

Rather than the typical "Long Bio," I'd like to include this interview:

**Interview with Josef Woodard for a JazzTimes magazine article on alternative jazz education
June 20, 2006**

1) Can you give me a bit of background about your own path into jazz education?

Neither of my parents were musicians, but both were educators – my mother taught art, and my father was an English teacher. I studied classical piano at the Hartford Conservatory from age 6 to 13 with a wonderful man named Aaron Pratt, who introduced me to compositional form, harmony, and a wide range of music. He encouraged me to develop my ears along with my reading, and I will always be grateful for my time with him.

When we moved to Miami in 1967, Jerry Coker was starting the jazz program at the University of Miami, and he became an important mentor for me. Although his famous "Patterns for Jazz" book was new then, his primary focus with me was listening deeply and intense ear training. I was transcribing everything I could get my hands on, but JC never pushed me to spend time practicing patterns – there were other things that attracted me more (melodic development, rhythmic intensity, orchestration...).

In high school and then during my bachelor's and master's degrees at UM, I was working professionally in Miami in all musical styles and situations. The early 70's was a very creative time there, and I played with Ira Sullivan, Jaco Pastorius, Pat Metheny, Carmen Lundy, Steve Morse, older Cuban masters, and a very long list of others. Everybody was experimenting with elements from a huge variety of sources, and sharing their discoveries very openly. I felt almost no competition or pressure to conform to one way of playing or writing, and there were many venues to perform at and try things out. Carmen and I had a quintet that played four nights every week for an entire year at the Lion's Share, an unusual restaurant in North Miami. Ira's quartet with Jaco (before he went on tour with Weather Report) alternated sets with us, then we'd play a set together, and every night was a revelation – the place was always full of musicians and artists.

I remember being in the audience at one concert, in the University's cafeteria (!) with Ornette Coleman's band with Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden, and Ed Blackwell that made a powerful impression on me and opened up another whole avenue of expression. I had heard them on records, but seeing it live – the intense level of communication, intuition, and freedom – was a glimpse of possibilities that I hadn't experienced yet.

I was also a teaching assistant and then part time faculty at UM, and learned the skill and art of teaching from Whit Sidener, Vince Maggio, Rosalina Sackstein, and many other master educators. Whit Sidener was the director of the jazz program and led the legendary UM Concert Jazz Band, Vince Maggio was my primary influence as a jazz piano teacher, and Rosalina Sackstein gave me everything about technique and hand position, tone and dynamics, phrasing and articulation. She knew exactly how to convey the specific physical motion that produced the musical result that I intended. Dr. Sackstein is the most intense and efficient teacher I've ever had, and I still base a large portion of my own teaching on what I learned from her. In Miami, I taught many valuable and effective classes and ensembles, but especially loved the private instruction – individual lessons could be so responsive and immediate.

In 1981, we moved to Los Angeles so my wife could do her master's degree at CalArts (in classical flute performance). I was busy writing, touring, and recording, and decided to take a break from teaching. However, after a year I felt like something was missing, and realized that teaching was vitally important in my life. I began to look for opportunities, and by far the most interesting place to be was at CalArts. There were no jazz majors, but it was already a center for new music, world music, classical performance, and technology.

Nick England was the Dean, and he hired Charlie Haden and me to create a jazz program that would be different from other schools. Our goal was to have a small, advanced program with a concentration on creative small ensembles, original composition and improvisation, with frequent performance and recording opportunities. Like the rest of the Institute, there would be inspiring collaborations between faculty and students, a lot of individual instruction, and a feeling of flexibility and responsiveness to the students' needs that was missing in many larger schools. That was in 1983, and I still love it at CalArts. It is a unique and wonderful place that always grows and changes with the individuals that are there.

2) *Have you brought a certain personal approach to the business of education, maybe in response or reaction to existing concepts you've had questions about?*

In the U.S. we have a serious national problem – we expect at least a Master's degree from our "professional people," but the cost of a college education is obscenely high and rising at a terribly fast pace. The most common form of "financial aid" is loans, and our government seems to consider this sufficient, but then college graduates are saddled with enormous debt for years and years. This is a real dilemma that affects us all, and as educators we have no control over it. We can control the *quality* of our program, however, and have a moral obligation to give each student the experience that they need and are paying for.

I feel very lucky to be working at a school where we can keep our program small – about 45 jazz majors, both bachelor's and master's degree candidates, so we never have more than 6 - 10 on any instrument. This means that we really know every student and can help each person design their own program. It also means that we have to be selective in the admissions process – we always have many more applicants than we can accept. So our recruiting goal is to get the word out to mature, creative, interesting and independent young musicians. We don't have to obsess about our enrollment numbers, or focus on filling all of the chairs in big bands. I'd say that in this area, we are probably a little spoiled.

Our student to faculty ratio is unusually small – we believe that it is more efficient for us to teach one person, responding to their specific and immediate needs rather than wasting time on conveying information that may be redundant for that particular student. Especially with creative music, a single hour of concentrated individual instruction can be much more productive than many hours of class time. This can be a difficult business model for a Board of Trustees, however our Board has always understood this distinction and supported us in our efforts.

Our most effective advertising is our annual CD project, recorded at Capitol Records every spring since 1990 (generously supported by EMI Music). When potential students hear the broad variety of styles and instrumentation in a sample of 10 new original compositions by CalArts students, they understand more than words could possibly convey. We usually include several tracks that are a real stretch to call "jazz" at all – which is exactly how we want it – but they accurately represent that year's community of CalArts musicians.

In a discussion of the "business" part of education, we should also look at what graduates do when they leave CalArts. A very high percentage of our alumni continue with music as their primary source of income. Part of it is that they are very committed and passionate about *their* music, which students at other schools may not have had time to discover while completing a long, rigid list of course requirements. Also, professional musicians in today's culture often have to *create* their own opportunities rather than applying for a diminishing supply of existing music jobs, and this is a skill that students develop at CalArts right from the beginning. Our graduates have started their own concert series, their own record labels and distribution systems, their own production companies, even their own schools to accomplish their professional goals. Of course, many are successful in a wide range of more typical music employment, and a few decide that they'd rather get jobs outside of music and pursue their creative work independently. But our students are taught that any aesthetic or stylistic direction can find an audience if presented in a professional and effective way.

3) *How would you say that the CalArts approach differs from most other jazz education programs in the U.S.?*

- a small number of students which allows for great flexibility and more individual instruction. It is a small community where everybody knows you. Very little "academic bureaucracy" to stifle or limit change.
- emphasis on small group composition and improvisation.
- jazz standards are a point of departure for us, not the destination. We make sure that students are fluent with the traditional vocabulary of jazz – some students are experienced before they come, and want to spend time opening up their creative side; others clearly have an original voice before they come, and need to spend some time developing their jazz language. If someone comes to CalArts and wants to concentrate on bebop, they can do that on a very high level. But we think that jazz standards are a basis for individual expression, not just an academic exercise.
- World Music program directly or indirectly influences everyone at the Institute. In western culture and education, most topics are separated into discreet and competing components (e.g. classical vs. jazz,

instrumental vs. vocal, academic music vs. commercial music...) or have too narrow a focus. But at CalArts, in the West African music ensembles for example, the students learn the songs, the stories, the dances, and many different instrumental parts. This is a much broader experience, and can also be a much deeper education. It connects the student to the AURAL TRADITION of learning music which is common to most other cultures in the world (and is the source of the jazz language as well). CalArts has ensembles, classes and lessons with masters from Africa, India, Indonesia, Persian music, Afro-Cuban music, Brazilian music – the point is to learn the music, not just study about it. Many jazz majors at CalArts end up spending more time with World Music than in jazz classes, and we encourage them to do it – for many people, it may be the best way to move their own music forward.

- opportunities for interdisciplinary projects (more on this below), and work across all music programs.
- frequent performance opportunities, both formal concerts and informal sessions, on and off campus. In some other schools, students rehearse all semester for one concert at the end – a very academic situation that does not reflect professional reality.
- regular documentation of student work. Recording is a priority, both in our on-campus studios and on our annual CD project of original student compositions at Capitol Records (sponsored by EMI Music since 1990). We even do our admissions auditions by recording – it is a better way for them to present their own compositions, and potential students begin documenting their work even before they come to CalArts.
- when we listen to admissions portfolios, we send back a page of comments and observations to every applicant. That way, the applicant knows who listened to their music, and has a clear idea of what we think of it (whether or not they've been accepted). Most people find this much more useful than a form letter, especially since the decisions are necessarily so subjective.
- all students can be in the center of the program from their first day – there is no hierarchy of seniority. There is also a non-competitive atmosphere – nobody is in a contest to be in the "best band." Faculty plays together with students in ensembles, ensuring that all will be valuable experiences, and that it will feel like a band, not a class. Students can participate in a variety of different bands during their time at CalArts. Ensemble placement is accomplished each semester at registration with a single form where each student requests the bands that he or she wants to be in.
- close to LA, easy access to a constant stream of inspiring, innovative visiting artists.
- all of this hopefully leads to students creating music rather than only recreating.

4) Are there particular challenges in terms of orienting students towards an artistic philosophy which stresses personal expression and more improvisational aesthetics, versus a more conventional jazz vocabulary?

It takes far less time to teach everybody the same conventional vocabulary in a classroom setting than to design a program for each individual student. This is a huge commitment for our faculty, and there are not too many music educators who are open, supportive, and qualified to guide students in an aesthetic direction different from their own. We have to maintain a balance of very different personalities and musical strengths on our team of faculty members so that our students will always have an appropriate mentor available to them.

This way of emphasizing personal expression requires a great deal of focus and initiative from the students, and it is not the best path for everyone. This puts more responsibility on the admissions process to make sure that the people who we accept have an excellent chance of having a great experience. We are successful in the great majority of cases, and when it works it is a very satisfying process for both the student and teacher.

In this day of "assessment" it is much easier to objectively measure progress when teaching in a conventional system. Creative expression is by definition thoroughly subjective and somewhat fragile, and the most important new developments in music will often be the ones that at first seem unlikely. It is difficult if not impossible to judge or predict which directions will succeed, so we emphasize *how* students play, rather than *what* they play. They are depending on us for our judgment, though, and trusting us to find the wisdom to help them find their voice.

5) Would you say that your teaching stresses the integration of ideas both inside and outside of music, maybe in a way analogous more to art education than traditional music education?

Ideally, music should be about life – the most interesting and important music reflects the cultural, social, political, or economic environment. So it is healthy, stimulating, and essential for a musician to move outside of a narrow group of people with a similar outlook (i.e. jazz majors) to broaden and deepen one's perspective.

When Walt Disney came up with the idea for CalArts, he proposed that all of the art forms be integrated in the same building. He recognized that professionals in all fields end up working together and should be able to do this on a high level while in school. This physical closeness creates opportunities for collaborative projects with film, animation, dance, theater, art, and writing. Some of the most exciting work at CalArts emerges from these collaborations, and students are not only allowed to explore, but encouraged and assisted. If a student or faculty has an idea or proposal for a new experiment, the answer is almost always yes.

6) Organized, institutional jazz education has expanded greatly in recent years. Do you have feelings about the general state of this fledgling educational avenue, in terms of its positive end results, or otherwise?

It is a good thing that there are so many schools where people who want to learn to play can go to get help and guidance, and to find a community of other musicians to play with. For many, it's the only way to get access – other alternatives (apprenticeship and touring with master musicians, local jazz community and clubs to sit in) are harder to find now. It is also true that you never know who is going to find success (aesthetically or professionally), and everybody deserves the chance to try.

However, there are some problems with the systemization of jazz education -

- innovation is often not recognized or supported. Students who follow directions the most literally are the ones who earn the most praise. This means that the majority of graduates have a similar sound and approach and narrower listening tastes.
- creative students often have to suppress their individuality while in school, then after acquiring skills, do their exploring after graduating. For many people this is not a bad thing, and their strong creative impulses are not "taught out of them." But there must be other alternatives (like CalArts).
- the aural tradition is disappearing. Academic systems are based on written sources and an analytical approach, so the rich human tradition of passing on music as sound and stories is excluded from most schools.
- there has been an escalation of degree requirements in our culture, where masters degrees and now doctoral degrees are the minimum qualifications to teach in a jazz program. If this continues, the only teachers will be academicians who have no experience outside of a school environment.

7) Is your educational approach necessarily evolutionary, something which changes with time and your own development as a musician?

At CalArts, we absolutely do have an evolutionary approach – each year a new group of talented individuals enters, with new ideas and expectations, personalities, musical strengths and weaknesses. We always ask them for suggestions and opinions and respond to them, and this keeps things fresh and changeable. For faculty this prevents "burnout" and staleness, for students their experience is unique. The program is quite different from what it was at the beginning because we have learned so much from each student that has come to CalArts.

There are specific curricular requirements, and a structure to all aspects of the program. But nothing about it is unchangeable – with such a small academic bureaucracy, we can alter anything with very little lead time.

Change also inevitably comes from each faculty member's outside careers. We all bring our life into the program, and everyone is better for it.

8) How do you view the blending of your life as an educator and musician? Do the roles interact much?

All faculty at CalArts are active and well known professionals, performing, recording, touring the world. Everyone benefits from this interaction, and it gives needed balance to all of our lives.

The only possible downside of this is when a faculty member is so busy outside of school that they are not on campus teaching often enough, and we've been very careful over the years to make sure that doesn't happen.

As the director of the program I have personally made CalArts a much higher priority than my performing career – my responsibility to our students is second only to my family. Because I am so active composing, performing and recording creative music at CalArts, though, I don't feel that it has been a sacrifice, or has negatively affected my own musical development.

Now that my children are grown, I am looking forward to spending more time getting my own recordings and compositions out into the world. I have two CDs almost ready to release after my sabbatical leave in 2004 – one of original jazz compositions, and another of new chamber music compositions.

9) *Any other reflections or observations that you'd like to add?*

I think that the overwhelming majority of jazz educators, if they could design an ideal program, would *not* choose to have a large, rigid, unresponsive system. Their love for the music is what brought them into teaching in the first place, and the joy and satisfaction of passing it on to young musicians is the reward. But the economic realities and other compromises inherent in an academic system force most educators to adapt. Everybody is just doing the best they can, hopefully trying and intending to keep the music free, spontaneous, and open. It is true, though, that we do *need* to have alternatives like CalArts where there are no obstacles to the creative individual expression that has always been at the heart of this music.

David Roitstein (June 2006)
