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SUNDAY, JULY 5, 2009

In Defence of Jazz Education



I think it's fair to say that in the jazz media, jazz education (or at least formalised jazz education in institutions) gets a bad press.

Which is ironic, since many from outside jazz find the idea of it both intriguing and admirable. I once had the good fortune to spend some time with the great American classical composer John Adams, and when he found out I was a jazz musician he went into a eulogy about jazz musicians and their abilities, comparing them to classical musicians and expressing the opinion that fully trained jazz musicians were generally superior to classical musicians these days due to the incredible range of their abilities. His son is a jazz bassist and Adams told me about watching him playing in an ensemble in his school, playing Wayne Shorter tunes. Adams expressed amazement at the harmonic sophistication of those young musicians and their ability to undertake something as challenging as that.

Yet playing through the repertoire of Wayne Shorter's music is precisely the kind of activity that draws the ire of jazz education's critics - 'everyone learns the same stuff' is the mantra – or one of the mantras – used to reinforce the argument that jazz education has a negative impact on jazz and its practitioners.

Before going further, I should explain that I myself am not a product of the jazz education system. I learned how to play this music in a way that would have been familiar to earlier practitioners – mostly from playing gigs. The jazz scene in Ireland in the late 70s was a throwback to an earlier era in that

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Ronan

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it was essentially a bebop environment – Broadway and jazz standards, little or no originals, and everyone was supposed to know every tune from memory – no Real Books (I think I saw my first one in 1981 – it was like seeing the Dead Sea Scrolls!). I read music books, picked up whatever info I could from other musicians and figured stuff out for myself – there were no jazz schools here then.

Now, thirty years later I am the head of a jazz programme here in Dublin – a typical jazz performance degree programme with eighty students, with content typical of this kind of education.

So I see both sides of the argument – I see the benefits I gained by being self-educated: self-reliance, development of instincts, ability to think on one’s feet and take decisions without always being told what to do. And I also see the disadvantages to that mode of learning – lack of access to useful (and sometimes vital) information, and making the kind of mistakes for years that could have been set right by a good teacher in 10 minutes. For example: although I knew most of the major and minor modes (found them in a Rick Laird bass book!), and could play them, I was playing them for years before I found out that they were related!

Having been involved in starting a school from scratch here in Dublin, and having seen the positive effect of that in the local jazz community, and having been able to give young musicians access to the kind of information and resources I didn’t have at their age, I’ve always been somewhat exasperated by what I see as the knee-jerk attacks on jazz education. Usually these take three forms:

- 1) Jazz education turns all who partake of it into clones.
- 2) The proof of jazz education’s failure is the fact that though there are more practitioners than ever before the percentage of great players hasn’t got any higher.
- 3) What is the point of turning out jazz graduates when there are no gigs?

To take each one of these in turn -

1. Jazz education turns all who partake of it into clones.

The first thing to remember when dealing with this argument is that academic music education, of any sort, is not ideal anyway. In music schools we tell students that you must learn X amount of information in X amount of weeks, but of course students are always of differing abilities and may have different life circumstances, and while one student may absorb the information fully, another may struggle. In non-academic ways of learning music (such as the one I undertook) you spend as long a time with a piece of information as you need or want and then move on. And in traditional cultures (and in rock music for example) this is primarily the way to learn music. But in western society we have developed a system of education which is geared to educate the many rather than the individual. While this is ideal for certain subjects (science and maths for example) it is less than ideal for music. But for better or for worse, this is the structure we have and the one we have to deal with.

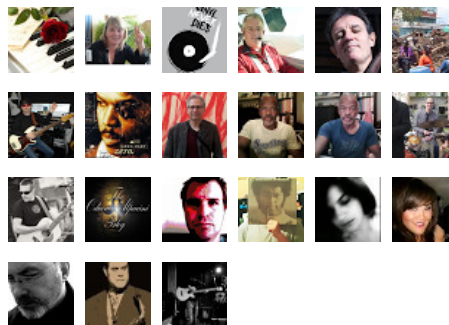
If you want to train young musicians in the techniques of music, and give many of them access to that, rather than a few hand-picked individuals, then you don’t really have a choice other than the academic model – for

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economic reasons if for no other. It would be clearly impossible to take students in and keep them in school until such time as they felt ready to move on, treating each one individually, so that student X spends three years on harmony while Y spends 6 months on the same subject. It's just unworkable – an open ended school is just not a practical possibility – for the school or the students. If you discard the academic model you must also discard many of the students - there is no other way to educate larger groups of people efficiently.

Having accepted the jazz school as the most practical model in which to operate, you then have to make a decision as to what to teach. The argument that the schools all teach the same stuff, therefore making all students into homogenised clones, is an argument based on the idea that the older practitioners were helped by the fact that they didn't go to school and their originality was predicated on their differing knowledge. But their originality was the result of their originality – it had nothing to do with their empirical knowledge or lack of it. What a lot of critics forget about is that most high level jazz school courses are staffed and run by professional jazz musicians. These are musicians who deal with the realities of playing the music, and who are aware of the skills necessary to survive in the professional milieu. And it is largely these same musicians who decide the curricula for the schools – not some faceless bureaucrat. So the information that is provided is largely that body of information which professional musicians agree are basic prerequisites for a life as a professional jazz musician. This basic information – harmonic, technical and rhythmic as well as repertoire – is generally agreed by most professionals to be part of the essential toolkit of the contemporary jazz musician.


Yet the writer James Lincoln Collier says:

'With students all over the United States being taught more or less the same harmonic principles, it is hardly surprising that their solos tend to sound much the same. It is important for us to understand that many of the most influential players developed their own personal harmonic schemes, very frequently because they had little training in theory and were forced to find it their own way.'

So – there we have it, the noble savage syndrome – for the sake of your creativity and originality it's better to have no training. It's hard to know where to start with the refutation of an argument this stupid. It's like suggesting that if you want to become a writer it would be better to be illiterate and figure out the rules of English yourself, rather than go to school and be taught how to read, how spelling, grammar and syntax work, and being directed towards great writing of the past. Yet this is the bizarre subtext of much of the criticism of jazz education – in order to be creative and original it's better to be uneducated. But though these writers idealise the self-taught musicians of the past, how many of these same jazz greats would have taken advantage of educational institutions had they been available to them? Most I'd say. And if they had, would it have stifled their creativity? Would Coltrane have sounded like a thousand other saxophonists of he'd gone to a jazz school? To suggest that he would have is to deny his innate genius and originality.

Some champions of the European jazz scene also use the 'jazz education = lack of originality' argument to attack the US jazz scene, claiming that it is the jazz education system that has largely contributed to American jazz stagnating while European jazz forges ahead. This argument conveniently ignores the fact that most European jazz schools teach (with variations) the

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About Me



Ronan Guilfoyle

Jazz bassist, composer, teacher, living in
Dublin, Ireland

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same basic core curriculum as their American counterparts. European jazz schools take the American system as their basic model, so all of these young European musicians who are lauded so highly come from a very similar educational background to their US counterparts.

And as to the charge that jazz education produces only clones, consider the following musicians:

Brad Mehldau, Jim Black, Branford Marsalis, John Scofield, Tom Rainey, John Abercrombie, Joe Lovano, Greg Osby, Jeff Watts, Pat Metheny, Scott Colley, Bill Frisell, Brian Blade. All of these have spent time in jazz educational institutions – are they all clones?



2. The proof of jazz education's failure is the fact that though there are more practitioners than ever before the percentage of great players hasn't got any higher.

Schools do not teach creativity nor originality nor do they stifle it – creativity and originality have always been in short supply. We are educating the many, but in the end, only a few will 'get it' so to speak. The number of musicians of real creativity, the ones who are head and shoulders above everyone else, have always been in the minority. And contrary to the mythology, the pre-jazz education scene was not always peopled by complete originals – Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Lester Young, and Bud Powell (to take just a few examples) all had droves of disciples who tried to emulate their heroes. Jazz has always been peopled by a few innovators and many imitators. The imitators either find a personal wrinkle for themselves within the canon created by the innovators, or they just vapidly regurgitate the surface gestures of the great ones. It was the same in 1930 as it is now.

What a good school will do is provide the environment that will give anyone who studies there access to information which will help them towards their goals. A student's originality will not be created by a school, nor will it be destroyed by it – original people will always be original people. No matter how many people go through the jazz education system the percentage of true originals will not rise. However everyone coming through the doors of a good jazz school will be given access to tools which will help them create a musical career for themselves should they wish to pursue it. Jazz schools cannot manufacture creativity, but they can facilitate in speeding the journey of the truly creative while giving a good music education to those who may not be among the elite in terms of originality, but who nevertheless are talented and wish to partake in the great musical tradition of jazz.

3. What is the point of turning out jazz graduates when there are no gigs?

This is a genuine concern among jazz educators and musicians, and recently Ethan Iverson wrote the following in his blog:

"There's positive aspects to jazz education, but I do worry about how corporate and money-driven it can seem, especially now that the

bubble has burst. As we all know, not only do young players fresh out of jazz college have trouble finding gigs, but for musicians of all ages the current market is completely over-saturated, making it extraordinarily difficult for anything to have any economic value whatsoever”

While it may be true that gigs are getting harder and harder to come by, the question has to be asked, is this the only value that jazz education has – economic value? The bassist and educator Todd Coolman puts it very well:

“We have to quit thinking of college as a vocational school. College, to me, is a place where you go to learn something, to develop intellectual and social skills so that you can become a contributing member of society. No one needs to go to college to learn to play jazz, anyway. In the same respect, college doesn’t create a brilliant economist.”

This point is well made – the idea that teaching the techniques of an art form becomes devalued if there is not immediate or automatic economic benefit to the student is simply wrong. Surely the main point of getting an education is to become educated? The benefits to young people of being involved in jazz are manifold. For example, one of the things that I find most attractive about jazz is the democratic and social nature of the music. The music is brought about by the efforts of a group of people working together, and communicating with each other. Yet within the tradition of this sociable music, the idea of individualism is not only encouraged, but highly prized. So here we have a music which is completely dependent on co-operation between the participants, yet which at the same time encourages each to make as personal and individual a statement as possible. What a wonderful ethos for young people to be involved with!

Another benefit of being in a jazz school and one that’s never even noticed by the critics of jazz education is that schools provide a space in which communities of jazz musicians can exist. In previous times these communities were centred around gigs and clubs and jam sessions, but this environment has almost entirely disappeared. The jazz community has become dispersed, and one of the few places where it still exists is in jazz schools. With the possible exception of New York and a few other larger cities where some gig-centred socialising by musicians still exists, the only place where large groups of jazz practitioners foregather is in jazz schools. Schools not only create a teaching environment, they also provide a place where information can be exchanged, gossip caught up on, new recordings discussed, gig information exchanged, tips for work opportunities given and camaraderie shared.

Like anything, jazz schools are not perfect – in the wrong hands they can churn out graduates without any consideration for the individual. But in my experience that’s the exception rather than the rule - most schools have dedicated teachers with a real love of the music and its traditions and a genuine concern that their students have access to it. In the schools students learn the basic techniques of the music and hopefully are also exposed to the creative ethos of jazz. They provide community environments for musicians whose love of a minority music sets them apart from the mainstream.

I’ve just returned from the [International Association of Schools of Jazz](#) annual meeting in Lucerne, where 50 high level jazz students from schools all over the world – from Japan to the US, from Finland to Israel, from Russia to Brazil - got together for a week and played music together and got

to know each other through the medium of jazz. I watched them perform six concerts of very high level creative music put together after only three days rehearsal, and watched their mutual delight in sharing this experience with each other. Try telling *THEM* that the jazz education system was a negative influence on their lives and creativity!

Posted by [Ronan Guilfoyle](#) at [1:41 PM](#)



Labels: [Jazz](#)

16 comments:

Scott Stroman [July 6, 2009 at 12:04 PM](#)

Beautifully stated, Ronan; exactly as I might have have said it myself. And from my perspective as someone who works in both jazz and classical music, the issues, dangers, and benefits are the same across the stylistic panorama (not divide). The best type of jazz education program is built on a foundation of fostering individuality and creativity that is rarely found in classical music education, and, romantic view aside, wasn't always present in the working worlds of us or our forbearers.

[Reply](#)

Willard Jenkins [July 9, 2009 at 7:27 PM](#)

My compliments Ronan, this is a beautifully and quite reasonably made case. There are plenty of side streets, alleyways, and tributaries we might explore from this piece (like the dwindling number of black students in jazz programs of higher learning in the U.S. -- and perhaps total absence of cultural diversity in particularly European jazz education programs(?)), but I'm sure Ronan would rather leave that to other forums. This is a very thought-provoking and logic-driven piece, in particular thoroughly debunking such naysayers as James Lincoln Collier and Stuart Nicholson (both of whom are curiously viewed by many as outright racists in their jazz commentary). In many cases what the naysayers are complaining about strikes more to the easy access musicians now enjoy -- whether they are ready or not/mediocre or truly have something to say -- in putting their thoughts down on record and subsequently making them available. THAT's where the glut exists -- and that's a genie that I'm afraid has long since escaped the bottle.

Peace,
Willard Jenkins
www.openskyjazz.com
Home of The Independent Ear

[Reply](#)

Chris Kelsey [July 9, 2009 at 8:59 PM](#)

Jazz ed works to the benefit of the *average* jazz player (of which there are many), but does little to help produce truly original artists (of which there are few). Genius will tell, formal education or no.

[Reply](#)

[Ronan Guilfoyle](#) **[July 9, 2009 at 11:21 PM](#)**

Scott, Willard and Chris - thanks for your comments. I've been amazed at the reaction to this post - I've had so many responses to my website and email as well. I had no idea it would provoke such a reaction.

Thanks for the compliments Willard - I don't live in the US and am not an American and so wouldn't feel qualified to speculate as to why there are so few African-Americans in US jazz programmes. And I'm not sure what you mean about the lack of cultural diversity in European jazz programmes - if you'd care to elaborate I'd be happy to respond if I can.

And you're right Chris, no school can create a truly original musician - but schools can help the truly original as well as the average. It doesn't matter how brilliant you are, you're still going to need access to information and people to play with, and schools can and do provide both of those things

[Reply](#)

[Ronan Guilfoyle](#) **[July 9, 2009 at 11:31 PM](#)**

Just reading your post again Willard - that's a very good point about the fact that anyone can make a recording these days, (as opposed to former times where at least there was some kind of meritocracy at work), and the resultant glut of recordings available, both good and bad. I hadn't really thought about that in that context - but I will now! Thanks

[Reply](#)

[Roberto Bossard](#) **[July 10, 2009 at 12:07 PM](#)**

Hi Ronan, I completely agree with your statements. Congratulations! There's one more aspect about jazz education, that Gary Keller mentioned in Lucerne: If you think about economic reasons why you study jazz it's surely not a good approach because it's about the music itself and nothing else. But if you don't study music because of economic reasons and you will regret it when you're older, there's no way you can start being a musician at an older age. It's too late, and you may regret it for the rest of your life. The other way around: It's much easier to start studying engineering or medicine or whatsoever at an age of 30 and beyond.

[Reply](#)

[Will Kriski](#) **[July 10, 2009 at 7:32 PM](#)**

My main beef with jazz education is not the above points, but the actual process of how they teach it. When I was at

college they had a lot of extraneous information/courses that were required as part of the curriculum, such as classical history, electives (english, psychology,etc), learning piano (for jazz guitar performance), overwhelming theory/analysis/exercises with 6-8 courses, starting with overly complex tunes before mastering the basics, etc.

So instead of being able to focus on one thing (eg. chord tones) and mastering it, they threw everything at us, making it difficult to absorb it all. Having done a master's degree in engineering I was no stranger to hard work and discipline. And then when you complain you are perceived as a whiner.

I've been studying with Jimmy Bruno via his guitar institute online and it is more like an apprentice system. Focus on one thing at a time, he gives feedback via videos, learning songs, and it's a step by step system, and he avoids a lot of the usually taught complexity (modes for example).

[Reply](#)



[Ronan Guilfoyle](#) **[July 12, 2009 at 6:14 PM](#)**

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)



[Ronan Guilfoyle](#) **[July 12, 2009 at 6:17 PM](#)**

Thanks for your comments Roberto and Will

Roberto I think you're absolutely right about the fact that though the reason we study jazz is not primarily economic, there are real professional benefits to studying in a jazz school. It really does give you an invaluable set of skills as a musician - and you're right that it's very difficult to get the the craft of music together when you're older - it's definitely a young person's game

And Will, while I take your point about the problems of having stuff loaded onto you, some of which you felt was unnecessary and possibly irrelevant, I think it's important to point out that not all schools are the same. In my school we start pretty basic the first year, with simple groove type tunes for improvising at first, before moving on to more complex progressions.

But in any school, as I mentioned in my post, you have the problem of trying to educate the many instead of the individual - it's impractical to tailor a curriculum to each individual student so some do get caught in the cross-hairs for sure. Taking students individually is a much more holistic way of teaching in general since you can respond to the individual needs of the student much more flexibly in a one-on-one situation than you can in a school setting. I'm glad you found a learning environment that suits you

Thanks for responding

[Reply](#)



[Jovino](#) [August 11, 2009 at 5:08 PM](#)

Ronan,
Thanks for a most insightful post. As a jazz educator, I felt inspired by reading it, and have forwarded it to my colleagues at Conrish College of the Arts in Seattle.
All the best!
Jovino Santos Neto

[Reply](#)

[Anonymous](#) [August 31, 2009 at 10:00 AM](#)

Hello Mr. Guilfoyle,

Ditto, but I will forward your inspiring essay to my colleagues in Berlin, Bonn and Cologne.

Thank you, and all best,

Brew

[Reply](#)



[Ronan Guilfoyle](#) [September 1, 2009 at 7:19 AM](#)

Thanks Jovino and Bruno - I'm glad you enjoyed it, and thanks for the feedback!

[Reply](#)



[Rodney](#) [September 14, 2009 at 3:54 PM](#)

I do not think it abnormal that jazz is now a part of most well rounded University and conservatory music programs. The acceptance of Jazz into the university curriculum has been gradual and controversial along the way. Early university professors trying to start Jazz programs met considerable resistance. This controversy stemmed from among numerous reasons the ill-conceived notion that Jazz music was not of the highest artistic quality and did not deserve a place beside of classical music. As it should, Jazz has endured all of its challenges and made its way from the Cakewalk, dance halls and nightclubs to eventually be accepted at university recital and concert halls. For if musicians as prominent as Ravel, Stravinsky, and Bernstein should admire jazz music and allow it to influence their musical style and methods of composition, then how can it be considered too lowbrow to be included into a well rounded university music program? This reason is my primary rationale that jazz is indeed our indigenous art music and should be a part of every well-rounded music program at the university level. It is very upsetting that jazz education has been met with resistance by narrow-minded people who perhaps did not

quite understand their own music. I am referring to the unyieldingly old fashioned, white classical music professor who in the past has looked down upon people in the jazz profession. It is ludicrous that this professor thinks it proper to condescend to the very type of music that his idols venerated. A case could be made out of this singular reason that jazz belongs in every well-rounded university music program.

Sincerely,

Rodney Lancaster
www.rodneylancaster.com

[Reply](#)



[mike November 15, 2009 at 3:56 PM](#)

I thought your article was brilliant Ronan. I graduated from a jazz education program and consider three of the best years of my life, certainly three of the years where I worked harder than I had ever before. I concur that point of any place of higher learning is to enable the student to think critically and to be able to continue learning after leaving. It is ludicrous to consider that for the “purity” of jazz, the players should have no educational background in their instrument. It is also patently false. Virtually all of the great jazz musicians of the past had some degree of training, some like Oscar Peterson or Miles Davis had a significant degree. In fact, when Miles first went to New York in the late 40’s, it was to attend Julliard! When I graduated almost 30 years ago, we were told that only a very few of us would be able to make our livings by playing music exclusively. It wasn’t a comment on our abilities, or the school or anything else. It was just a statement of fact. If you are so serious about your art that you are willing to undergo the risks and privations that go along with the life of an artist, then you will make those sacrifices. Many people (including me) don’t want to live that way. Jazz schools are a valuable support system for an extremely important cultural component of our musical milieu. I thought at the time I was attending that I was privileged to be there, and I haven’t changed my opinion.

Mike Milner
Orillia, ON
Canada

[Reply](#)

[Anonymous December 8, 2009 at 7:51 PM](#)

the point you made about schools providing a community for artists is exactly how I would have put it. I tried learning the old fashioned way (but with lots of extra help from all the private lessons and books I could afford) but I found I wasn’t getting nearly enough experience playing with other musicians simply because I didn’t know many. The biggest resource in college I’ve found as a student is the other students, not the teachers or how/what they

teach.

But that means the success of an education is equally the student bodies responsibility. I put off going to college for a long time because I thought the competitive (male centered) environment of colleges tends to encourage 'hard' music rather than 'good' music, and although I think this is true to a degree, in my experience so far I've found its mostly the fault of students rather than teachers.

I'm probably not one of the 'head and shoulders above the rest' students who will be a real innovator, and I definitely don't think that means that the education is wasted on me, or that if I graduate and don't become a 'great player' that I am proving a point about the downfalls of jazz education.

Reply



Radam Schwartz January 26, 2014 at 5:36 AM

I believe that Mr. Guilfoyle misses the point on several issues. When college jazz programs came into existence they separated the musician from the audience. The jazz culture involved the musician, audience, (casual and erudite), proprietors, etc., and musicians developed their creative impulses with the listenership in mind. College trained musicians develop their concepts without a single thought to how it would play in front of patrons, and this disconnect leads to the separation between these entities and this has more than an economic consequence.

The jazz culture had certain attributes that passed into oblivion when the center of jazz education became the universities. Examples of this jazz cultural system can be seen in mantras such as "one must pay his dues", or "the music is something you have to live". The jazz culture has been replaced by a fraternity mentality (Kappa Delta Jazz) where listening to recordings overrides hearing live music and where Coltrane and Bird are icons but students don't seek out their local legends. Of course jazz education also took the music out of the jurisdiction of the African-American community and placed it the hands of the Board of Trustees at Colleges as well.

Lincoln Collier's remarks are surely misinformed. My mentors in Newark, NJ were some of the most analytic and theoretical musicians I've ever met and the fact that they did not display a PHD on their wall did not insinuate they had no training, but their training was also steeped in blues theory, which is frequently absent on the university level. A good article that explores this is David Ake's "Jazz Historiography and The Problem of Louis Jordan". It is definitely accurate that the basic same canon of jazz is used at the university level. Where is Jimmy Smith, where is Earl Bostic, Eddie Cleanhead Vincent, Shirley Scott? Your question should be would John Coltrane have sounded like he did without his work with these important jazz figures prior to his tenure with Miles. I suggest had he gone to a jazz school instead of working on the chitlin circuit he would have sounded quite different and that does not deny his genius or originality. Radam Schwartz

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