JAS Academy Partners with Frost

"WHAT JAZZ INSTITUTIONS HAVE CREATED with these summer programs is what I would call a minor league farm system," explained bassist and baseball fan Christian McBride over breakfast at the Gant Condominium Campus, where 23 students were attending the Jazz Aspen Snowmass Academy in Aspen, Colorado, Aug. 4–18. "You get to hear these incredible musicians before they reach the major leagues."

McBride, who started teaching in Aspen in 2000, has mentored a steady stream of youngsters there who have entered the limelight, including pianist Christian Sands, vocalist Gretchen Parlato, drummer Johnathan Blake and vibraphonist Warren Wolf. The big news this year, however, was the JAS Academy’s new partnership with the University of Miami’s Frost School of Music, which has allowed the program to deepen its faculty; expand from one to two weeks and, thanks to philanthropists Ed and Sasha Bass, offer the lavish two-week program to students for five years, entirely free.

JAS, which has produced a June jazz festival since 1991, launched the academy in 1996. After a hiatus from 2011 to 2017, the camp re-emerged last year. With Frost, the 2019 academy took on an unusual flavor and structure. Slots were open to both individuals and pre-existing bands. Out of 155 applications, two quintets were accepted—one from Frost and one from Michigan State University in East Lansing. Of the other 13 individuals who got in, two were added to the existing groups, which left 11 players to form an eclectic, Snarky Puppy-style ensemble. During the first week, each of the three combos was required to write, arrange, rehearse, perform and record its own compositions.

The second week was devoted to big band work, with McBride at the helm. Frost faculty participating included pianist Shelly Berg, the dean of the music school; bassist and academy program director Chuck Bergeron; and guitarist and associate professor Reynaldo Sanchez.

The Frost curriculum emphasizes career pathways, as well as musical excellence: how to network, write a business letter, speak in public, use social media, stay visible and be prepared when opportunity knocks.

"What we’re looking for here," Bergeron said, "are students that can play but who are starting to ask the big question: ‘What do I do with my career?’ So, the vision of Jazz Aspen is to mentor them into successful careers.”

If the showcases in the lobby of the Limelight Hotel were any indication, the academy soon will produce another batch of successful musicians. Jazz fans should keep an eye out for Florida State University senior Mikailo Kasha, who plays electric and acoustic bass. He broke up the audience as he introduced his compelling composition "Words Don’t Do You Justice" by saying he didn’t know who it was for yet, but that he was taking applications.

"In higher education in jazz, they teach you how to play, but they don’t teach you what to do to get to a place to play," Kasha noted. "[The academy is] really opening up my understanding of how it works.”

—Paul de Barros