Getting In

MYSTERIES OF THE COLLEGE JAZZ PROGRAM AUDITION PROCESS EXPLAINED

BY DAVID DEMSEY

For many students, the college jazz program audition process can seem to be full of anxiety and stress. Although your audition is certainly a moment when you want to make the best possible impression (musically as well as personally), it's best to think of this as a time when you can also learn which program is the best fit for you. In fact, you are auditioning the program as much as they are auditioning you.

The Audition Recording

Most programs require an audition recording; some schools use this as a first step to scheduling live auditions, and other programs have an option or requirement for recorded auditions only. Don't toss this off as a "preliminary" recording – you'll never have a chance to closely investigate any program if you don't first grab their attention, and this is your chance. The major jazz studies programs have only a certain number of openings based upon available faculty teaching loads, rehearsal space, scheduling, et cetera, and there are many more applicants than the available openings. This recording is your chance to make the case that you are "a contender," that you have musicality and potential that the faculty wants to help develop. Take full advantage of the opportunity.

As you plan your recording, first read the school's audition requirements carefully and follow them closely, in terms of required scales, repertoire, tempos, styles, and so on. Do exactly what they ask – and consider the reasons for these requirements; they tell you a lot about the school and what they expect of their students.

If you are asked to select your own repertoire, your choices will speak as loudly to the auditioners as your performance itself. Although it's great to showcase your ability as a composer with your original tunes or showcase the uniqueness of your working band, the core of your audition should be made up of popular song and jazz standards (some schools require this). Standard tunes are the common denominators of modern and older jazz alike, and have formed the basis of jazz for a century. Through your choices, you can demonstrate your understanding of that history, lineage and repertoire. Although much of your high school experience may have been in an 18-piece big band, any competitive college jazz program expects incoming students to have considerable improvisation experience and repertoire when they arrive.

Some other CD tips: make your case succinctly by including no more than three or four selections. You should be the first improvising soloist after the initial melody statement; don't make the auditioners fast-forward through other peoples' solos to find you. Mix up the tempos of the selections; along with the medium- and up-tempo tunes that show your technical level, include a lyrical ballad that you truly "believe in," with a melody that you can really sing with musicality. If possible, include

at least one standard such as "All the Things You Are," "Have You Met Miss Jones?" or "Body and Soul," showing your ability to improvise over modulating chord progressions. Although tunes like "Impressions," "Autumn Leaves," "Song for My Father," or a blues are certainly famous standards, an audition recording made up only of these modal or "one-key" tunes can imply that the applicant can handle nothing more than that. On the other hand, avoid including the most difficult tunes you know on your CD; for example, there are only two kinds of improvised solos on very challenging tunes like "Giant Steps," "Countdown," or "Moment's Notice": super strong with excellent command and deep knowledge, or not good. It's better to perform well on tunes that demonstrate your strengths.

If you spend money on producing your CD, spend it on getting the best possible players to accompany you. Although gaining recording studio experience is important, spending thousands of dollars on a big production is worthless if the playing is not strong. Of course it's important to spend time jamming with your friends and peers, but if you are in the very common situation of being the best jazz player in your school, do not hesitate to ask your teacher for recommendations on pro players who will make you sound your best. Although the faculty focus on each applicant's performance and try not to let the accompaniment affect their decision, many an audition has the added distraction of a bassist or pianist playing wrong changes, or a dragging/rushing drummer. If finding strong accompanists is impossible, a play-along recording from Jamey Aebersold or other sources is preferable. It's always best to demonstrate your interaction with fellow humans (after all, that's the basis of this music), but a well-balanced and well-recorded play-along audition is in my opinion far better than a distractingly poor live rhythm section.

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The CD package is also important. Again, no need to spend lots of money – just make the CD cover neat, readable and attractive. Be sure to include your name and contact information (unless the school requires that this information be omitted on the CD), with the correct order of tracks listed. Check the disc on a standard home CD player before it goes in the mail to be sure that it burned correctly! A blank or unreadable CD means extra work for the school in contacting applicants to re-send their audition… or worse, rejecting them out-of-hand without their ever knowing what happened.

The Live Audition

When you receive a call or letter inviting you to come to the campus for a live audition, that creates an important opportunity for you. Take advantage of your presence in the jazz program's building to check out classes, ensemble rehearsals, even private lessons if possible, as well as the overall atmosphere in the corridors. Learn about the housing situation, and try to get a tour that includes a meal in the cafeteria and a dormitory visit. If the audition day schedule makes these visits impossible, make every attempt to come back another day when you can accomplish this. (Note: most programs will welcome you at any time for a daylong visit to sit in on classes if you make an appointment. These have an advantage because you'll often get more personal attention than would be possible on a group audition date.) When you visit, ask yourself these questions: Will you be challenged by the classes and ensembles? Are you meeting students and faculty with whom you identify? Does the program repertoire reflect a broad focus from modernist to traditional, from small group to big band? How is the atmosphere: is it well organized and relaxed, or does it seem too rigid and regimented, or too loose and unfocused? Get to know the program's statistics: some students do better in a larger, more competitive environment, while others thrive in a smaller, more intimate situation. Similarly, some students want big-city surroundings, others prefer a campus setting, and others a combination of those.

The live audition session itself can be daunting, so the key is to be so well prepared that you are ready for practically anything. That confidence that "I'll be fine no matter what" will minimize the factor of nerves. There may be required repertoire, so consider the reasons behind the faculty's choice of requirements. For example, what are they looking for by asking everyone to play this same selection? Do your homework to understand the history of the tune through its famous recordings: important elements like introductions or endings, background or harmony parts often don't appear in fake book lead sheets, so the recordings are the true source. Be aware of any harmonic pitfalls such as quick key changes, or places in the progression where there are alternate or substitute harmonies you should know.

If there is a sight-reading requirement, there's only one way to practice for that – read new music every day. Song melodies from fake book anthologies are good practice, but jazz etude books by such people as Bob Mintzer, Jim Snidero, and Greg Fishman provide more challenging experience at multiple levels of difficulty.

Assuming you are allowed to pick a tune for the live audition, choose an "old friend" that is familiar and relaxing to play from memory – that hopefully did not appear on your audition CD. Have several possible backup selections along with your "Plan A" tunes, including a ballad as well as faster tempos, in case your choice is vetoed by the auditioners for any reason. Bring sheet music copies for your accompanists. Remember that you will usually be performing with faculty or advanced students that you are just meeting for the first time; they may play your selection using a different groove or tempo than you are accustomed to. To prepare, practice your tunes at widely varying speeds, all the way from walking ballad to up-tempo, and in a more traditional "swing" style as well as with a more modernist approach. If you are fully ready, you can "go with the flow" and really interact with your fellow musicians in the moment, rather than being flustered by unexpected elements they may add.

Either before you begin or when you finish playing, have some questions ready for the faculty, and be ready to briefly tell them about yourself. Use these few minutes as a chance to let them quickly get to know you personally as well as musically. Remember, it is not enough to be a great performer; they're looking for great people as well, ready to interact and fit into a variety of musically and culturally diverse situations.

A final live-audition note: don't be distracted by the apparent mood in the room as you enter; remember, that mood is a factor of the previous applicants, not you. The auditioners may be upbeat or businesslike, may be talkative or nearly silent and procedural, even a bit punchy and silly after sitting in that room for eight straight hours. Just go with it, as you would any situation meeting new people, remember that they're human too. Be ready to do your thing at the downbeat, and create your own mood!

Many of our William Paterson University jazz majors and alumni have told me that they look back on their audition and program selection process as a very positive time when they made important career decisions that have affected their lives. This advice on CD preparation and live auditions will hopefully help you gain awareness of the central issues, so that you are equipped to make these decisions. Good luck!

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