

## **“Jazz Education Topics: The need for jazz education”**

### **1. Can one “teach” jazz?**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and since the 60’s there was no jazz course as such.

The knowledge was passed on verbally or through participation in a band. Now one needs to categorize systematize and teach different aspects of jazz. Its very difficult nowadays for someone to be entirely self-taught as the amount of information is vast.

Best balance is achieved when one can follow a jazz course or an intensive study period combined with “street” knowledge and playing live in the real world.

One can teach different aspects of this art form. History, harmony etc, but still requires a certain amount of serious self-teaching.

This is done best by listening to records, transcribing solos, learning tunes, lyrics, forming a band to explore the material learned in the classroom.

This is the only way to fully understand with spirit, mind and body the other important term associated with jazz = swing.

Swing refers to rhythm or the “feel” of the rhythm, or interpretation of the basic pulse in jazz, but cannot be taught completely. Student has to find it for himself. It’s a feeling, an innate rhythm, and part of the tradition of the music. Otherwise the result is an academic approach with no idea of the true nature of this art form.

### **2. Can one “teach” improvisation?**

Improvisation is one of the key elements of jazz and a common thread with “ethnic” music, but it’s somehow impossible to teach this craft to some music students, though they are competent in “classical” music. This has to do with the way they learned music in the past. Also a result of the need for advanced students in jazz courses who 1<sup>st</sup> learn their instruments well, through a classical music course, and then approach jazz, or improvisation. By the time they do this they already have lost their ability (if any) to improvise. Self-consciousness mixed with insecurity is one problem but the main obstacle is the education process that doesn’t allow or include improvisation.

Some systems of early teaching like the Carl Orff system of music education for kids is a great help, also to have a jazz band or orchestra at school makes a difference.

In most cases a good jazz student may be already an improviser before he is taught improvisation.

The important thing about improvisation is that it’s not connected only with jazz and provides a new channel of thought, expression and approach that can broaden the horizon of the serious classical performer or composer. It is also an integral part of “traditional” or “ethnic” music in different parts of the world.

**3. How can a jazz course be successful in small departments?**

Small departments have the advantage of taking really good care of their students. Problem is the lack of variety and integration between different style players.

The aim here for teachers is to inspire and motivate the students to get as much out of the jazz life offered to them, make sure that student ensembles can get real work outside the department and also that the course can offer enough visiting artists representing different styles of jazz and contemporary music.

**4. Is it possible to run a large-scale jazz course and still keep the individuality, the flame, as in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where most of the knowledge was passed on verbally?**

That is a problem that has to do with the course itself and the individual students.

Some of the most well known jazz departments in the States are too big (1000-3000 students).

The course has to become more personalized to cater for the needs of individual student.

This is a matter of curriculum that is not so simple, while the credit system can work, provided that the student-teacher relationship, for the main subject, is good and this mentor-like feeling is present.

**5. What should be the relationship between student and teacher?**

This is very important and in some ways an overlooked factor.

The teacher has to be a mentor in many ways.

Professionally he has to be successful to be able to serve as a role model for the student.

Musically has to be on a high level that the student can aim for and he must have an inspiring personality.

Student has to be able to challenge, so the result will be a young all round player that is in the process of creating his own individual voice.

The problem arises with the increasing number of jazz graduates that not all become successful players/teachers.

A lot of them will mostly teach than play so we come more and more often in front of the phenomenon of a teacher who might be good in transmitting the basic knowledge, as he has been through the educational process, degrees post-grads etc, but he is not or has not been in the past a successful player.

This is a basic point of discussion within the jazz educators and the jazz community.

**6. Is there a way to unify degrees and diplomas to facilitate exchange of students and staff without a need for time consuming bureaucracy regarding degree recognition?**

That is a complex matter as there are different laws governing education even within the EU.

In Greece there was a governing body (DI.KA.TSA.) to deal with this, now in decline as new situations arise.

One of my tasks as a member of the International Association of Schools of Jazz (IASJ) was to investigate this issue.

My opinion is the creation of a European Jazz Curriculum that can be compatible with jazz education in USA.

Thus serious private schools and University departments can include the core of this into their curriculum, ensuring that it will result in a recognized degree that also reflects real knowledge, compatible with other institutions in the world, thus opening the way for student and teacher exchange under EU or US programs.

**7. Can an undergraduate course include serious education topics so the graduate student can be regarded also as a qualified teacher?**

Today it's not always easy for a young up and coming jazz musician to live entirely based on his or hers live performances, recordings, clinics etc. A certain amount of teaching will be required almost from the start of the career.

In some academies or university departments educational subjects are included in the curriculum, other systems require one extra year of teacher training, that leads to a diploma, which I believe is a better way of dealing with the problem, especially if the prospective teacher wants to have the qualities described above on the relevant question.

**8. The problem of cost.**

To study jazz one shouldn't have to pay much in my opinion, he or she will be required to *pay* for a lot in life choosing that path.

Cost has to be balanced with government funding and private sponsorship mainly for the undergraduate level.

In USA, things work differently but still more government support is demanded from the community in matters of education, insurance, promotion, sponsorship.

**9. Louis Armstrong's Hot 5 and Hot 7, Duke Ellington's Orchestra, Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Charles Mingus's Jazz Workshop, Miles Davis's Groups.**

**All these jazz ensembles served as the best *jazz courses* up to know, what is the point today?**

We are not so lucky nowadays to listen to bands like these, let alone to expect to be part of them and get 1<sup>st</sup> hand wisdom.

These bands served as evolution ground for jazz musicians that took part and then were able to create their own styles.

Most of the players with Ellington or the Jazz Messengers or with Miles made huge contributions later and became leaders on their own right.

We have to create this environment, continuously challenging both ourselves and our fellow musicians.

Aim should be to explore new ground while there is a connection with the past.

It should be about individual and collective lives and not about institutionalized concepts.

To make an analogous situation to these bands I formed in Athens, in collaboration with the British Council, an educational platform called “Greek jazz warriors”.

This was done in conjunction with the “Tomorrow’s warriors”, a project started in London 10 years ago, with the aim to provide real life jazz education for young and talented jazz players from the Afro-Caribbean community, inner city areas or ghettos, that cannot afford to study in colleges or universities.

Mainly this results into a band formation that changes every few years, when new blood comes in, and there is a weekly venue to present the ensemble, playing standards, original compositions, large scale works, like jazz suites, and collaborations with professional soloists or composers. More like learning on the bandstand situation. Or even like reinventing the famous jazz groups of the past with the addition of the New York loft period in the 70’s, thus giving “real-life” or “street-wise” jazz education for non-privileged students.

## **10. What is the true nature of jazz as an art form?**

Jazz is not a collection of instructions of how to play an instrument regardless high technique, or harmony and counterpoint rules, not orchestration or ear training, not even ensemble work. Jazz is not hip or cool or hot or just a way to express feelings.

Imagine a whole century of great musicians, different evolving styles, and interesting and sometimes hard lives.

A serious student of jazz has to absorb what has happened before him and then has to try to make something new out of this, what a great task!!!

Of course jazz has always been a musicians-music and a highly individual art, where one can recognize a player from the 1<sup>st</sup> few bars of the solo, or the way the melody is played, just by sound, individual sound, like a signature.

For many jazz is a just another language and if one learns to speak it properly then is able to express almost anything, so proper education is enough.

But also its about life stories, as a jazz artist, more than anybody else, has to have the gift of communication and will inevitably be playing his or hers life on stage.

Jazz is a living and vibrant art form, depends on the players but also depends on the environment, in that way one can say like other arts it reflects nature.

Jazz is made here and now and even if we are talking about the same tune or written material it will never sound the same way again.

This has a lot to do with improvising but also with a group of people that we call the band; who comp, or comment on the soloist’s ideas, also to do with

what is inside the mind and soul of the player, as even one note, depending on sound and placement, time and timbre, can say it all. Miles Davis was a great example of a most economical player that had the ability to produce strong feelings for the audience with just sheer sound and his aesthetic approach.

Jazz can reflect the good side of globalization.

It always amazes me in jam sessions how jazz musicians from different parts of the world can communicate instantly, when they refer to a famous tune, or if someone hums or cites a famous solo, it almost produces the look of the conspirators.

Thus people from different cultures and countries speak the same language.

The jazz player will inevitably, at a certain extend, explore and include elements from regional cultures, thus enriching and expanding the language.

Another unique characteristic is the immediate nature of jazz, to play on a jam session a well known jazz standard and embark on the innumerable possibilities (the tempo, the key, the band, the certain moment, the mood of the soloist, etc.) most of the times doesn't require any rehearsal, or even notes in front of the players, but needs good handling of the moment, of here and now.

As a true art form the nature of jazz for the musician is the same old thing...self-discovering, or discovering the meaning of life etc. it can be said in many ways.

For me there is no better explanation for the serious student of art; otherwise he becomes a rather poor craftsman.

## **11. What happens in Greece?**

In Greece unfortunately, although an E.U member now for many years, music education is not properly organized.

Music Departments at Universities like Macedonia or Aristoteleion in Thessaloniki, Ionian in the island of Kerkyra or Athens University, though they offer degrees, in some cases cannot teach basic subjects yet, let alone jazz, and there is no jazz course as such. What is offered is a couple of subjects in jazz to be chosen by the students as electives.

In the private sector there are few jazz music schools, which work mainly with the grade system and follow the educational model of private schools in the USA.

Their problem is partly because of insufficient legal framework in the Educational system in Greece and partly because of their inability to offer high level courses, they cannot offer recognized degrees like BA, BMus, etc. The result is that only those who can afford continue studies mainly in USA with consequences on the quality of the resulting local jazz scene.

I worked both at the private sector and at the state universities addressing these issues in each case.

Jazz education is connected with the performing aspect, and that means clubs, concert halls, venues, festivals, sponsorship, state funding etc, the list is huge. We need to develop more in Greece and although this should be an all round development for the moment jazz education needs a good boost to come to at least what is the obvious.