

The Relevance of Jazz History in Twenty-First Century British Jazz Practice and Pedagogy

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In this discussion of jazz education, I contrast the development of traditions and practices in Britain with the practices of North America. In both cases, I categorize methods of jazz education into formal and informal schools of training, with the former focusing on early schemes of oral learning, and the latter on codified systems.¹ To my mind, history has a particularly important role in three main areas of jazz education: firstly, trans-generational mentors, by which I mean the practice of learning from the experience and abilities of older musicians; secondly, learning from recordings—and by this I mean existing jazz recordings, not Music-Minus-One™-type practice tools; and finally repertory bands. These three processes took slightly different forms in Britain than they did in the US in both informal and formal training, and they occurred after a delay of twenty years. After the first jazz performances in Britain in 1919, aspiring British jazz musicians met informally to play and study the repertoire. The formalization of jazz education in Britain took place in 1965, with the establishment of a degree program at Leeds College of Music and summer schools offered by the London School Jazz Orchestra (later the National Youth Jazz Orchestra).

The division of jazz education into informal and formal practices is highlighted by Gary Kennedy, in an entry for *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*.² In the United States, African-American teachers and institutions in the early twentieth century provided a basic musical grounding to such pupils as Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman (informal), while high school and college degree programs evolved from the 1940s onwards, using systems derived from bebop methodologies (formal). In Britain, these processes took a slightly different form, and occurred after a delay of twenty years.

1. I borrow from Lucy Green's work on popular music education in making this distinction; *How Popular Musicians Learn* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 16.

2. Gary Kennedy, "Jazz Education," in Barry Kernfeld, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2002), 396.

The idea of a jazz mentor is a recurring theme in jazz history, as evidenced by numerous accounts from respected jazz musicians. Before the birth of formalized jazz education, aspiring jazz musicians learned from those around them. Such mentorships can take different forms, as pianist and educator Charles Beale explains:

Apprenticeship often involves the learner in working with key mentors rather than teachers. Armstrong had King Oliver, for example. Mentors are sometimes just friends with big record collections or musicians seen in brief but crucial encounters where advice is given. They may also be older, more experienced players in a band who guide the learner's developing practice. At the top level, mentors who had guided sidemen in the past include Art Blakey, Miles Davis, Woody Herman, and Buddy Rich.³

By referring to more experienced musicians already working in the field, it was possible to gain both skills and abilities, and contacts for gigs. British trombonist Eddie Harvey commented upon the importance of mentors in his informal jazz education experiences in the 1940s:

If you get in a section and shut up, people will help you. Don't come along with an ego or anything like that, just sit there and be quiet and then the old guys in the section will be very kind and they'll show you what to do.⁴

The relevance of this historical approach to formalized contemporary learning and practice is evident in Harvey's written introduction to the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) jazz syllabus (which was established in 1999). He implored students to: "Find a teacher or mentor . . . [because] all jazz musicians will tell you that the odd piece of advice from a respected jazz musician is invaluable."⁵

Recordings have also long been a source of inspiration for jazz musicians. The birth of recording technology and the emergence of jazz occurred within a few years of each other, and jazz recordings have helped disseminate the music, as well as cross race, class, and geographical boundaries, as David Ake has noted.⁶ Britain, recordings played a particularly important role in early jazz education, because an officious Ministry of Labour ruling banned foreign (read American) musicians from performing between 1935 and 1955. Harvey and other jazz musicians around this time recalled being able to get hold of just one jazz record a month, and then transcribing it, copying it, and

3. Charles Beale, "Jazz Education," *Oxford Companion to Jazz*, ed. Bill Kirchner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 759.

4. Eddie Harvey, interview with the author, Richmond, 2 March 2010.

5. Eddie Harvey, introduction to *Jazz Piano from Scratch* by Charles Beale (Sussex: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1998), ix.

6. David Ake, "Learning Jazz, Teaching Jazz," *Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn, 255–69 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

absorbing the language through repeated plays. “That’s where I got my language from in jazz,” he says, “from listening to early Basie and a lot of Duke Ellington things. It was all done by ear.”⁷ Saxophonist John C. Williams confirms that this experience was common, recalling the understanding of jazz harmony he gained from studying recordings before formalized jazz education was available:

I remember it was in 1960 I discovered . . . how the altered dominant chord works from listening to Dexter Gordon playing “Willow Weep for Me” on *Our Man in Paris* . . . I realised he was just using all the upper [tones]—you know, sharp ninth, flattened ninth . . . So I managed to sort of work it out by [ear].⁸

Now that jazz education is available in formalized conservatory courses around the country (and the world), transcription and stylistic reproduction from recordings still form a major part of syllabi, showing that this historical approach is important in contemporary jazz education.

Finally, repertory bands also represent an important way in which British and American jazz musicians learn from history. Alex Stewart documents the long history of repertory bands in America in his study of New York big bands, explaining the canonizing and legitimizing effects these ensembles had on the reputation of jazz.⁹ From 1930s efforts such as the Bob Crosby Orchestra and Benny Goodman’s “From Spirituals to Swing” concert in 1938, bands replicating and promoting the old jazz masters grew in popularity and prestige through the 1960s New York Jazz Repertory Orchestra, the 1970s National Jazz Ensemble, and New York Jazz Repertory Company. Wynton Marsalis is the most recent figurehead of repertory jazz in the United States. In Britain this phenomenon began in the 1950s, when a network of so-called “rehearsal bands” began in London, offering jazz musicians the opportunity to rehearse big band repertoire in informal settings that were not intended to lead towards performance. This tradition has continued, with all music colleges and most universities, as well as county systems, offering repertory bands. These groups offer the chance to play big band music from different eras and composers, capturing stylistic and idiomatic language through repeated performance. In this way too, historical knowledge informs contemporary jazz education and practice.

In conclusion, jazz is commonly regarded as a progressive and inclusive music. As these three examples have proven, though, progress can only be achieved if its historical foundations are acknowledged. And as these three

7. Harvey, interview with the author.

8. John C. Williams, interview with the author, Ratlinghope, 27 February 2010.

9. Alex Stewart, “3: The Rise of Repertory Orchestras,” in *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 61–89.

examples have also shown, jazz education (and more broadly jazz *learning*) in Britain is firmly grounded in tradition.