforeseen with grace. Musically, group improvisation teaches the individual to adjust circumstances beyond her control and use her portion of influence to create something cohesive that sounds good. That's the beauty of Louis Armstrong and the thing that was so startling to everyone first hearing him.

There's a great account of Bix Beiderbecke saying that when he first heard Louis Armstrong, it was unbelievable, because here was a guy improvising a solo, and playing what Bix called "like phrases," so that one phrase led logically to another phrase led to another phrase. Through Armstrong he understood that you could improvise and make a complete artistic statement. Well, now here we are, eighty years later, and we're trying to teach our students how to create coherent improvised solos, to understand the importance of creating and developing ideas through the harmonic form.

You know, you don't have to create the Sistine Chapel; but let's concentrate on developing our solos and understanding the value of improvisation. How many times in the lives of our students are they going to be called upon to improvise? It might just be basic improvisation in the kitchen, or it could be some serious personal crisis. But the art of improvisation and the fact of improvisation is something that is very important to living a confident, modern life. That's why it's very, very important: soloing and improvisation.



Jazz, because it allows us to interface with the greatest minds in American music, empowers our students to make honest and personal statements. In our music there's a premium on integrity. First, just the integrity of playing your instrument. When you hear someone like Clifford Brown, or Art Tatum, or Charlie Parker, you know they had to practice that instrument with integrity: every day being serious about it, addressing deficiencies. They were willing to do that, and do it over and over and over again. Second, jazz demands that our students to be confident enough to express how they're feeling, to develop their personal identity and to play what they are hearing in the moment they hear it.

The roll call of innovators we have produced is not the greatest achievement of jazz. That amateurs and professionals could play together in the streets of New Orleans and create great music is an extraordinary expression of communal creativity the likes of which had never been seen in music. This is our greatest achievement. The music was constructed in such a way that a genius like Louis Armstrong could perform with someone who could barely play, and they could make up something that satisfied them and an audience.

Jazz music affords every musician an opportunity to find and develop his or her individual sound and identity. They don't have to create an entirely new form of music to be successful. How many trumpeters were influenced by Dizzy Gillespie? Miles Davis, Fats Navarro, Clifford Brown, Booker Little, and so on and so forth. We could just go on and on and on. But we know when we hear Booker or Freddie; we know that's not Dizzy. Though none of those trumpeters invented bebop, the creation of their *own* sound was enough to make legions of fans happy and send musicians to the practice room.



An important aspect of jazz is the blues. When jazz musicians applied the sophistication of other forms to the sound of the blues, they created a language that was universal—sophisticated and down home. All bases were covered.

The best example I can think of is Louis Armstrong's version of *Star Dust*. You think about the distance between some fundamental country blues progression and the complex harmonic progression of *Stardust*, and realize that Pops could hear blues implications in that song. His solo and singing on *Stardust* is a great musical achievement of natural integration. And from this we have musician after musician after musician. Charlie Parker said he tried to put the blues in everything he played. Blues expression raises the soul quotient of our nation; something we need to raise in the worst kind of way.

We often confuse having an "edge," or strange hairstyle, with being soulful, and it's just because of a lack of education. Many times I see kids and they're caught in the gap; they don't really know how to develop the expression of who they are. So they're naturally going to go toward the thing that is sold to them

most frequently: where the most commercial money is, where the most nudity is, the most pornography and profanity. We live in that environment and it is incumbent upon us to teach our students about these things like we have to do with our own kids. We can't act like it's not there; it is. And it affects our bands, because music is the most common way of delivery.

So we have to raise the soul quotient of our students, so that they understand what the world of human feeling affords you. And when you pick up your horn to play, you're entering the world of human feeling. And the question of soul is always, "How do you want to make somebody else feel?" Yes, the blues is a very important aspect of our music that should not be run from. Instead of running from it, we should run towards it.

It's like dealing with the most hardheaded, difficult kids. You want to really run from them, but most of the times, these are the kids you've got to run toward, because they are looking for something—they need to be loved or have a foot put in their butt. It's best to keep those kinds of kids in the band and work with them. But you have to walk that thin line. If they step across that certain line, you got to send them home. That's just my experience. As much as you don't want to send them home, you have to be firm. It's very important for them to be clear about your authority. It's better to have a sad band that you can teach than to have one or two kids that are a disruptive influence just because they play better than others. Try to bring those kids in; but if they don't want it, let them go, and the other ones will step up.



Jazz is romantic music. It is a music that exudes a sensuality that can't be reduced to pornography. A lot of stuff that I see and hear—I don't even know how to address it. We are in a crisis situation due to the proliferation of vulgar videos and music. Sexuality is a part of life. You can't teach jazz music and avoid that, because the sale of sex to kids through music affects their taste. Believe it or not, jazz can counter state the hyper-sexuality of this forty-year downward spiral.

The whole history of the American popular song runs through jazz. Most of that material is very romantic. Kids can learn from checking out Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Frank Sinatra. That generation had a certain conception of adult romance, and it's important for us to understand that this is an important part of life, not something to be awkwardly avoided. By the time kids get into high school, they're old enough to understand love songs. We can't take kids, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, whose sexuality is being exploited everyday by companies, and by people with half of their clothes on, and talk to these students like they're six years old, 'cause they're not.

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I always remember we were in Chicago once, and this is a story that I really keep with me, and I think about this when I'm playing my horn.

A group of kids had come in; it was a lunch with the mayor and everybody was sitting up with their suits on. You know kids; they come into that situation wondering, "When is this going to be over?" So the kids come out, they play mallet instruments, and there's one little bitty kid maybe eight years old in the middle. He doesn't play one note the whole time they're playing, and I'm kind of looking at him wondering, is he going to play? So the whole band is playing, and he's just sitting there, but he has his mallets up, and he's ready. He's looking at the music like he's trying to translate the Rosetta Stone or something. I've never seen a look with this type of intensity.

So Wes Anderson and I started watching him, and we were saying, "Do you think he's going to play?" He said, "I don't know, it's almost over man!" So he just kept looking and then when he got to the very last note, he hit this note; he was so nervous, "BING!" And right, as soon as he hit the note, he looked across the room at a bigger kid (about twelve or thirteen), who was probably his brother, and the big kid gave a solemn nod of approval, and the eight-year-old just started gushing with satisfaction.

I said to myself and Wes, "That's how we ought to be playing. One note. He looked at that note like it was St. Peter. And I think about that sometimes when I want to stand up and not give a hundred percent. What about that little kid? And that's a feeling we should try to give our bands. Because a lot of kids just don't have it. We have to bring that type of energy and feeling to them, even if we must overdo it sometimes. That's a big part of our job.

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Now there are many pitfalls, of course. I've been to many bands where the greatest one is apathy. We have to keep our kids interested in the music. It's very hard sometimes. I remember when I was in high school, my band director, who had directed bands for forty years and was a little out of touch with kids of the seventies, said: "I remember when I had great bands. Now I just have uninspired bands with kids that don't want to play. What can I do to get through to these kids?" And I said, "Man, I don't think you can really do anything with these kids, because they are so spoiled, they aren't interested in being in the band. This is just a way to get out of a *real* class."

I know you have many problems—no acoustic bass player, bad feeder schools, etc. It's very important for band directors to develop good relationships with all those middle school directors and elementary schools; get to know the people and make them a part of what you are doing. How many band directors with a great band say, "Man, I have a great band, but I have

great feeder schools.” Keep recruiting kids; bring them and their parents into the world of music. And if you maintain a positive attitude and feeling, your band program will flourish. But you can’t do it by yourself.

One thing I learned from Ron Carter when he was at East St. Louis—I actually did my first clinic for him in 1980. He called me, he said, “Man, you’re playing with Art Blakey.” I think I was nineteen. He said, “I want you to come talk to my trumpet players.” I said “Yeah, man, I’d love to come talk to your trumpet players.” I went over to the school; his school was in the middle of one of the most challenging areas in America. When you go into the area, you’d be saying, “Man, it’s going to be a sad band.” But when you get his band room, his kids were in there playing great!

But then, he’d bring his kids to our concert. He’d have a big parent booster organization. He achieved that. We have to keep recruiting. When you have a strong parent booster organization and a good relationship with the feeder schools, you know the people you’re dealing with, and when you have good relationships with the other band directors in your area, your programs will flourish.

It’s like what I call a “humanity gig”—you are really disgusted, the band is arguing, you don’t feel like playing, you’re tired, you been on the road, you had to get on a plane and you’re scared to fly, the iron burned your suit, on and on. And you walk out on the gig and there are only seventy people in a five-hundred-seat hall. You want to go home. But that’s when you have to play like you’re playing the greatest gig of your life. That’s when you find out if you want to play or just be seen playing.

Those are some of the things I think about—things about our music that can help a young person grow into mature adulthood, and things that we can deal with when teaching this music. We’re all trying to do the same thing—create a better environment for our kids. But it’s important for us to take that moral high ground in this time and say, “We don’t want the audience to train people in music; or the record companies or what’s on the internet, or any of this other stuff that has nothing to do with music.” Let’s deal with practicing and playing together and swinging and the things that make music so great. Let’s remember all the reasons we got into it and enjoy it, and why we’re here today.

*Written and delivered by
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