

EARN YOUR KEEP

Jazz and the lost art of apprenticeship

BY DAVID R. ADLER



Gary Burton with guitarist Julian Lage

It's unusual to begin liner notes with dictionary definitions of the words "apprentice" and "mentor," but alto saxophonist Bobby Watson does just that on his latest Palmetto release, *From the Heart*. His point? To emphasize what he calls "the backbone of the music," a self-sustaining system in which young musicians come of age by playing with a jazz master in a working-band setting over the course of months or years.

The master-apprentice relationship dates back to the dawn of recorded history; nothing, it can be argued, is more fundamental to the growth of human society. Jazz is no exception, and for decades apprenticeship was the unspoken rule for veteran bandleaders and aspiring

players. "When I first got to New York in 1976," Watson recalls, "if you were playing on a certain level, when you'd come off the bandstand at a jam session, cats would ask, 'Who're you with?'"

Watson, along with Wynton and Branford Marsalis, went on to reap the benefits of jazz's ultimate apprenticeship: Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. Others, including Jacky Terrasson, came through the proving ground of Betty Carter's band. The tradition, of course, goes back to King Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Charlie Parker mentored Miles

Davis; Miles and Monk mentored Coltrane in turn. The less famous examples are too numerous to mention. In the words of drummer Ralph Peterson, also a Betty Carter alumnus, capable artists have the task of "passing the knowledge forward in the way it was given to them, so that the truth is maintained."

But for various reasons, it's no longer assumed that a given young player is "with" anyone. Some hold that the apprenticeship system in jazz has been eclipsed, to the detriment of the music. Young players, it is said, get hyped as bandleaders before they're ready. Due to a shrinking club circuit and skewed priorities on the part of labels, festival programmers and other industry forces, working bands are in shorter supply. Available mentors "are not able to reach out to our young up-and-coming jazz musicians and bring them along," Watson writes.

The growing primacy of college-based jazz education and the concurrent downgrading of on-the-job experience have also played a role. Pianist Hal Galper, who apprenticed with Cannonball Adderley, Sam Rivers and others, outlined the problem in a 2000 essay titled "Pipe Dreams."

"The loss of the apprenticeship system has had a dual effect," he argued. "It has deprived many masters of a way to make a living performing their music as well as opportunities for students to continue their education."

Despite all this, there are still accomplished leaders who carry the torch of bandstand-based training for new artists. Some, such as Watson and bassist Curtis Lundy of the Live and Learn Band, consciously describe their work as mentoring. Roy Haynes, on the other hand, resists the term. "I don't particularly concentrate on the age [of my sidemen]," says the legendary drummer, who has cultivated everyone from David Kikoski and Craig Handy to Marcus Strickland and Jaleel Shaw. "That's not a plan of mine," Haynes adds. "It just happens that way."

Haynes' Fountain of Youth Band has nonetheless become a school unto itself, and there are others. Tom Harrell, Terence Blanchard, Gary Burton, Joe Lovano, Chick Corea, Wynton Marsalis, Ralph Peterson, Wallace Roney, Steve Coleman, Greg Osby, Anthony Braxton, Tiger Okoshi and Bobby Zankel are among the estimable artists who hire young players and put them through the paces of gigging and recording, with consistently high-level results. Eric Alexander, Peter Bernstein and others of their generation have nourished deep and visible ties to living masters such as Jimmy Cobb, Horace Silver and Lou Donaldson. This raises the question: Are reports of the apprenticeship system's demise premature?

Granted, not every young player can count on being recruited by a Haynes or a Harrell. "Where most young musicians really suffer from lack of mentorship is before they're skilled enough to be invited into a band like that," says bassist/vocalist Esperanza Spalding, who plays frequently with Joe Lovano's US Five. True, the majority will have to scuffle in some way. But as more and more venerated artists embrace full-time commitments in university music programs (a case of economic necessity breeding positive change), it is hoped that fewer students will be left behind. Jazz education, in other words, is striving to replicate the apprenticeship system more closely. There may never be another Jazz Messengers, but new mechanisms are slowly coming into being, and complaints are giving way to constructive solutions.

"The future is bright," insists Peterson, who now sits on the

Berklee faculty.

"Every generation has to deal with the card they're dealt," offers Watson, who is the first William and Mary Grant/Missouri-endowed professor in jazz studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "You're born when you're born," Watson adds, "but if you're in this jazz stream, you're connected to all that came before you and after you."

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JUST AS WORKING WITH A MASTER YIELDS LIFELONG dividends, the lack of such an opportunity can truly hinder a career. "It saved me 10 years working with Art Blakey," says Watson. "Saved me 10 years of guessing. With Art it was such a clear path. By the time I was 30 I had the experience of a 40-year-old."

The jazz world seemed to lose sight of this during the "young lions" craze of the '80s and '90s, when record labels, desperate for a new hook to sell jazz to an indifferent public, signed gifted but green musicians and created a buzzing market in precocious, energized youth.

"The commercialization and marketing of the young lions was cute, but it broke the chain in a way," Watson notes. "They sort of choked off the older cats." Age itself wasn't the problem, however. "Lee Morgan was a young lion," Watson continues. "Clifford Brown, Oscar Pettiford—these cats died young. So the 'young lions' phenomenon

"I did the whole child-prodigy thing, and I'm really glad I didn't pursue that road all the way, and had the opportunity to play with somebody like Terence [Blanchard] and also Kurt Rosenwinkel."

PIANIST AARON PARKS

was nothing new, but [in earlier years] the young lions had a place to go." And the place they went, in many instances, was "finishing school" with the Jazz Messengers.

Jaleel Shaw, who plays alto with Haynes, the Mingus Big Band and others, recalls a recent conversation with pianist Stephen Scott, who recorded for Verve in the early '90s. "Stephen talked to me about playing with Roy Haynes and asked, 'Do you realize what you're doing? Man, you've really got to realize and appreciate it. When I was your age I had a record deal. Most of us young cats, we were just thrown right into the fire as leaders.'"

Shaw adds his own confession: "It's funny, I actually moved to New York wanting to be one of those cats. I wanted to get a deal and tour with my own band and play my own music. But after playing with the Mingus band and Roy, I realized there's so much more to learn, so much room to grow. It doesn't stop there."

Pianist Aaron Parks, who recently released his Blue Note debut *Invisible Cinema*, underwent a similar process while playing for five years with Terence Blanchard. "There's still a bit of residue from the young lions movement, where people feel they need to jump into the spotlight right away," he says. "I played with that fire for a little while, when I was 16 or so. I did the whole child-prodigy thing, and I'm really glad I didn't pursue that road all the way, and had the opportunity to play with somebody like Terence and also Kurt Rosenwinkel. Before that, I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't



Taking Art Blakey University to formal education: Bobby Watson (far right) with the University of Missouri-Kansas City Jazz Band

know that I didn't know."

Besides the cult of youth, certain practices in the jazz industry also "challenge the existence of an apprenticeship system," says Ralph Peterson. "One thing is the club owners' and festival promoters' need for dream-team rosters, as if the name of the leader is not enough. There's a systemic lack of courage. If the label or promoter likes someone enough to sign them, they ought to trust them enough to bring a smoking band to the table no matter who's in it."

In time, given the opportunity, a leader's "risky" unknown sidemen—in Peterson's case the list includes Jeremy Pelt, Sean Jones, Tia Fuller and the Curtis brothers (Luques and Zaccai)—can become substantial draws themselves.

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ACROSS THE BOARD, YOUNG APPRENTICES HAVE FOUND one thing to be true of their bandstand mentors: They lead by example, rarely giving explicit instruction. Better to let newcomers express themselves freely, make their own mistakes and find their own voice. "The most important thing I learned from [my mentors] was how to learn from them," Spalding remarks. "The learning that is most crucial is unsaid. And usually, if you're not catching something, you have to be the one to ask."

Jaleel Shaw notes an exception to this rule: Haynes will spend whatever time necessary to correct him if he flubs the melody on a standard tune. Apart from that, Shaw and his bandmates learn by osmosis.

The mere act of repeated listening to a master player, night after night, can have an immensely clarifying effect. Tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery, a member of Tom Harrell's quintet and Ben Riley's Monk Legacy Band, recalls being awestruck when he first heard Riley play the ride cymbal. "I couldn't believe how swinging it was. I realized I'd never played with any drummer who has such an amazing feel. I'd never heard it before live, and I'd never played over it."

To interpret Monk's music with one of Monk's longtime drummers—needless to say, this leaves a permanent impression. As for Harrell, some of the trumpeter's chord progressions can utterly confound the other band members until they hear Harrell blow. "So

many times I'm just praying that Tom will solo first, so that I can hear his concept on the tune," Escoffery confides. "It never fails that once he plays, it's like a light shining down. All of a sudden it just clicks and you completely understand."

Another crucial part of a player's education, something that can't be taught in a classroom, is audience rapport. Again, watching a veteran performer in action couldn't be more ideal. "Gary Burton is so good at putting on a show," says guitarist Julian Lage, who has toured and recorded with Burton's Next Generation band. "I remember one night the band was trying stuff out and we got a little bit wild. Gary liked it, but after the show he said, 'Just keep in mind the audience has never heard us before. It's OK to do something you may have done before, because it's new to them.'"

Aaron Parks also learned plenty about stagecraft working with Blanchard, whose extended monologues during shows can range from hilarious to genuinely moving. "It doesn't need to be an artificial persona," Parks notes, "but you need to find a way to welcome the audience into your world."

Of course, no one did this better than Art Blakey, as Bobby Watson recalls: "I learned how to greet fans with Art. He was so gracious and available off the bandstand, and he'd throw you right in there with him."

A great bandleader, in other words, can highlight the big picture about music and even life itself. "Don't be so serious," Blakey would tell Watson, putting in perspective the urge to play long and ambitious solos. "You can't hit a home run every time. Take some, leave some." Watson even remembers Blakey showing him how to handle the embarrassment of not remembering someone's name.

One could say that a mentor is like a parent, "teaching musicians how to be adults," as Ralph Peterson puts it, offering career guidance and exerting an influence well after the apprenticeship is over. "Having a teacher who loves you enough to threaten to whoop your ass if you make a stupid decision is a real blessing," Peterson laughs.

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IN HIS "PIPE DREAMS" ESSAY, HAL GALPER PROPOSED fundamental reforms to the jazz education system. Within the

prevailing academic models, Galper wrote, "Students don't have time to practice and develop ... The classroom reduces musical knowledge to a mechanical format that produces mechanical players and a learning environment not conducive to developing the creative processes." Galper insisted that collegiate jazz study become more playing-centric, but he also floated the idea of a Jazz Masters Guild, a "post-graduate extension" that would go some way toward restoring the lost advantages of the apprenticeship system once players leave school. Even if this was a "pipe dream," and such a guild has yet to emerge, the thinking behind it remains influential, and the gap between the classroom and the bandstand is starting to be bridged more effectively.

"We have to embrace the fact that [jazz study] is collegiate-based, that the apprenticeship system is in a way rooted in players going to college first," declares Peterson. "We do a disservice to young people if we lure them to New York with the bait of notoriety, and life descends on them, and they realize, 'Wow, the Vanguard don't have a dental plan.'"

The challenge, however, is to run jazz programs so that they function as de facto apprenticeships, an approach that pianist David Roitstein has pursued with notable success as Chair of Jazz Studies at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

Co-founded in 1983 by Roitstein and Charlie Haden, the CalArts jazz program arranges things so that faculty members—including Wadada Leo Smith, Vinny Golia and Alphonso Johnson—not only develop one-on-one mentoring relationships with students, but also play right alongside their students in ensembles. "Rather than have a teacher critique and observe, we run our faculty ensembles like bands," says Roitstein. "We treat the students as colleagues, just like a leader would on the road."

And like in real life, these ensembles perform and record routinely, not just once at the end of the semester. "You have to practice performing," Roitstein notes. "I grew up in Miami, and even in school I was working five or six nights a week. Now our students are lucky if they can get one set in one club in a month. I don't like to complain about that. What I'm looking for is a way to replace it. We try to get as close as possible: Here's another set, another set, another set. You don't measure progress from a single big concert per semester to the next. We're trying to measure it from day to day and week to week. When you're in a club or on the road, you don't see every single tune or every set as some kind of a final project." Take some, leave some, as Blakey advised.

Between CalArts, the New School, the Thelonious Monk Institute, the Juilliard Institute for Jazz Studies, the University of Hartford's Jackie McLean Institute and other entities, there's no one approach to getting students in direct and sustained contact with master teachers. And successful young players are reluctant to pose the school-versus-bandstand dilemma as a simple matter of either/or. "I've worked to gain a sensitivity to what each situation has to offer," says Julian Lage.

"I love my [gigging] experience," adds Jaleel Shaw, "but at the same time, I love the experience

I had at Berklee. I'm glad I got both. I got a degree in music education, and nowadays, with the way the scene is, you never know."

Somehow, despite less-than-ideal circumstances and a tough, ongoing process of working out the kinks, one hears an unabashed optimism from masters and apprentices both. As they play and work together, they're keeping alive a professional dynamic that has sustained the music from its birth. Years of wrong and counterproductive turns in education, it seems, can't keep jazz from its path of development. "The industry is a living organism, like the planet," Peterson says. "No matter how bad man fucks it up, the planet tends to right itself."

Watson agrees: "Jazz is like a river—you can't kill this one. It's gonna flow. I'm not worried about it at all." **JT**

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