Jazz Studies Department Hosts Battery of Legendary Visiting Artists

OBERLIN, OH (May 4, 2012) — Bobby Ferrazza flips through a stack of faded, dusty posterboards, each adorned with curling photos of musicians in an old gymnasium.

"James Moody," he says, pointing to one, "and Neal Smith. Neal graduated in 1996."

He lifts the board from the top of the stack, revealing another, and a dozen more photos.

"Cecil Taylor," he says, gesturing to an image of an elderly black man in sunglasses and a sweater reminiscent of Bill Cosby. "The student leaning on the piano with him is David Pier."

A few minutes before, Ferrazza, who has led the Jazz Studies Department since the 2010 passing of founder and late director Wendell Logan, guided me through another stack, one that reads more like the table of contents in the New Grove Dictionary of Jazz than the entertainment schedule of a northeast Ohio college town.

In the department’s glass-walled administrative office, located in the second-floor, cathedral-like atrium of the 2-year-old Bertram and Judith Kohl Building, he pulls a ream of laminated master class flyers out from behind a filing cabinet.

"Dave Holland Quintet," he says, as he slides a red eleven-by-seventeen off the top. "Chris Potter, Christian McBride, Joey DeFrancesco, Vijay Iyer, John Patitucci..."

He moves deeper into the stack.

"McCoy Tyner, Donald Byrd, Jimmy Heath, Ray Brown, Dave Brubeck, Slide Hampton, Mulgrew Miller..."

"This is just from the past few decades," he says.

Almost all of the biggest names in jazz have visited the Oberlin Conservatory to teach or perform, Ferrazza says, even before the Jazz Studies Department was established in 1989. The flyers and photos from each of those visits, which were displayed in Hales Gymnasium until the department moved to the Kohl building in
2010, serve as an unofficial record of the faculty's strong, long-standing ties to a community of the world's top performing musicians.

Just a few weeks ago, jazz bass professor Peter Dominguez brought premier bassist Rufus Reid, his long-time friend and colleague, to campus for three very full days of master classes, rehearsals, performances, and private coachings. On his final night at Oberlin, Reid led a student combo, two double bass ensembles, and the Oberlin Jazz Ensemble through three hours of standards and his own original compositions in Finney Chapel, Oberlin's top venue for large ensembles.

Though Reid’s scheduled events alone were extraordinary, says one OJE member, he put in extra time for Oberlin students.

“What I loved about Rufus,” bassist Ethan Philion ’15 says, "is that he pulled the rhythm section aside after our second rehearsal with the big band. He said 'Let’s meet up tomorrow. You guys are sounding good, but we're not really clicking as well as I’d like us to. So let’s just meet up and work.’”

This spring, Oberlin’s jazz students also worked with guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel and saxophonist Dave Liebman, each of whom, like Reid, hosted everything from public master classes to private rehearsals with student ensembles. Herbie Hancock, Robert Glasper, Stephen “Thundercat” Bruner, Stephen Lehman, and jazz/indierock fusion outfit Kneebody, among others, visited to perform.

Last academic year, Oberlin hosted trumpeter Nicholas Payton, bassist Esperanza Spalding, drummer Daphnes Prieto, John Hollenbeck’s Claudia Quintet, Cyro Baptista, Ambrose Akinmusire, and The Bad Plus.

The flurry of jazz legends, according to Ferrazza, is nothing new for Oberlin.

"It's been going on as long as the Jazz Department has been in existence, since 1989,” Ferrazza says. "Over the years we've had a huge number of the greatest names in jazz through here. In Hales, we used to collect the posters and put them up on the walls, so you could see all the people that had been within those walls. Practically everybody has been here."

"In my experience," he adds, "It isn't typical for students at other schools to have the same degree of contact with this level of guest artist. At other schools, maybe one of the guest artists that we have in one year will visit over four years."

2011–12 has been a particularly busy year, but it’s been a long time coming according to one jazz student, who feels that the packed schedule of visiting artists is an indicator of growth in the jazz department.

"I came to Oberlin in '08, and it’s gotten better every year," guitarist Conrad Reeves '12 says. "I can see it being on an upward trajectory, because there were a lot of
great players when I was a freshman, but there are so many more now, and a lot of them are really young. So they'll be here three years from now and will be ridiculous. I think it's only going to get better.”

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