



## BASS

# What do You Want to do? The World is Your Oyster!

## Spring Jazz Festival

by Tom Pieper

Everywhere I see examples of young bassists who not only impress me with their skills and abilities, but also with how they think conceptually about improvisation, and how they are becoming leaders in their ensembles. This was certainly true at the Spring Jazz Festival in late February at MacPhail Center for Music. The head of jazz studies, bassist Adam Linz, organized this festival. The day consisted of five adjudicators, four presentations, twelve high school combo ensembles, and a final concert featuring the premier H.S. combo in the area, the Dakota combo, and the Dave King Trucking Company. Overall all parts of the day produced an event that was beneficial for students, parents, teachers and the jazz community.

### State of Jazz in This Context

What I first found was that the opportunity for young people to play in a small ensemble setting is alive and well in the Twin Cities. My thanks to all the directors in the area who take time to coordinate these groups, or simply allow them the space and incentive to create this type of music. Thanks also to MacPhail, that has jazz combo playing as part of the regular offerings to students of all ages. Combo, or small group playing is chamber music for and in the jazz setting. Unlike classical music, the understood differing component is the inclusion of the art of improvisation. Many directors allow combos as outshoots of their large jazz ensembles, and as a way to encourage more people to get involved with playing jazz in the school environment. Whatever motivates the students to work in this setting and take a risk will clearly help them and the programs that they are part of.

### Many Choices—Few Restrictions

If you think about the creation of music in jazz we really have two options that sometime are pitted against each other. Big Band verse Combo. This was historically an outcome of hard economic times when it was cheaper to take a small group on the

road than a big band. It was also an inevitable conclusion when improvisation was taking on a bigger role in the repertoire for musicians, and jazz was developing players who wanted to stretch some limitations that were common binds in larger bands. This has now come full circle and many jazz musicians have and continue to lead vital and creative big bands using improvisation as a formal element of their music—think Gillespie, Mingus, Ellington, Lewis, etc.

In the high school, the big band is highly arranged, organized, and has the purpose of creating music to meet the standards set by the arranger, composer and director. A rehearsal trains 17+ musicians to capture every nuance written to meet the expectations of one creative writer. Often, this creative writer imagines certain players to conceive of the sound wanted, so there may be some collaboration between the composer and a group that he/she works with.

Smaller ensembles also need to be organized but an important distinction of a rehearsal is to bring out the individuality of all the players in the group and emphasize how creative they can be within a small amount of variables. The music emanates from the players and not from the arranger since all members participate in the process extemporaneously while playing the music. The musicians make many of the choices that the composer/arranger would make for them like who plays the melody, solo order, different accompanying combinations, and having some instruments lay out for a section. Small group have the capacity of all possibilities including improvising harmony in the moment, meaning if you want to change a chord you can. The improvised part is that the other players can react and play the chord with you, play another complementary chord, or a chord that could clash with the other chord. We also talked about finding how far you could push the dynamics or density of the sound. By not always playing safe and at a medium level you could see how far you could push

or how much space you could interject into the mix. Changing the key and meter are also choices that could be made, along with having the ideal goal of making every performance of a tune special and unique. Both contexts help to develop players' skills and creative thinking and require great flexibility and balance. The fact that these two different types of performance settings are both available to younger players is worth celebration

### How This Happened Here

Thinking of all of the homegrown names on bass from Minnesota would be an exhausting endeavor, but to name a few: Oscar Pettiford, Tom Hubbard, Gordon Johnson, Jimmy Johnson, Willard Peterson, Reid Kennedy, Anthony Cox, Keith Boyles, Chris Bates, Adam Linz, etc.... and also many others who have settled here and contributed to an incredible local scene. Over many years of teaching I have been lucky to come in contact with these students and watch them explode on the local and national scene. The tradition will continue with the young players at this event because the players now meet adjudicators who have personal experience in performing jazz and bring their passion and commitment to share this music to the event. Many changes have taken place with musicians performing in small venues, however the concert and video presence of jazz in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is allowing people everywhere to experience music anywhere. As long as this is combined with live playing, the artistry and scope of jazz creation will continue to develop among this next generation of players.

### Continuing to Grow in Your Improvisation

Today the state of bass playing has reached as high a level as any other solo instrument. So many options exist for bass players and the true question no longer is how can I find the information I need, but how do

I use the information and experiences that best fit my areas of interest to evolve and influence the music around me. Answering the question of why you do what you do can be used for framing what you do and how best to get there. As we are always on a one-step-a-day journey, be prepared to take advantage of something that may also just drop in your lap. This is also important for your life as a performing bassist when you need to make quick decisions to interact musically with those around you. You may have to play a different chord when playing, or you may need to adjust your bowing to match the other members of the ensemble. Being aware of the bigger picture will also inform you to make good choices. The

more you know why you are a bassist, the better chance you have to take advantage of the pieces to see them fall in place. As the bass has clearly been on a path of acquiring greater recognition over the last generation, your awareness will help you become better rounded and become more of collaborating member of the bass community. Nothing seems to be slowing down the pace for anyone who wants to excel and be a leader on this instrument.

#### **Other Takeaways and ?**

If you just browse through the web you can find many pages devoted to the bass, and if you look around the Twin Cities you can be part of bass clubs (<http://tcbasscamp.com>),

see performers in traditional groups and groups that feature duo and quartet settings of double bass players making music all over town (<http://jazzcentralstudios.org>).

As Yogi Berra said, “When you come to the fork in the road-take it.” Any choice you make is often better informed when you not only pursue your dream, but also pursue that dream with data from outside of yourself. Use any information from everyone you meet and every resource available as you continue to pursue the Art of Jazz.

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