

Jazz at Oberlin: A History

With the landmark album *Jazz at Oberlin*, released by the Dave Brubeck Quartet in 1953, “jazz” and “Oberlin” became linked in the public consciousness. Recorded live in Finney Chapel when the group played to a full house on March 2 of that year, the album was a huge success for Brubeck, helping not only to launch his career but also to change the way jazz was experienced as an art form. Professor of African American Music and Chair of the Jazz Studies Program Wendell Logan has called the Oberlin-Brubeck concert “the watershed event that signaled the change of performance space for jazz from the nightclub to the concert hall. Nationally known jazz bands had come to Oberlin before, but mainly to play at dances. The trend of going to a jazz concert simply to listen was a novel idea, and the Brubeck concert was a major factor in starting that trend.”

The Brubeck concert and album presented an audience largely uneducated in jazz with some of the genre’s finest players, all performing at the top of their games. “I always considered *Jazz at Oberlin* a breakthrough album for the quartet,” Brubeck said in an interview with Oberlin about the 50th anniversary of the recording. “It caught [Paul] Desmond and me in the early days when we were beginning the concept of ‘jazz goes to college’ as a concert performance.”

While a jazz concert played to a full house is a regular occurrence at Oberlin today, such was not the case in 1953, when its concert halls were filled with Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, but not with Basie or Baker. In 1953, most music schools and conservatories across the country were dedicated exclusively to classical music. Jazz was played clandestinely; its following was underground.

There was no jazz department at Oberlin in the 1950s. Students such as James Newman ’55, who were instrumental in bringing the Dave Brubeck Quartet to Oberlin, listened to jazz records on a jukebox in the student recreation center. The concert’s success inspired them to form the Oberlin College Jazz Club, which brought Brubeck back to campus the following year, and hosted concerts by other jazz greats, among them Count Basie, Chet Baker, and Teddy Charles in a group that featured Charles Mingus on bass.

Another James Neumann, Class of 1958, hosted a jazz program on the college’s radio station, WOBC. During the course of his lifetime, he would come to amass the largest privately held jazz record collection in the United States. He and his wife, Susan, have given Oberlin that collection, which also includes posters, ephemera, and historical iconography. The James and Susan Neumann Jazz Collection will prove extremely useful to scholars and aficionados alike, and will be housed in the Bertram and Judith Kohl Building, which in spring 2010 will become the home of Oberlin’s jazz studies department, as well as its departments of music history and music theory.

Wendell Logan launched the study of jazz at Oberlin in 1973, the year the art form was first incorporated into the curriculum. The following year he founded the Oberlin Jazz Ensemble (OJE). Composed of classical performance majors as well as jazz majors, the OJE made an extended tour of major cities in Brazil at the invitation of the United States Information Agency, recently performed to acclaim in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and frequently appears at collegiate festivals throughout the United States. The OJE, recipient of numerous outstanding performance awards at the Notre Dame Jazz Festival and Cleveland’s Tri-C Jazz Festival, issued a CD in 1998 featuring works by such legends as Jimmy Heath, Slide Hampton, and Duke Ellington.

The OJE is but one rich component of Oberlin's four-year curriculum in jazz studies, which became an official major in 1989, and which leads to a bachelor of music degree with possible majors in performance and composition.

Today Oberlin's jazz studies department prepares undergraduate musicians (70 students from across the United States and internationally are currently enrolled) for careers as professional jazz musicians and for advanced study in jazz with a premier performance education grounded in the history and theory of both jazz and classical music. This dual approach provides a solid musical foundation, a rich understanding of diverse styles and genres, and exposure to a variety of pedagogical resources. Jazz performance majors participate in ensembles during all four of their Oberlin years, and they perform in recitals during their junior and senior years.

Smaller student ensembles, such as the Oberlin Jazz Septet, have been featured at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts under the auspices of its Conservatory Project Series, and at the Detroit Jazz Festival. Student jazz ensembles have also embarked on performing and educational outreach tours, often during Oberlin's winter term; these tours have included gigs at such acclaimed venues as Birdland and Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in Manhattan, Chris' Jazz Café in Philadelphia, and Jazz Aspen Showmass.

Principal private study is offered in saxophone, trumpet, trombone, piano, guitar, percussion, and double bass.

Students can also major in jazz composition, and included among their courses of study are jazz aural skills, jazz keyboard, jazz theory, basic arranging and composing techniques, improvisation, and TIMARA (Technology in Music and the Related Arts). Oberlin's undergraduate musicians also take liberal arts courses in the College of Arts and Sciences, and many are enrolled in Oberlin's acclaimed double-degree program.

Logan's colleagues on the faculty—Gary Bartz (saxophone), Marcus Belgrave (trumpet), Peter Dominguez (bass), Robin Eubanks (trombone), Bobby Ferrazza (guitar), Billy Hart (drums), and Dan Wall (piano)—are renowned, award-winning composers, arrangers, and performers who also teach and coach ensembles while maintaining active performing and recording careers throughout the world. Their collective history of making music with the legends of jazz carries its own legacy, which they share freely with their students.

Oberlin's Jazz Faculty Octet was featured at the 1991 and 1996 International Association of Jazz Educators conferences held in Washington, D.C., and at the 1996 conference in Atlanta. The group's CD, *Hear and Now*, released in the 1990s, features original compositions by Logan, Ferrazza, and the late pianist Neal Creque.

In 2007, the faculty took to the studios again, releasing another album of original music, *Beauty Surrounds Us*, on the Oberlin Music label. Alumnus Leon Lee Dorsey produced the disc at his Manhattan recording studio.

A watershed moment in the history of jazz at Oberlin will take place on May 1, 2010, with the dedication of the Bertram and Judith Kohl Building. With his wife, Donna, Stewart Kohl '77, a member of Oberlin's Board of Trustees, donated the lead gift of \$5 million to construct this new, much-needed facility for the program. Other donors soon followed, among them Chicagoans Joseph Clonick '57, Clyde McGregor '74, and the aforementioned James Neumann with his inestimable collection.

At 37,000 square feet, the Bertram and Judith Kohl Building promotes green building practices and sustainable strategies and planning opportunities. Its design intention—to achieve the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold rating for a facility exclusively dedicated to music—is remarkable given the engineering innovation required to attain such an appellation while meeting the exacting acoustical standards of a music building. The Bertram and Judith Kohl Building will serve as a pioneering model for sustainability and energy efficiency for music facilities of its type with stringent acoustical requirements.

Oberlin's jazz alumni have contributed greatly to the world of jazz. This listing, by no means comprehensive, provides an inkling of the ways in which an Oberlin education has influenced the great art form of jazz:

- Pianist and composer Stanley Cowell '62
- Keyboardist Ted Baker '83
- Bassist, composer, and arranger Leon Lee Dorsey '81
- Pianist, arranger, and producer Allen Farnham '83
- Pianist and arranger Lafayette Harris '85
- Flutist Paul Horn '52
- Bassist and member of Preservation Hall Jazz Band Ben Jaffe '93
- Composer and pianist Jon Jang '78
- Writer, composer, and saxophonist James McBride '79
- Trumpeter, trombonist, and composer Michael Mossman '82
- Percussionist Neal Smith '96
- Trumpeter and jazz historian Richard M. Sudhalter '60 (1938-2008)