

# Education, Enrichment, and Ellington

by Todd Stoll

For more than two decades, Jazz at Lincoln Center, through its *Essentially Ellington* program, has distributed more than 150,000 Duke Ellington scores to thousands of schools. These scores have been played by more than 500,000 high school students across all 50 United States, Canada and American schools abroad.

Why would an institution get in the business of publishing little-known artifacts of a by-gone era and for almost zero financial gain?

A little history. I was a child of the '70s, played trumpet in the school band and was attracted to any type of music that featured horns: rock, R&B, funk and jazz and orchestral music. I started playing in my junior high jazz band and played through high school and into college. My major was in music and I attended a major conservatory as a graduate student. At 23 years old, I had played in jazz bands for half of my life - literally 12 years - but had not played a single note of Duke Ellington's music? Really? Arguably one of our country's greatest composers and certainly one of our most prolific, Duke Ellington toured and composed for the better part of 50 years, producing one of the richest (and largest) bodies of work seen in the totality of Western culture. How did 'we' miss this? How was it possible? Imagine young violinists, serious students of European classical music, without contact with Mozart? Or Haydn? Or Beethoven?

In American instrumental music education, little effort, many times, is given to teach beyond the strict confines of a given year's performances. Contests, festivals, concerts are public displays of the quality of a school's band program. There are standards for performance, ratings with concise rubrics and events in which these ideas move from the theoretical to actual. (If you have never sat with a group of teenagers awaiting their band's rating at an adjudicated event, it is a rare glimpse into the seriousness of our nation's

young people - this is serious business!) However, these events, while motivating and part of our national mindset, may also be limiting the scope and depth of their educational value. In jazz education, it may have been even more so.

In the late '80s, as a young music teacher, I read in my IAJE (International Association for Jazz Education - RIP) Journal a list of the top ten most influential big band compositions and arrangements. Wow, I thought, I'll go out and buy these and have my kids play them... they're the 'best' and we should do this.

I headed down to the local music store (which just happened to be one of the largest brick and mortar sheet music stores in the US), plunked down my school purchase order and said, "Hey, I'd like to buy these." Now, if memory serves me right, on this list were five Ellington compositions (I distinctly remember "KoKo" and "Cottontail"), some Benny Carter tunes and a few others that escape me now. The salesperson started typing into his computer, looked at me and said, "Well, you know none of those are available." What?! I was completely taken aback. Come on, check again, you must be kidding me...? But, I was turned away. At that time my school band was playing a fairly typical mixture of different pieces. I distinctly remember the programming. It was a bit random, consisting of two or three original swing tunes, a Latin/rock tune, a rock ballad and two funk tunes. Not a single composition was a work by a prominent jazz composer and it was 'fun'. By 'fun' I mean, fun for the kids. They seemed to enjoy coming to rehearsal/class, playing the music and appeared to be engaged in what I was teaching.

Now that word 'fun' is interesting and popped up in discussions with my colleagues, my friends at the music store and with the kids themselves. Jazz band was something 'fun'. Not serious like our concert band or, in many cases, marching band (which was geared towards competitions). I started thinking about what I was actually *teaching*, what lessons the music was teaching, who created it, how the literature itself perhaps carried the cultural DNA of our country. Interestingly enough, a close friend, who taught English, was also a jazz aficionado. In one of our many late-night debates about this exact topic, he gave me an

analogy that I still use to this day. Imagine, if you will, a high school American Literature teacher, prepping the literature for the year. This teacher, well-intentioned and trained by a university, looks at the great writers of our country - Faulkner, Hemingway, Ellison - and says "Wow, these books seem nice, but I don't know much about these writers and, honestly, I really want the kids to have fun." Said teacher then assigns comic books to his class - Spiderman, Batman, Superman - all with good intentions. After all, kids are reading, having a good time, engaged with words on a page. How long does one imagine that teacher might keep their job?

I understand that my analogy may be a bit extreme, but that is the situation many times in our nation's jazz bands. With no disrespect to the hard-working music teachers in schools all over our country, we *need*, we *have* to do a better job. We should 'teach like our students' lives depend on it' - their cultural lives at least. We should understand that the content of our literature is just as important as the technique. Our classes and rehearsals need to reflect the best of American intent. It needs to carry the weight of the culture that created it and challenge young people to rise up to it, not us reaching down to them.

That is why. ❖

For more information, visit [academy.jalc.org/ee](http://academy.jalc.org/ee). The 2014 *Essentially Ellington Competition* is at Rose Hall May 8th-10th. See Calendar.

Todd Stoll has been a leading advocate in jazz education for more than 25 years. He has taught music at the elementary, secondary and collegiate levels and most recently served as Music Curriculum Supervisor for Westerville City Schools, Westerville, Ohio. Stoll is a past President of the Ohio International Association of Jazz Educators, served as the Ohio Music Education Association Jazz Events Coordinator and founder and leader of the nationally recognized Columbus Youth Jazz Orchestra. On the business side he has worked as the orchestra contractor for Broadway Across America, booking agent for various jazz festivals and promoter for a series of independent jazz concerts. Stoll currently serves as the Vice President of Education at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

## VOXNEWS

# You Bet Your Brass

by Katie Bull

**Louis Armstrong** set the bar for all horn players who sing. The 1961 musical *The Real Ambassadors*, by Dave Brubeck, Iola Brubeck and Armstrong, featured as part of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Brubeck Festival last month, was rendered with precision, heart and soul. In a particularly poignant moment, the live ensemble went silent. A recording of Satchmo's rich, rough and earthy voice rose up. Hearing his recorded voice echo inside the cavernous Appel Room was a moving reminder of other great horn-playing singers in history, including one of Armstrong's favorites, trombone player **Jack Teagarden**. In archival footage from a 1956 televised duet, the two trade vocal phrases as if completing each other's thoughts. Another trombone playing singer was the brightly buzzy sounding **Frank Rosolino**, also an Armstrong contemporary, known for his unique lightning scat. Then there's the trumpet playing singer and dancer **Valaida Snow**, dubbed by Armstrong as the "second best trumpet player in the world" (naming her "little Louis"). Vivacious and daring, she was born in 1905 and in the '20s-30s was a blues innovator alongside the likes of Ethel Waters and Josephine Baker. Snow performed in the USA and Europe, a sensation in London and Paris. Snow is a

relatively unsung great in the voice/horn lineage, preserved in priceless archival film clips and several recordings. Of course jazz fans know trumpet player **Chet Baker's** voice well, a mirror of the smooth clean lines he played on his horn. Spring ahead to today and hear how these artists were springboards.

**Pete McGuinness**, who credits Baker as his main influence, is a quadruple threat: he leads, arranges, plays trombone and sings with his Jazz Orchestra on the new album *Strength In Numbers* (Summit). Though only three of ten tracks are vocals, McGuinness 'sings' non-stop on this powerful celebration of big bands. Go to brunch at the Blue Note for the release show of this contemporary great (May 25th).

Anyone who loves horns and singers should know about young Canadian-born, New York-based trumpet sensation **Bria Skonberg**, a *DownBeat* "Rising Star". Skonberg's new CD, *Into Your Own* (Random Act), goes in what she calls a "modern" direction of pop-edged jazz originals and covers. The album boasts electronic trumpet effects and vocals are overdubbed in hip harmonics on some tracks. Live, Skonberg will more than hold her own (horn) at The Iridium (May 6th) and the New York Hot Jazz Festival at The Players Club (May 18th). **Jennifer Hartswick** is another current trumpet-playing vocalist, composer and bandleader not to be missed. She will bring her deeply resonant and superbly funky blues to Perez Jazz (May 18th).

Though not literally trumpet players, two cutting

edge vocalists are related to brass. Swiss-born experimental jazz vocalist and beat boxer **Andreas Schaerer** also calls himself a "human trumpet". On the latest release of his band Hildegarde Lernt Fliegen, *The Fundamental Rhythm of Unpolished Brains* (Enja/Yellowbird), Schaerer takes listeners on a playfully fantastical sonic trip into subterranean mutterings of the collective mind. (Let's hope for an American tour soon!). Likewise, Portuguese-born, Brooklyn-based vocalist **Sara Serpa's** voice is often compared to a trumpet. Serpa unites with her husband, guitarist André Matos and guests Greg Osby, Leo Genovese and Pete Rende, for *Primavera* (Inner Circle), their gentle ode to spring. A refreshing song cycle of minimalistic motifs in syncopation, Latin roots and experimental sensibilities permeate the album; the release concert is at Greenwich House Music School (May 22nd).

It must be noted that although her voice is not compared to horns, nor does she play one (she plays guitar), **Kendra Shank** shapes lines like a horn player, breaking apart lyrics in entrained exchanges with guitarist John Stowell, her musical soulmate, on their new duo album, *New York Conversations* (TCB), weaving acoustic voice and nuanced electronic overlays with bluesy plucking and chordal responses. The release event at Roulette (May 4th) will feature guest percussionist Rogério Boccato.

Owing a debt to the first jazz horn players who sang, May's vox highlights are sure bets. ❖