

'Tearing Down the Silos'

Inside Aspen's New Jazz 'Boot Camp' Collaboration Between Jazz Aspen Snowmass and the Frost School of Music

BY VICTORIA WASYLAK

On a pristine August morning, the hush of Aspen, Colorado is about to be broken.

Against a backdrop of lush pines and ski gondolas dotting the staggering Rocky Mountains, musical notes begin to float up the grassy peaks. Atop the Gant Hotel's conference building, it's time for the students of JAS Academy to rehearse their original music.

Gathered in the artistic mecca from August 4 to 18 this summer, 23 music students from across the globe witnessed a first for the jazz world this summer: the inaugural collaboration between Jazz Aspen Snowmass (JAS) and the Frost School of Music.

After founding the JAS Academy summer program in 1996, the Aspen-based jazz society made a new partnership this year with the University of Miami's esteemed Frost School of Music. From there, the two entities created a two-week, free-of-charge program for the most advanced young jazz students in country (the world, actually – more on that later).

Designing the curriculum started on a cruise in Vietnam, where jazz greats like Shelly Berg and Christian McBride started plotting out lesson plans and activities. Although JAS Academy had already existed for years, the program took a seven-summer break due to the recession before returning in 2018. The 2019 edition of the summer program, however, would be different – longer, more intensive, more immersive, and guided by the values and the staff of the Frost School of Music. Over many months, the curriculum for a jazz "boot camp" began to take form.

Focusing on real-world skills, from recording know-how to publishing rights and showmanship, the program aims to prep the students for the next chapter of their careers when they finally receive their undergraduate (or graduate) degrees. Staff at JAS Academy need not lecture on basic musicianship – the 23 students selected already have that down pat.

"I think the 'boot camp' element of it does separate it. There are a few other summer camps that no tuition has to be paid, but that's pretty rare too. We want the only filter on attendance

to be talent and career readiness," Frost School of Music dean Shelly Berg says. "Everybody here, we feel is one of the top people in the country, if not the world, in terms of their talent and career readiness. But it really is a distinctive factor that you and I just walked out of a room where they were learning about copyright and publishing and the business side of the music. And they're learning about artistic persona, and stage presence, and social media, and how to get their music out there. They're learning how to record themselves more effectively."

During the application process, students were selected not only based on skill, but also based on

which instruments they are able to play. The 2019 JAS Academy assembled three groups – two already-active ensembles from American colleges, and one group of individual artists made specifically to perform as a brand-new ensemble. Although Frost is a major player in the program this year, the application process was never limited to only

Frost students, and college students from across America submitted to attend. One international student, guitarist Ohad Niceberg of Israel, even made the JAS Academy Class of 2019 as well.

"I never even considered that we wouldn't open it up to other students, it never occurred to me," Berg explains. "And I think one of the most compelling things is that music is a business of relationships. Our students are living nine months a year with all the other Frost students. For them to come here and become close with musicians from other parts of the country and other schools, they're gonna build relationships that will help them for the rest of their lives. It's a great opportunity for everybody who's here."

Money never came into the equation for any of the students, either; the program's tuition, lodging, and transportation costs are all covered by the generosity of donors, making it so there are no economic barriers limiting any student's opportunities or education. Students also received per diems for meals, meaning that they had literally no out-of-pocket costs to attend.



Program director Chuck Bergeron, Jazz Aspen Snowmass CEO Jim Horowitz, Dean Shelly Berg, and professor Rey Sanchez

For 2019, both the STAMPS Ensemble from Frost School of Music (part of a four-year scholarship program) and the SLAM Ensemble from Michigan State University were chosen to participate, as well as 13 individual players.

“What I figured was, we could have three working combos throughout the two weeks, and especially in the first week,” explains Frost professor and program director Chuck Bergeron. “Part of [Jazz Aspen Snowmass founder] Jim [Horowitz]’s original vision for this [was] he wanted to take pre-existing groups at schools that already had a sound, that had already been working together musically. We set up a platform where you could audition as a solo artist, or as a group, or both. From them, I was able to pick two pre-existing groups that already had a sound, already had a style. And then several other people that we could do something with, that came in as individuals.”

Two of the individual musicians were added to the other respective ensembles – saxophonist Aidan O’Connor joined STAMPS for the program, and trumpet player Gregory Newman from the University of North Texas joined SLAM.

Sorted into these groups, their masterful collaborations began on day one, starting with three-hour writing and rehearsal periods for each combo to practice their original music before their individual showcases on August 10. The program finished on August 18 with a big band concert of all 23 students, conducted by Christian McBride himself.

“This is a two-week immersion. They’re immersed in these three groups that we’ve created, and this is their life,” Berg emphasizes. “So what we’ve created is an immersive laboratory that says, ‘We want an end-result by the end of two weeks. You’re gonna have recorded yourself on music that you’ve written while you’re here, while you’ve honed an image for what your group is and what your group isn’t. And when you’re at the university, you’re going to try myriad things, right? You’re gonna try on every musical hat there is. But for this two weeks we say, no, no, you’re *not* gonna try on every musical hat. You’re going to decide what musical clothes you’re gonna wear for these two weeks.”

And so, many mornings started with rehearsals with every group spread out – one in the basement of The Gant’s conference building, one on the first floor, and one parked on the rooftop, sweetly ushering in the dewy Aspen morning with original music.

After breakfast at 8 a.m., the meticulously-scheduled days kick off with rehearsals or in-depth masterclasses, homing in on the angles of the music industry that any jazz up-and-comer needs to know. On certain afternoons, special guests visit the classroom for exclusive, interactive lectures, such as Arturo Sandoval, Emmet Cohen, Veronica Swift, Brian Lynch, and Catherine Russell – and when he’s not rehearsing for the big band concert, Christian McBride.



The JAS Academy Class of 2019

In the backdrop, the city of Aspen welcomes the students with open arms across multiple venues – The Gant, The Limelight Hotel, and the Aspen Art Museum, where the students gave their final showcase. Already known and admired as an arts mecca,

the area had been curated into a jazz mecca as well, largely by the programming and community fostered by over 25 years of Jazz Aspen Snowmass.

“In this place is a very strong tradition of support for the arts. That was here, and that preceded Jazz Aspen,” says Jim Horowitz, founder of Jazz Aspen Snowmass. “There was already a tradition in the arts. But there wasn’t any active tradition at jazz. There turns out to be a lot of jazz history in Aspen sporadically, going back to the early 1950s, but it has never had a consistent presence until we came along. We’ve developed it. We have really developed an audience for it by presenting the music consistently. And it’s really accelerated in the last 10 years because of this small venue series, the JAS Café. It’s given us a chance to present the music.”

It’s an ideal place for some thoughtful solitude while also catching a JAS Café concert or performing jazz standards to de-

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lighted hotel guests. Admittedly, the program puts forth a tight schedule for just two weeks, but this is what the Frost School of Music as a whole feels that students need to prepare them for a full-time career as a musician post-college, equipping them for the rough landscape of the modern jazz music industry.

"There are some things that work against jazz – it represents less than two percent of all consumer-based record sales, album track sales," Bergeron says. "Jazz and classical music represent combined about three percent of the industry. It's a niche market, and we don't want it to be. This is America's indigenous art form – we want it to be for everyone."

To help with that effort, the course teachings are deliberately thorough: copyrighting songs, maintaining a catalogue, managing royalties, recording techniques and technology, mixing and mastering music, and touring essentials all come into play.

"My colleague, Rey Sanchez, who [has been] a producer in this industry for 30 years, explains parts of how the music industry works," Bergeron continues. "Because you'll have jazz guys who will write incredible pieces of music, and then they don't know what to do with them. My personal opinion is we are training these young people to be professional musicians. So they want to play at the highest level, but you also have to know all the ins and outs of the music business. Management, touring, what is a gig? What should it pay? How to handle it? Different audiences, different styles of music, different types of touring – you know, as much real world [lessons] as possible."

"Understanding how the business of being an artist works is something I could have benefited greatly from in my 20s, and I didn't have that," Berg elaborates. "Personally, where I went to school, I was in contact with local artists, but I didn't have the opportunity to be mentored by world-renowned jazz artists coming and working kind of intensively with me. I would have loved that. I tell the students, there are things that by the time I discovered them or was able to use them effectively in terms of how I think about performing, that I was 40 when I really started to grasp those things. I love helping 20-year-olds understand those same things because they have all the capacity to do what I did at 40. They just don't have the maturity yet. If I can give students a shortcut into certain maturation of a musician, then

that's worth its weight in gold."

Every aspect of the program circles back to the aforementioned "boot camp" mentality, from impromptu jam sessions at the Limelight Hotel, to three-hour rehearsals of original music, and all-inclusive masterclasses. While JAS Academy opens the doors to a world of possibility for the 23 students involved, there are also harsh realities that come with such real-world exposure.

"This isn't little league and everybody gets a trophy," Berg notes. "They have to know along the way how well they're measuring up to not only their peers at our school, but the industry that they're entering into. It does nobody any good if we tell somebody, 'You're an A player,' and they're not progressing at the proper level. It's really important for them to know what the standard is, to have professors who model that standard."

And while jazz does represent a minute fraction of the music industry as a whole, the

staff at Frost have confidence in their educational approaches, and the data of a recent survey shows that they're doing something right.

"I could not be the dean of a major music school if I was pessimistic about the opportunities to have a life in music," Berg elaborates. "Statistically, 89 percent to 90 percent of the undergraduate graduates, six months after graduation, were in the job or graduate school of their choice. And, the income they were reporting was on par with our business majors. By the way, that [figure] 10 years ago was something like 60 percent. It just shows that this is not impossible to do."

"Being a great musician, really, is an attitude more than a skill, because to be a great musician, there are a lot of technical things we have to learn how to do," says McBride. "I'm not sure that many jazz programs, even now, really sort of talk about the professionalism in music. My job is to be there to help them [the students] with their aspirations. As long as you strive to be the best musician you can possibly be, you can do anything. And that's probably the only thing I would be able to tell them in terms of some sort of core value."

Jazz Aspen Snowmass president Jim Horowitz feels the inherent positivity of the program, too. Born in Miami Beach, Florida, the University of Miami and the Frost School of Music's influence have always been in his life, and this collaboration just brings things full circle.

Professor Rey Sanchez leads a masterclass on professional recording



Dean Shelly Berg coaches students during an ensemble rehearsal

JAS Academy 2019 Participants

Michigan State University

Luther Allison: saxophone, drums, piano
Markus Howell: saxophone
Alexander Larionov: trombone
Stanley Ruvinov: upright bass
Sequoia Snyder: piano

University of Miami

Marcello Carelli: drums
Jered Byford: trombone
Max Schwartz: upright bass
David Sneider: trumpet
Tim Watson: guitar
Michael Dudley, Jr.: trumpet
Makayla Forgione: vocals
Duncan McElman: saxophone

Florida State University

Patrick Campbell: trumpet
Mikailo Kasha: upright bass

Jackie McLean Institute

Sarah Hanahan: saxophone

Manhattan School of Music

Rico Jones: saxophone

UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music

Brendan Kersey-Wilson: trombone and keyboard

University of North Texas

Gregory Newman: trumpet

Ironi Alef School of Arts, Israel

Ohad Niceberg: guitar

Eastman School of Music

Aidan O'Connor: saxophone

California State University, Northridge

Connor Sanchez: trombone

Princeton University

Maya Stepansky: drums

"My favorite part [about the program] is that we have a partner, just the fact of a partner who lives, eats, and breathes education," Horowitz says. "I think there's a real alignment of what I would call musical values between the Frost School of Music and Jazz Aspen."

Looking ahead, JAS Academy's program with the Frost School of music has a five-year funding commitment, ensuring the maintenance – and growth – of the collaboration in the years to come. In the meantime, Jazz Aspen Snowmass seeks to find a permanent home building.

"We have a five-year funding commitment, which is tremendous. It's going to go from two weeks to four weeks in 2021," Horowitz explains. "We would like to be an owner and not a renter, so that we can do the programs bigger and better and with the stability of being able to plan in every way, and to really grow the footprint of the program."

Boarding their respective planes in Aspen, each of the 23 students left with some significant feats on their résumé from the past two weeks alone: they've written and recorded original music, performed (and intimately rehearsed) with Christian McBride, and received professional tips from some of the best names in the business. In their notebooks are the intricate details of publishing and recording; in their hands is priceless experience – and maybe a few blisters.

"The Frost School tears down the silos," Berg emphasizes. "We want our students to experience a lot of different kinds of music, to feel that they have some proficiency in the areas of music outside of that head of that pin. We want them to have the life skills, so that if they present themselves well, if they understand the importance of it being a business, that they can create, they can lead. If you can lead and create and understand business and have a broader kind of sense about what's out there, then I believe you *will* have a career."



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