UNLV Upholds Standards of Art, Professionalism

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS enjoys the benefit of a thriving entertainment capital in its backyard. And Dave Loeb, director of jazz studies and professor of music, embraces that resource. Loeb believes a student’s education should flourish both within and without the walls of a university. It’s a philosophy of serious arts education reinforced with “real world” working knowledge.

“The primary strength of this jazz program is the talented faculty who are highly involved in many facets of the industry—jazz being primary—but also classical and commercial,” Loeb explained. “Here in Las Vegas, there’s been a resurgence of employment opportunities for musicians. As quickly as possible, I try to get students into the professional pipeline—when they’re truly ready, of course. A lot of our top students are now playing on The Strip in shows like Jersey Boys and also Cirque du Soleil shows such as Zumanity.”

Loeb’s resume reflects his work ethic. In addition to performing with major jazz artists, he’s served for 10 years as pianist with The Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, accompanying everyone from Quincy Jones to Garth Brooks to Plácido Domingo. He also shuttles to Los Angeles for film and TV sessions, including his long-term stint with Family Guy. In an example of school-industry interaction, Loeb got permission to bring groups of students to recording sessions that let them observe Hollywood pros at close range.

“Recording is a big emphasis in our program,” Loeb said. “The students have to take classes on recording techniques and learn all basic music technologies, and then be able to engineer recordings, master them—the entire process, including copyrights and mechanics.”

Established in 1957, UNLV enrolls approximately 28,000 students in undergraduate, masters and doctoral programs. The school’s music department has 400 students, 60 of whom are jazz studies majors pursuing graduate and/or undergraduate degrees. Jazz degrees offered are Bachelor of Music in jazz studies with a concentration in jazz composition, jazz instrumental or jazz vocal performance; Master of Music with a concentration in jazz instrumental or jazz vocal performance; and a Master of Music with a concentration in jazz theory/composition.

Nathan Tanouye—a UNLV alum who is now an assistant professor of jazz studies and studio trombonist there—values the program's intimacy. "It's not a huge music program like North Texas or University of Miami," he noted. "Students get more opportunities to step up here; they'll receive more individual attention. I guess you could say it feels like a tighter family. And with all the ensembles and smaller pool of players, students have more opportunities to play in these excellent ensembles."

The pride and joy of the jazz program is its widely acclaimed jazz ensembles. The school’s high-level bands include three large jazz ensembles, the Latin Jazz Ensemble, Contemporary Jazz Ensemble, Joe Williams Every Day Foundation Jazz Sextet, Jazz Vocal Ensemble and 10 small combos. The department also sponsors yearly CD releases showcasing various ensembles and student compositions and arrangements. The ensembles’ numerous awards have boosted UNLV’s profile. Loeb said, "We’ve won seven DownBeat Student Music Awards’ Outstanding Performance’ awards in the past five years, as well as several outstanding soloist awards in both the Reno Jazz Festival and The Monterey Next Generation Jazz Festival."

Although UNLV’s faculty encourages commercial preparedness, Loeb is emphatic about their ultimate goal. “We still uphold jazz and classical as the bar. And we make sure students maintain that legacy and integrity. We want to make sure—whatever the music may be—that students can discern true quality from something that’s not.” —Jeff Potter

Fall at NEC: Among the events scheduled this fall at New England Conservatory are master classes by several jazz artists: John Hollenbeck & The Claudia Quintet (Sept. 23, Vijay Iyer and Jason Moran Sept. 30) and Fred Hersch (Oct. 6 and Nov. 4). Also scheduled is an Oct. 2 performance by artist-in-residence Dave Holland, an Oct. 16 concert by the NEC Jazz Orchestra playing the music of George Russell and a special Nov. concert titled "The Music of John Zorn: A 35 year Retrospective," as performed by NEC's faculty, students and ensembles. Zorn will be interviewed onstage prior to the concert.

More info: necmusic.edu

KU Fest: More than 50 college, high school and middle school jazz ensembles and combos from the central United States will perform for a panel of distinguished jazz educators and musicians in a non-competitive environment at the University of Kansas’ 38th Annual Jazz Festival on March 6-7, 2015, in Lawrence. Saxophonist Jerry Bergonzi and trumpeter Marshall Gilkes will be special guests at the fest, which will feature performances by KU Jazz Ensemble I, KU Combo I and the KU Jazz Festival All-Star Big Band. More info: music.ku.edu