

Jazz Studies

IMPROVISED





The Synergy Jazz Youth Combo—Nate Sparks (piano), Taylor Igram (saxophone), Hannah Marks (bass), and Luke Bascom (drums)—performs at the Patty and Fred Turner Jazz Center in Des Moines.

by **Hannah Marks**

In a college basement classroom one June morning in 2011, 20 students gathered not to take an exam or hear a lecture, but to learn about jazz. With a wry smile, our instructor told us, “This is *jazz*” as he put on Miles Davis’s famous record *Kind of Blue*. As I listened to “Freddie Freeloader” and “So What,” the first two songs on that album, my love for jazz took root.

I had signed up for the Simpson College Jazz Camp in Indianola, Iowa, to learn more about jazz before I became the bassist in the high school jazz band. I had played electric bass for four years and even played in the eighth-grade jazz band at school, but until that day at camp, I had never actively listened to jazz. The songs that woke me up that morning made me realize there was more to the genre than the strained efforts of a middle school ensemble. In the depths of that basement classroom, my education began.

The Local Scene

When camp ended and I returned to Des Moines, I was eager to experience more jazz. I started by signing up for a master class with local jazz bassist Susie Miget. There, a friend told me about an organization called the Community Jazz Center (CJC) of Des Moines, which hosted, among other events, a monthly jam session at a local coffee shop. I worked up my nerve, and on the night of the next jam session, I walked into the side room at Java Joe’s Coffeehouse.

My experience that night shattered the image I held of myself as a fine jazz bassist. After playing jazz for only a year, I had believed myself to be the best young bassist around; in reality, I had only met one or two other bassists my age. I think I blocked out much of what happened at that first jam because it was pretty traumatic, but I vaguely remember managing to screw up almost every song I played, even with my bass teacher standing behind me helping me read through the song.

Despite that unfortunate beginning, I returned to the monthly CJC sessions. Because I was forced to play music I had yet to learn and adapt to players I had never played with, my playing began to improve. I met other students who enjoyed playing jazz, as well as some local professionals who sat in on the sessions to help out the younger

students.

In the fall of ninth grade, I started attending workshops through the Synergy Jazz Foundation (SJF). One weekend every month, SJF brings in a jazz musician to conduct workshops, put on a concert, and play with students and adults in a jam session. Many of the students who attend CJC jams also come to SJF events, which made it easy to become friends with some of them. Through SJF, I’ve also had the opportunity to be critiqued by the three-time Grammy Award-winning bassist Christian McBride in a master class and to jam with Indiana University trumpet professor Pat Harbison. Just a couple of years ago, I would have been sitting in the audience for concerts by nationally known jazz musicians, but now I was exchanging musical ideas with them.

Raising the Bar

Exploring the Des Moines jazz scene gave me the confidence I needed to apply to a more rigorous summer program. On a friend’s recommendation, I set my sights on the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshop held at The University of Louisville in Kentucky. Fortunately, SJF provides transportation and scholarship money for students who attend this camp. A student with whom I’d played in a combo at Simpson Jazz Camp signed up, too, and we drove to Louisville with three other students from SJF two days before the camp started in early July.

As soon as we arrived, the fast pace of camp kicked in. Everyone rushed around preparing for a theory test and an audition for the faculty. I auditioned for bassists Rufus Reid and David Friesen. Aebersold is known for hiring accomplished players, so I knew I was in the company of greats. They asked me to sight-read a piece and walk a bass line. Rufus smiled and made small talk, making me feel much less nervous and intimidated.



Left: Hannah performs with Trevor Else (drums), Chris Thorpe (piano), and Tim Zuo (saxophone) at a farmers' market.

Right: Through Synergy Jazz Foundation, Hannah took a master class with Grammy-winning bassist Christian McBride.



Then, when I was about to pack up, he asked me, "What's the first thing you play when you pick up your bass every day?" So I began playing a solo over the standard tune "Autumn Leaves" while David Friesen kept time with his hands.

That audition placed me in a combo class with pianist Steve Allee as the instructor. Our combo had four adults and four kids, and by the end of the week, we were a well-oiled machine. But the combo was only a part of the Aebersold day. I would get up by 6:00, and after breakfast walk across campus with my electric bass and mini amplifier to the music building for my theory class, taught by pianist Dan Haerle. Afterward, Jamey Aebersold gave short lectures incorporating everything from jazz jokes and information about his career to classic recordings. Students also took classes centered on their instruments. The eight talented bassists on staff created different classes according to their personal style, and I was excited to study with a new teacher every day. But the faculty lunchtime concerts were my favorite part of the day. Mesmerized by the faculty playing, I spent more time absorbed in the music than actually eating or talking to my friends.

During the week, I met two guitarists from Florida, a saxophonist from Texas, and a drummer from Michigan. One night, I jammed with them and was wowed by their talent, later learning that they all attended top-notch performing arts high schools. When students weren't jamming, they flocked to the practice rooms. Given the intense nature of the musicians, nights did not wind down until 11:30.

Taking Charge

The most important thing I learned at camp was that there are kids my age even more passionate than I am about jazz. Seeing this gave me hope for my future in college—that I will find kindred spirits who will challenge me as a player—and I started setting bigger goals for myself. Realizing that some kids attend performing arts high schools where the bulk of

their time is spent in rehearsal and performance, I pushed myself to take charge of my jazz education. I knew I needed to create opportunities for myself.

In the weeks following Aebersold, I formed my own jazz group with a couple of friends from Simpson Jazz Camp. We started out by just jamming together in the drummer's basement, but then tried to set up some gigs. Trying to arrange gigs turned out to be a lot more work than expected because of our busy schedules. We played a few events, but my friends struggled to commit. I recently formed a new group, which has become the first official SJF youth combo. For our first show, we opened for Pat Harbison when he played in Des Moines. In the next month, we will be performing at a church, a fundraising event, and a wine bar.

Like any jazz musician, I know how important it is to be able to improvise, to take cues from other players in a combo, and to build off their sound. When it's my turn to play a solo, I must often take a risk and compose as I go, listening to the people I play with in order to produce a coherent sound. Although I take jazz band as one of my high school classes, my real education in jazz has come from my involvement in the music scene, both locally and nationally. By taking risks and connecting with the other musicians around me, I have improvised my own jazz education. **i**



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