CONTEMPORARY BIG BAND MUSIC

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This study seeks to illuminate a largely unknown yet vibrant contemporary music scene, that of the big band, and distance this current scene from the nostalgia associated with the swing music of the 1930s and 1940s while respecting the depth of the ensemble’s history. Given the scarcity of academic research available in this area, interviews have been conducted with leading composers, bandleaders, performers, and educators in order to supplement the modest available research. These interviews form the foundation of the study, and are both quoted throughout and included in full in the Appendix. Rather than seeking to be a comprehensive investigation into the current big band scene, this study instead focuses on several issues that arose during the research and interview processes. These issues include the economics of running a big band and the effects of funding sources, the use of new media technologies for the dissemination of big band music, the role of the university system in big band and jazz music, and the connection between the ensemble and musical conservatism. The study concludes with a survey and analysis of six big band charts written by living composers in order to explore the music itself, complementing the exploration of the scene.
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PREFACE

The contemporary big band scene occupies a very small niche within the global music community, and yet within this microcosm there exists a surprisingly diverse number of musical approaches. Current big band composers utilize styles and techniques from an incredible variety of sources, and a small but dedicated audience has helped the scene thrive in the last couple of decades in a way it never has before. Despite the recent success of many ensembles, an often more sophisticated approach to composition, and a higher standing within the jazz community, there is little academic research available on the topic. Having spent a significant amount of time living on both coasts in or near the two largest centers of big band music, New York and Los Angeles, and having interacted with many of the key figures in the current scene, I found myself in a privileged position to conduct this much needed research.

Over the course of several years, I interviewed prominent big band composers, leaders, players, and educators, as well as some leaders of smaller regional bands. Care has been taken to assure a representative mix of interviewees in terms of location, background, affiliation and/or non-affiliation with the university system, race, and gender. The interviews consist of questions pertaining to the personal background of each interviewee and how they became involved in the big band scene, and specific questions related to several issues that form the basis of the dissertation chapters, outlined below. The interviews are presented in full in the Appendix, and will be cited throughout the study
Chapter 1 begins by defining the standard instrumentation of the ensemble. It includes a description of the types of bands currently active, which include professional big bands, university ensembles, reading bands, legacy bands, and recording bands. Professional and university ensembles will form the majority of the groups engaged by the study, as these two types of big band are most frequently the sites of contemporary big band music. After a review of the current scholarship available, the remainder of the chapter is dedicated to the economic issues that arise when attempting to fund a large ensemble, and what impacts the lack or presence of funding (and the source of this funding) might have on various bands and their music.

Chapter 2 addresses media technologies used in the dissemination of big band music, and particularly the difference between the models used by big bands of the 1930s and 1940s and those employed by current bands. The earlier bands relied on a broadcast model, and this one-to-many approach only allows for a select few creators to gain a large audience. This created a situation with a few bands in New York becoming incredibly successful to the detriment of the territory bands. So even at the height of its popularity, there were fewer big bands working than before or after. The spreadable model employed by contemporary bands, in which media is spread among people via social networks, allows for more variation, and in fact encourages a plurality of styles. Such diverse approaches are not supported in a broadcast model, which seeks to attract mass audiences. The ease of sharing media through social networks allows niche music like that of big bands to be spread among more people. Relevant issues connected to the spreadable model are
discussed, including participatory culture, the inequality of access to social
networks, and various approaches to financial reward when content is often spread
freely.

The role of the university system in the proliferation of big bands and its
effect on them is discussed in chapter 3. Almost all current big band composers
studied jazz in the university, and this has had a significant impact on both the
ensemble and the music written for it. The trend in recent years shows big band
charts becoming much more harmonically sophisticated, but often at the cost of the
swing feel and the sonic power that can be achieved through simpler harmonies
played at higher volumes. The big band’s move into the university (along with the
majority of jazz) also influenced a shift in demographics, with many more white
musicians getting involved in the scene while their black counterparts became much
more scarce. Additionally, in recent years more women have become involved in the
big band scene, and this is likely in part due to their increased presence in the
university system.

Chapter 4 deals with the connection between big bands (or at least the
popular image of them) and musical conservatism. The rough definition of musical
conservatism in this case refers to a musician or band that either plays older tunes
exclusively, or play in an older style. There is a debate in the jazz community
concerning the validity of many styles of jazz after the hard bop of the 1960s,
particularly styles incorporating rock influences. Wynton Marsalis has become
somewhat of a figurehead in this discussion, and the chapter includes discussion of
his role with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, as well as his involvement in the
Ken Burns documentary, *Jazz*. Additionally, an in-depth comparison is made between the JLCO and the Mingus Big Band’s approach to playing Mingus’ music, comparing each band’s recording of the tune “Dizzy Moods.”

The final chapter contains analysis of six representative charts in the contemporary big band repertory in an effort to show the diversity of approaches to the ensemble in the current scene. The charts included are “Beads” by Carla Bley, “The Pretty Road” by Maria Schneider, “Lickety Split” by Jim McNeely, “March Sublime” by Alan Ferber, and “Brooklyn Babylon 1. The Neighborhood” by Darcy James Argue.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCING THE ENSEMBLE & A REVIEW OF EXISTING BIG BAND SCHOLARSHIP

The contemporary big band scene contains an incredible variety of musical voices with a multitude of approaches to writing for the ensemble. Younger composers are crafting new sounds and textures for this well-worn ensemble, proving that far more can be done with this nimble assortment of instruments. Despite the numerous thriving big band scenes in the United States and parts of Europe, many erroneous assumptions and conclusions have been made pertaining to the music of big bands and the state of the current scene. The ensemble has been so closely tied to the swing music of the late 1930s and 1940s that the term “big band” is often used as more of a genre marker than as an indication of the performing forces in use. Modern bands defy genre classification, and in fact there are at least as many bands currently active and as many albums being released as there were during the heyday of the ensemble. What is true is that the music is not nearly as popular, and the functional purpose of the ensemble has changed from providing music for dance to more serious concert functions. Writing in 1972, Jim Szantor explains the decline in popularity of big band music:

“What, then, decimated the ranks? Band singers gave rise to the age of the vocalist; there was bebop and resultant trends to small groups; television and maybe just plain changing public taste. There are other reasons, of course. Johnny came marching home from war and wanted to spend some time at the hearth. Thus, the ballrooms, clubs, and movie theaters all gave way to the electronic age, which seems to be further expanding with cable and cassette TV. Also, the increase in the quality of phonograph records and equipment may be partially to ‘blame.’ If the medium had not advanced as it has, people might be going out a little more often to hear the real thing in person.”¹
The move away from live entertainment is certainly a large factor in the decrease in popularity of the bands, but the emergence of bebop as an alternative can hardly be blamed. Bebop has never been widely popular, and its more angular, aggressive style and increasingly complex chord changes were in fact absorbed into the big band tradition. If the bebop style had anything to do with the fall of the big bands, it was due to its inclusion in new big band music. The rise of the singer, concurrent with a recording fiasco perpetrated by the musician’s union, may also have had a significant impact. George Simon described this in a 1977 *Down Beat* article, in which he argued that the recording ban by the musicians’ union (which mostly represented instrumentalists) in 1942 did nothing to stop studios from continuing to record. Instead, they simply hired the singers that had previously been promoted by the big bands, this time recording with vocal groups rather than instrumental ones. After the ban was lifted in 1944, there was a small resurgence in popularity, but by then big band style had begun to shift away from danceable tunes to a more concert oriented style. Without the regular dance gigs, running a big band was no longer economically viable in most cases. Album sales and what concert attendance remained was simply not enough to support all of the bands active at that time. The late 1940s and 1950s are generally viewed as the low point in the history of the ensemble, both in terms of popularity and the number of bands working.

Essentially, the death of the big bands would more accurately be called the death of the dance bands. Many involved in the current scene express optimism regarding the future of the ensemble. In their book, *Jazz Composition and Arranging*
in the Digital Age, Richard Sussman and Michael Abene argue that although big band musicians are not making large sums of money from participating in the scene, there are thriving big bands in virtually every city and many smaller towns.³ It is important to note that musicians have kept this ensemble alive despite the fact that there is no major money to be earned in it. It has become a connoisseur’s ensemble, and attracts more sophisticated writers who want to explore the possibilities and intricacies of a large group. That being said, big band leaders remain active in trying to promote the ensemble to a wider audience. In a letter to the editor in Down Beat, big band leader Bob Mintzer writes:

“Big bands are alive and well, albeit in a different form than previous days when bands could tour all year and make great strides in the music. University big bands are making great strides as vehicles for talented young players and writers alike. The radio bands of Europe are recording compelling specialty projects with jazz greats on a regular basis. There are countless big bands springing up around the world with aspiring young composers and players. I’ve worked with many of them. There are other bands that have cultivated a sound and style through years of perseverance, determination and consistent personnel. I’m particularly referring to the Bill Holman Big Band, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, Clayton–Hamilton Jazz Orchestra and my own band. Please support these organizations through buying their CDs and attending their concerts.”⁴

The ensemble has had a tenuous existence for decades, but there is no sign of its imminent disappearance.

**Defining the Ensemble and Parameters of the Project**

For the purposes of this project, a big band is defined as a 14-18 piece ensemble consisting of 5 saxophones (2 altos, 2 tenors, 1 baritone), 3-4 trumpets, 3-4 trombones (2-3 tenors and 1 bass), guitar, piano, bass, and drums. Some groups omit either the guitar or piano from the rhythm section, while others add a
percussionist in addition to the drummer. Most contemporary big band composers also make frequent use of instrument doubling. There is an undocumented tradition of typical instrument doubles that can be expected in a big band setting (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Standard Doubles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alto Sax</td>
<td>Soprano Sax, Flute, Oboe (uncommon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenor Sax</td>
<td>Clarinet, Flute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baritone Sax</td>
<td>Bass Clarinet, Flute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trumpet</td>
<td>Flugelhorn, Cornet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trombone</td>
<td>Euphonium (uncommon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass Trombone</td>
<td>Tuba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*table 1: typical big band doubles*

There are other doubles frequently used in certain bands (e.g. cimbasso and Electronic Wind Instrument in the Westdeuscher Rundfunk Big Band), but these are dependent on the individual players and cannot be expected in a general setting.

Medium sized ensembles (sometimes referred to as “little big bands”), such as septets, octets, and nonets will not be included, except as background information in the case that a big band chart originated in a medium sized ensemble (as is the case in some of Alan Ferber’s big band compositions). Large jazz ensembles consisting of dramatically different instrumentations (e.g. Michael Brecker’s quindecetet from *Wide Angles*) will also be excluded, as the relationship among the instruments and scoring is significantly different in these groups.

In terms of scope, this study will focus on the period beginning with the resurgence of big bands in the 1990s, particularly after the landmark release of Maria Schneider’s first album, *Evanescence*, in 1994, and continue to the present day, with a particular focus on the current scene and related issues. Geographically, the focus will be on the two largest producers of big band music, the United States
and Western Europe. Latin big bands will not be included in the project for several reasons. These bands have developed along a different lineage and have their own set of relevant issues that do not always correspond with the rest of the big band scene. Big bands led by vocalists will also be excluded, as they too have evolved along a different path.

**Types of Bands Currently Active**

For the purposes of this study, active big bands will be divided into five general categories (although it should be noted that these categories are fluid): rehearsal bands, studio bands, repertory bands, working bands, and school bands. Each plays an important and distinct role in the modern big band scene.

**Rehearsal Bands**

Rehearsal bands offer musicians a chance to network with one another, keep players’ reading and improvising chops fresh, and provide opportunities for composers to hear their works performed. The term “rehearsal band” is actually a misnomer, as these bands do not generally rehearse tunes. Rather, the bands usually meet weekly and read through a combination of standard arrangements and new tunes written by composers who typically play in the band. Although rehearsal bands are generally viewed as inconsequential to the overall big band scene, in fact they are very important sites for sharing the love and excitement that many feel towards the ensemble. They frequently offer amateurs the experience of playing with professionals, and this experience helps grow the ensemble’s niche fan base.
Historically, rehearsal bands have also helped to connect various highpoints in big band output, particularly during the low following the fall of dance bands, and the low point between the first resurgence in the 1970s and the second resurgence in the 1990s.

**Studio Bands**

Studio bands were also an important connective tissue, especially in the 1960s. Alex Stewart clarifies:

“Studio bands were among the most important entities for the propagation of orchestral jazz after the decline of the full-time bands. Most were assembled for specific recording projects and had no life outside the recording studio. A look at the personnel on these sessions reveals the same names cropping up time and time again – players with similar competencies who were accustomed to working together and thus required little or no rehearsal time. Composer-arrangers such as Oliver Nelson, Nelson Riddle, Henry Mancini, Gerald Wilson, Billy May, and Quincy Jones relied on these networks of musicians to produce their albums of big band jazz in the 1950s and 1960s. Their style of writing usually adhered to certain conventions of phrasing, articulation, and swing that facilitated recording. As described by the players, ‘the charts played themselves.’ This form of praise signified that the music flowed naturally and presented little in the way of pretentiousness or artifice. Unlike writing that demanded extensive rehearsals and frequent performance, this style was matched to the competencies and conventions of the collaborative art worlds that performed it.”

Stewart does overstate the stylistic simplicities of music written for studio bands, as many were the first to incorporate bebop and other styles not usually heard in prior big band arrangements.

The 1960s is generally known as the last golden age of studio recording in New York City. According to Kenny Berger, most top performers would book three recording sessions per day, each session typically lasting three hours. These performers would be required to play in any style at any time, so they had to be
nimble and well versed in many types of music. Much of the music recorded was commercial in nature, so the musicians relished any opportunity to play serious music.

One jazz composer who took advantage of this situation was Oliver Nelson. Nelson had a history playing with big bands, and was a well-known composer for film and television. The big band music he recorded in New York in the 1960s combined various styles and made high demands of the players. Because of this, he put together bands made mostly of friends who he knew would be able to interpret his arrangements quickly and perform them well under pressure. In the liner notes to an Oliver Nelson big band compilation, Kenny Berger notes that the bands on Nelson's sessions were not bands that played weekly live gigs, and never rehearsed before a session. Because many of the parts contained highly difficult passages, Nelson had to hire players he knew were capable of not only reading the charts well, but who could also match styles and interpretation. For this reason, Nelson often used the same players on multiple sessions over many years, and this consistency allowed him to write solo and ensemble parts with individual players in mind, much in the way Duke Ellington did.

A jazz composer who utilized the studio system quite differently in the 1970s was Charles Tolliver. Tolliver had been a small group player, and while he achieved some success, he found it difficult to get studio time with Blue Note Records. Because of this, Tolliver and Stanley Cowell started their own label, Strata-East. Tolliver decided that the first release of his new record label should be a big band. Tolliver had previously written some big band charts for Gerald Wilson's orchestra,
and thought that the larger format would help draw attention to the release. The concept behind Tolliver's album was notably different from earlier approaches to big band writing. In this case, the big band would frame his quartet. While all the tunes contained the typical ensemble parts, only members of the quartet took solos. This served a dual purpose of making the record stand out while capitalizing on the cachet of a small group record. The band never performed live, because Tolliver and Cowell lacked the major financial backing needed to tour. Tolliver claims that he and Cowell never had any ambitions to tour with the band, and that the album was simply to satisfy their own desires to write and record with the ensemble. Although Tolliver performed in small groups for the next several decades, he assembled a big band again in 2006, and has released two albums with his new band.

Television shows have incorporated big bands into their programming since the birth of the medium. Many of the late night shows employed a big band, the longest running of these being Doc Severinsen's Tonight Show Band. Beginning in the 1960s, many television soundtracks, including Ironside, Columbo, and Hawaii Five-O, utilized a big band with a small string section. Although the ensemble’s popularity in television music declined in the 1980s and 1990s, recent television productions – Family Guy and American Dad in particular – have used big bands as an integral part of the soundtrack. The band for these shows, led by Walter Murphy, consists of top studio professionals who also play in many of the Los Angeles area big bands. Murphy’s background includes several years as the arranger for Doc Severinsen and the Tonight Show Band. While the band has maintained a relatively stable roster since it’s inception in 1999, and the shows have become quite popular,
this band represents an anomaly. Further, the band functions less like a contemporary big band and more like a Broadway pit orchestra.

Another band that started as a studio project, but eventually transformed into a working band was led by Toshiko Akiyoshi and Lew Tabackin. According to Leonard Feather, like the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra in New York, it had a dual leadership, and contained mostly studio jazz musicians looking for an opportunity to play music that was not commercial in nature. Akiyoshi originally wanted to start a big band in New York, but the cost of renting a rehearsal space prohibited the venture. When Tabackin was hired for the Tonight Show Band in Los Angeles, Akiyoshi began working on big band charts for a band to be started there, where rehearsal spaces were (and still are) more affordable. After the success of her first two studio albums, *Kogun* and *Long Yellow Road*, Akiyoshi and Tabackin began slowly booking tour dates for the band, and in a short amount of time the studio band became a working band on the success of its albums.

**Working Bands**

Working bands make up the smallest portion of currently active big bands. For a band to be considered a proper working band, it must either tour regularly or have an established weekly gig. Working bands are typically subdivided into road bands and bands that have a residency at a jazz club or other venue. Although road bands are increasingly rare, there were several groups in the 1960s and 1970s that toured frequently. The most significant of these were the Woody Herman, Buddy Rich, Count Basie, Toshiko Akiyoshi/Lew Tabackin, and Stan Kenton bands.
Herman’s band was one of the few that were consistently on the road throughout the low period that began in the 1950s. After several live recording fiascos and not being able to sign with a major label in the 1950s, Herman approached Mercury, and found support from Jack Tracy. Tracy stated that he received permission to sign Herman from Mercury president, Irv Green, on the condition that he did not do any big band recordings, given the high expense. Tracy recorded several quartet albums, but after hearing the big band live was convinced to record them. He was informed that if he went “over budget on this, it’s your ass.”¹¹ The initial record sold well enough that the label signed the band to three more albums. In a 2010 interview with *Down Beat*, John Fedchock shared his thoughts on the Herman band from this period. Fedchock worked with Herman for seven years, serving as his chief arranger and musical director, so he was quite familiar with the various incarnations of the band. He claims that the inclusion of bebop and hard bop in both the solos and charts, as well as the cohesiveness of the players, made the band “plain scary.”¹² Herman was able to keep his band fresh in this way, adapting the vocabulary of bebop and hard bop to the large group format.

Other bandleaders in the 1960s and 1970s used various approaches to keep their bands on the road. Stan Kenton’s band played at universities, attracting younger audiences. Kenton also approached the big band with more of an ensemble focus. Writing in 1979, John McDonough commented on the difference of Kenton’s approach, remarking that Kenton’s approach was similar to Ellington’s, in that it focused on ensemble unity rather than using the sections as backdrops for a series of solos.¹³ While there was certainly room for improvisation in Kenton’s band, the
focus was on large ensemble sound (which often included extra trombones, trumpets, tuba, and French horn), while Herman’s band retained a more traditional instrumentation and used arrangements as vehicles for individual improvisation. The Basie band of the 1960s and 1970s lacked a unified direction, with an assortment of different composers and arrangers providing tunes for the band. That being said, most of the tunes incorporated the Basie style, with simple textures and a basis primarily in the blues. The success of the Buddy Rich band was due chiefly to its aggressive playing style and Rich’s technical prowess. In his article, “Some Straight Talk about Big Bands,” Jim Szantor commented that in the case of the Buddy Rich band, “the leader’s dynamism and charisma are perhaps the only reason the band got off the ground.”

The two most prominent working bands with established gigs in the late 1960s through the 1980s were Doc Severinsen’s Tonight Show Band and the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra. The Tonight Show band became a staple of the Johnny Carson-era version of the popular late night television program, and many of the players on the band also worked with Buddy Rich, Woody Herman, and Toshiko Akiyoshi. The Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, established in the mid-1960s, began as a rehearsal band to read new arrangements by Jones. The band eventually secured a regular Monday night gig at the Village Vanguard, and became an almost instant success due to the quality of Jones’ compositions and arrangements and the unique approach to ensemble textures. Jones and Lewis insisted that each player maintain their own individual sound, and the consistent roster of the band allowed them to create a unique blend of texture made up of personal timbres. In Szantor’s
1979 article, he argued that although Jones for the most part utilized the basic format of a big band chart, his innovations in voicing and melodic construction proved that there was still room for progress within the traditional big band chart.\textsuperscript{15}

After the departure of Jones and the death of Lewis, the band continued as the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. For a few years, the band lacked direction, until Jim McNeely accepted the position of resident composer. McNeely has continued the tradition of innovative arrangements and a similar approach to ensemble textures that had defined the band for decades. The current VJO is more of a combination of a studio band and a rehearsal band, with the band reading charts each week and trying out new compositions by McNeely. Once the band is comfortable with a new set of charts, they will record them for a new album. This approach has both strengths and significant drawbacks. At any given performance, there can be both the excitement of a band reading new compositions, but also a possible lack of precision that comes with a well-rehearsed band.

\textbf{School Bands}

Many big band players moved into education in the 1950s and 1960s when regular big band work became more scarce, and this began a trend in which all forms of jazz became much more prominent in the school and university system. This has benefitted jazz in general, and helped younger players learn various styles and begin to establish networks. According to Alex Stewart, “School bands have helped to structure the social networks of New York City big bands as bonds among players often lead to lasting professional relationships.”\textsuperscript{16} This has been the case not
only in New York City, but in other urban areas as well. The university system has also provided an outlet for jazz composers and arrangers, and in fact many of the current leading arrangers are tenured professors at major universities. Arrangers and composers frequently have their works recorded by university big bands, many of which release albums on a yearly basis. The ensemble’s relationship with the university system and the resulting musical and cultural changes will be discussed in a separate chapter.

**Repertory Bands**

As the name would imply, repertory bands perform canonical big band compositions. Many of these bands focus on swing era music and appeal to a certain nostalgia associated with the ensemble. Repertory bands are different from other types of big bands in that many not only perform strictly older compositions, but also often attempt to mimic the original source exactly. In some cases, performers play transcribed solos from swing era musicians. Many of these bands are not really considered jazz bands, as they are missing one of the most important elements in jazz – improvisation. Some repertory band members consider the groups show bands rather than jazz bands. These bands will be discussed in more detail in the chapter concerning conservatism in big band music.

**The Current State of Big Band Scholarship**

As jazz scholarship began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s, it became clear that small groups were viewed as the vehicles for the most significant advances in
the genre. This assumption was perhaps due to the decline in the popularity of big bands in the late 1940s that followed a decline in the sophistication of the music. The tremendous success of the bands of the 1930s inspired many imitators who aimed to attract larger audiences – the sophistication of the Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman bands became the bland simplicity of the Glenn Miller band. At the same time, small groups were the center of important advances in jazz style, creating the bebop, cool, and hard bop styles all within a decade. In the mid to late 1950s, when jazz studies was beginning to become a legitimate part of the university music system, not only were big bands at their lowest point, but some of the most revered small group recordings were being made. In New York, Miles Davis was leading his first great quintet (which included John Coltrane on tenor saxophone, Red Garland on piano, Paul Chambers on bass, and Philly Joe Jones on drums) and Art Blakey had just started the Jazz Messengers with Horace Silver, while on the West coast Clifford Brown and Max Roach (along with Sonny Rollins on tenor saxophone, Richie Powell on piano, and George Morrow on bass) were recording their seminal albums. This environment permeated the beginnings of jazz scholarship, and in many ways still shapes it today.

This focus on the small group by jazz scholars as the most fertile area of innovation may result from a bias toward certain aspects of jazz. Alex Stewart comments that this may have something to do with an implied philosophical stance that has become increasingly popular:

“Contributing to the marginalization of orchestral jazz has been the tendency of jazz writers and scholars to prioritize characteristics, such as improvisation and swing, that clearly differentiate jazz from classical music. From the earliest years of jazz, emphasis on its ‘otherness’ has extolled the
oral mode over written texts, the ‘freedom’ of small group over the ‘regimentation’ of the large group, the spontaneity of improvisation over the fixedness of the composition.” \(^{17}\)

Because music performed by a larger number of musicians must necessarily contain more prewritten sections, the role of improvisation is often overlooked. Likewise, the approach to ensemble textures – with bands typically attempting to achieve a cohesive sound that does not deny the individuality of each member – has been ignored by scholars, who seem to believe that individual sounds are subsumed into the larger texture.

Much of the big band scholarship that does exist comes from disciplines outside of jazz. Historians have studied the cultural aspects of jazz, as in Lewis Erenberg’s book, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*. \(^{18}\) Erenberg is admittedly not a musician, and while his historical and cultural analyses provide insight into the period of the early big bands, his occasional forays into musical analysis (or rather musical description) are lacking in any precision or sophistication. Scholars in the field of African American Studies have also provided valuable insight into the early big bands, although the subject matter is overwhelmingly the Duke Ellington band. The importance of Ellington’s band cannot be overstated, but there are several other bands of the period that had at least as much influence on later big bands (particularly those of Benny Goodman and Count Basie). Ellington’s position as a cultural icon is likely the reason for his seeming monopoly of what is essentially cultural (more so than musical) research. For instance, Harvey Cohen’s article, “The Marketing of Duke Ellington: Setting the Strategy for an African American Maestro,” published in *The Journal of African
American History, illuminates the particular racial challenges in selling Ellington’s music to a wider audience. David Metzer’s “Shadow Play: the Spiritual in Duke Ellington’s Black and Tan Fantasy,” too, is more a study of the spiritual’s continuing place in black culture than it is a study of the music itself or the ensemble. These studies in culture are certainly valid and much needed, but the big band is only a side note; it just happens to be the ensemble utilized by Ellington. A notable exception is Wolfram Knauer’s “‘Simulated Improvisation’ in Duke Ellington’s Black, Brown, and Beige,” in which he details how Ellington scored the arrangements in such a way to give an improvisatory feel to a highly organized and pre-composed work. The real problem with this research in terms of the current project is that it all posits big band, either implicitly or explicitly, as a singular period in music that existed only in the past, ignoring the long and rich history of the ensemble that continues onward.

Scholarship of a more practical sort is found in the field of music education. Articles such as Andrew Goodrich’s “Peer Mentoring in a High School Jazz Ensemble,” published in the Journal of Research in Music Education, touch on important issues in big band (apprenticeship in this case), but do so in a practical sense so that teachers may implement the principles into daily rehearsals. The compendium, Teaching Music Through Performance in Jazz, offers many articles on jazz education from leading jazz artists, and background, performance tips, and analysis of 65 big band charts. Again, the analysis and background in this case is tailored toward educators, with the analysis being more of a description of musical events that allows a director to decide whether or not the piece in question will
work with his or her band. In terms of analysis, the only real source with any depth is the text by Rayburn Wright, titled *Inside the Score: a detailed analysis of 8 classic jazz ensemble charts by Sammy Nestico, Thad Jones, and Bob Brookmeyer.* While this text is clearly an attempt to sell more charts (since the book and the scores are all published by Kendor), it is also the most in-depth analysis of any big band charts currently published, and will provide some of the foundations and techniques for analysis utilized in this study.

The only proper scholarship concerning contemporary big bands is musicologist Alex Stewart's book, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz* (and a related article published in *Ethnomusicology*), which documents the New York big band scene in the 1990s. Stewart offers many sound insights into the big band world of New York, and his work covers a number of relevant topics in detail, including repertory orchestras, styles ranging from conservative to avant-garde, women in jazz, and the musical personalities of several prominent big band composers. His work, however, does not explore some key issues. Perhaps the largest is the role of the university in contemporary big bands. It is quite possible that Stewart intentionally avoided this issue, as his work primarily focused on professionals. However, most of the professionals he included not only worked in the university system, but many of them were a product of it (some, in fact, the first generation to learn jazz in this way). Also, his own entry into the New York scene came via connections formed through local universities. It is curious that he decided not to explore this aspect of the scene, but it was perhaps too large a topic to add. His analysis is also lacking in depth, although he only used the analytical sections to
illustrate the differing musical personalities of the composers he profiled. It is also
difficult to know what copyright issues may have prevented him (and others) from
deeper analysis. Regardless, his techniques and approaches, as well as the areas he
chose not to explore, will certainly inform the present project.

Although there has been a lack of engagement with big band music in
academic publications, there have been several jazz magazines to cover big band
music, including *Metronome, Jazz Times*, and most notably, *Down Beat* magazine.
Since the decline of the big bands in the late 1940s and 1950s, *Down Beat* has been
the primary source for big band articles, mostly written by a small group of
dedicatees. One of the early regular writers about big band was Leonard Feather,
who was an editor at *Metronome*, jazz critic for the Los Angeles Times, and regular
contributor to *Down Beat*. Feather also released a series of records titled *Leonard
Feather's Encyclopedia of Jazz*, the first volume featuring big band works by Oliver
Nelson. His colleague, Jim Szantor, also wrote several articles about big bands in the
1970s, including the previously referenced piece titled “Some Straight Talk about
Big Bands,” published in the April 1972 issue, in which he outlines some of the
problems with big bands of that era, as well as new currents and meditations on the
future of the ensemble.26 One of the primary champions of contemporary big band
music is John McDonough, who has been a contributing editor for *Down Beat*
magazine since 1968. McDonough’s articles have anticipated many of the trends that
have helped the ensemble survive, including a piece on the Stan Kenton band in
1979 in which he praises Kenton’s multifaceted approach in connecting with fans.27
Recent *Down Beat* writers contributing articles on contemporary big bands include Dan Ouellette, who has written articles on Maria Schneider, the Mingus Big Band, Wynton Marsalis, and Monika Roscher; Ted Panken, who has contributed articles on older musicians making new contributions in big band, including Toshiko Akiyoshi and Dave Holland; and Howard Mandel, who has written about new media technologies and composers’ utilization of these technologies to spread their music. In particular, Mandel has written about Darcy James Argue’s use of blogs, email, Facebook, and Twitter to engage his fans directly, essentially continuing the work McDonough began with the Stan Kenton band decades earlier.28

**Economic Challenges**

Large ensembles naturally face economic challenges, and given the niche appeal of contemporary big band music, maintaining a professional ensemble is a difficult task. However, according to John Clayton, co-leader of the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra, funding a professional big band is no more difficult in present times than it was in the 1930s.29 In fact, it would appear that low points in the American economy seem to correspond with an increased level of big band activity and output. A potential reason for this is that in times when there is less work available for performing musicians, players are more willing to take low paying gigs that offer the benefit of building networks, given the large number of musicians involved. When compared to small group jazz gigs, the big band also offers wind players the opportunity to network with people who play their own instrument. This opportunity is not typically present in small group gigs, where there is rarely more
than one of each type of wind instrument. Further quantitative research is needed in order to objectively verify this trend, accounting for several statistical issues, including the number of professional bands active, the frequency of performances of each band, the number of recordings released during a given period, etc. It should also be noted that there are many other factors that contribute to the ensemble’s level of popularity.

The inability of the ensemble to generate enough revenue to provide the primary financial support of all of its members also creates more vibrant scenes in areas with a strong presence of alternate forms of performance work. In the United States, the cities with the most prevalent big band scenes are New York and Los Angeles. Both of these cities have their own industries that draw musicians and give them the financial backing that allows them to participate in ensembles for enjoyment that do not offer high compensation. In New York, there are Broadway shows, recording gigs, and a large number of venues for small group gigs. When I spoke to New York based composer Alan Ferber, he stated that his compositional output increased while playing for a touring Broadway production. Playing the same show on a daily basis can become somewhat monotonous, and most show performers seek creative outlets during their off time. For Ferber, composing became an important outlet – “therapy,” as he called it – and he was able to enlist the help of other performers from the show who were also looking for a chance to do something different.30 The Los Angeles scene is primarily supported by the film, television, and video game music industries. In an article for Down Beat magazine in 2004, Josef Woodard noted that Los Angeles based Gordon Goodwin’s Big Phat Band
“is made possible by the gainful employment of the mainstream entertainment industry.” Goodwin stated that although he wanted to start a big band for years, he had put it off in order to focus on his more lucrative film and television projects. Like Ferber, his desire to create something outside of his day-to-day work eventually led to the founding of the Big Phat Band. According to Woodard, the members of the band have two musical lives, one in the commercial recording industry and the other performing music they find personally rewarding. There are other cities in the United States that have large enough populations to support a big band scene, but without these other supporting industries many are unable to attract enough working jazz performers.

Several countries in Europe have widespread thriving big band scenes without as large a presence of other performance industries, and they are able to do so because of government and radio sponsorships of big bands (among other ensembles). German expatriate Chris Walden commented in a 2007 interview with Down Beat magazine that although the United States is the birthplace of big bands, Europeans have been adding their voice to the ensemble over the past several decades. Walden notes that although the European bands are still viewed as secondary to their American counterparts, they do not struggle as much with financial issues thanks to the available funding. While Walden is generally correct about the comparatively generous funding of European big bands, it should be noted that maintaining government sponsorship is not entirely certain. One of the most famous European big bands, the Vienna Art Orchestra, suffered from decreased funding following the world financial downturn in 2008, and finally disbanded in
2010, after 33 years in existence and releasing 36 albums. If a group as well known and successful as the Vienna Art Orchestra can lose funding, it is clear that public funding does not provide the complete safety that some might imply.

In the United States, where public funding for the arts in general is relatively sparse, many bandleaders personally provide all of the funding for their ensembles. In a 2007 interview with *Down Beat* magazine, John Clayton stated that most of the funding for the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra comes from arranging and touring with Diana Krall, as well as a number of small band gigs and teaching jobs outside of his full-time position at the University of Southern California.³⁴ Likewise, when I interviewed Nate Kimball, he stated that the funding of his recent album, *Gaea*, came from a number of different sources, including grants, sheet music sales, and real estate commissions.³⁵ U.S. bandleaders often must make many personal sacrifices in order to fund their ensembles. Darcy James Argue pointed out to me that there are both positive and negative aspects to this situation. The “romanticization of the starving artist,” as he puts it, has a negative impact on the arts. He states that artists should not suffer, and suffering does not have a positive impact on an artist’s work. However, he does find inspiration from the sacrifices being made by bandleaders:

“[T]here’s something to the idea of people who believe in something so strongly that they are willing to make personal sacrifices in order to make it happen, and big band is kind of the epitome of that. There’s no one who’s doing this who isn’t fully committed to the idea of big band as a contemporary venue, as a setting for contemporary music, and to me that’s so exciting that there are people who believe in it so strongly.”³⁶

This extreme dedication to creating contemporary music for the ensemble and willingness to make many sacrifices to do so is shared by most, if not all, bandleaders in the United States. One might wonder what about the ensemble
would trigger this level of dedication. Alan Ferber’s description to me of his big band’s first gig provides an answer that many other leaders have echoed. Ferber described the high associated with hearing his music played by the ensemble, and he compared the addictiveness of this feeling to a bad drug – there is no money or fame to be found in leading a big band, but the feeling alone is worth the hard work and long hours.\(^{37}\) Gordon Goodwin echoes Ferber, suggesting that the lack of funding in the United States means that the musicians involved are pursuing the music for strictly artistic reasons rather than seeking financial gain. He states, “My band members make a lot of sacrifices to play this music. There’s something about 18 guys pulling on the same end of a rope that’s its own compensation.”\(^{38}\)

In my interview with Darcy James Argue, he noted that the musicians in many American big bands play essentially as a favor to the bandleader.\(^{39}\) This results in bands with very distinct musical personalities that emanate from the bandleader/composer, as most working bands only have one or two primary composers. This is in contrast to the homogenization of big band styles that occurred in the late 1930s and early 1940s, a time when musicians from popular bands were able to make a living touring. Courting a larger audience for financial rewards meant that bands were primarily concerned with maintaining their popularity. The niche appeal of modern bands creates a scene in which unique personal expression is the ultimate goal and reward.

The presence of full funding has had varied effects on big bands in Europe and the United States, in large part due to cultural differences. The majority of European big bands receive government sponsorship, and it has allowed them the
security to create much more experimental music. The Monika Roscher Big Band incorporates electronic instruments, drum machines, and popular music-inspired vocals processed with effects. Jazz Bigband Graz's 2009 release, *Electric Poetry and Lo-Fi Cookies*, takes the implementation of electronics and effects a step further, using studio effects to essentially remix and rework the sounds of the band into music that is essentially disconnected with the stylistic tradition of the ensemble. In the United States, the only bands to receive this level of funding are the military big bands (most notably the Airmen of Note) and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. In contrast to their European counterparts, these bands tend to have musically conservative tendencies. The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in particular is known for its conservative agenda, ignoring most musical developments in jazz after the hard bop of the 1950s and modeling itself after the Duke Ellington band. The band was introduced in 1988 during a series of concerts that were even labeled “Classical Jazz.” This association with classical music in the United States mirrors the conservatism within the classical music scene. It is difficult to place a direct relationship between funding in the United States and musical conservatism, but trends certainly seem to suggest a connection.
Despite the economic difficulties in maintaining a big band, the community of individuals who continue to write and perform in these ensembles remains dedicated to creating innovative new music. One outside influence has not only made it easier to get this music out to its audience, but has had an impact on Western culture and in some ways encouraged the acceptance of these many different voices: new media technologies.
CHAPTER 2: METHODS OF DISSEMINATION
& THEIR EFFECTS ON THE MUSIC

In his famous book, *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan stated that the “medium is the message,” meaning that any medium for the dissemination of media texts will have an effect on the texts themselves.\(^1\) This is certainly the case with big band music, both in the early years of popularity and in the current scene. As stated earlier, the economic situation in the United States was similar in both the early to mid 1930s during the Great Depression and in the post-2008 recession, with most people facing economic hardship and limited employment. Maintaining a big band in such tough economies is a difficult enterprise, and in both cases big bands made use of new technologies for dissemination to foster the tradition. Although the current level of popularity of big bands certainly does not approach their popularity in the early 1930s, the niche approach of big band leaders and the pluralism encouraged by online circulation nonetheless keeps more groups working than in the heyday of big bands. The differences in the technologies used for dissemination – radio in the 1930s and the internet in the current scene – have had an impact not only on the number of bands working, but the musical styles employed by composers and bandleaders.

**Distribution vs. Circulation**

In their book, *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green posit that we are amidst a change in the model of dissemination of media content,
from a broadcast model to a spreadable one. This change can be represented by two types of stage lighting: the spotlight and the scoop light. The spotlight focuses attention on a single subject, with a clearly defined boundary between who or what is illuminated, while everything else is in darkness. One is clearly either in the spotlight or not. The scoop light casts a softer diffused light over a larger area, with a much less defined boundary. Radio, like other broadcast media, is like the spotlight in that it utilizes a one-to-many approach. This is also sometimes referred to as the stickiness model – content is available from a single source, and the hope is that if it is compelling to a mass audience, people will come to this single source. The spreadable model is like the scoop light in that the way media spreads is fueled by the actions of fan communities. The relationships between content producers and audience members are also drastically changed in the spreadable model. Jenkins and his colleagues elaborate, stating that the roles of producer, marketer, and audience are quite clear and separate in the stickiness model. In the spreadable model, however, there is a blurring of the distinctions and often collaboration across the various roles.

The broadcast model benefits the few who are able to stay in the spotlight, at the detriment of others. In 1930s big bands, this not only meant that few bands were able to stay in the spotlight and continue working, but it also led to a homogenization of style. Lewis Erenberg, author of *Swinging the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*, explains that with the birth of radio and the popularization of big band jazz, the once thriving territory bands were the ultimate victims. Before this change, many bands worked in different regions, each with their
own distinct style. The overwhelming popularity of the New York bands via radio caused many of the territory bands to mimic their musical style in a desperate attempt to remain relevant (and keep working). While this was ultimately unsuccessful, the end result was that the New York style replaced the various regional approaches.

So while the popularity of the ensemble was at its peak in the 1930s, there were actually fewer successful bands than in the years prior, with only national stars like Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman making enough money and gaining enough exposure to keep their bands running. These few bands dictated the styles of music performed by the ensemble, with smaller bands attempting to emulate one of their more successful counterparts. Even when the Kansas City riff-based style of Count Basie was “discovered” by John Hammond, the band immediately moved to Chicago, and to New York shortly thereafter. This is not to say that there were not significant differences in the approaches of each nationally known band, but their popularity certainly reduced the number of regional variations.

By contrast, the pluralism encouraged by the spreadable model allows for more stylistic variation. Maria Schneider’s narrative forms and extensive use of woodwind doubles, Darcy James Argue’s use of minimalism and leitmotif, Alan Ferber’s re-imagining of both the music of Bjork and odd-meter Balkan melodies, and Gordon Goodwin’s big band arrangements of classical pieces all represent individual approaches to the ensemble that defy genre classification (some of this music will be explored in more detail in the final chapter). Such diverse approaches are not supported in a broadcast model, which seeks to attract mass audiences. The
interactions of fans and other musicians in the spreadable model allows this music to be shared among networks of people who would have had more difficulty connecting with one another before the internet allowed for niche social networks to share content more easily.

Bertolt Brecht envisioned this type of interaction between creators and listeners in 1932, suggesting that there should be a way to make radio communication two sided rather than one. He argued that changing radio from a system of distribution to one of communication would allow the transmitter and the listen to have a relationship, rather than isolating the two from one another. Although the technology did not exist in Brecht’s time to achieve such a thing, social media has finally made this type of relationship between musicians and listeners a reality. Spreadability understands the importance of relationships between people, which are not only made more apparent by social media platforms, but also broadened and deepened.

In order for media to be spreadable, it also must be in an easily shared format. This concept is called “grabbability” by Jenkins et al., and is also designated as “permeability” by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green. Grabbability is perhaps the better term, as it emphasizes the actions of people sharing content, while permeability suggests that the material itself has some agency. With the popularity of YouTube, Spotify, Pandora, and other media hubs with easily linked embed codes, people can share recordings, live performances, lectures, interviews, and other materials related to big band music. While the sharing of recordings, videos, etc., is certainly not a new phenomenon, the convenience of sharing material via social
media invites people to share more material with more people. Embedded codes also provide many access points to the same content in a number of places across the internet, making it easier to spread content more quickly. This is a key point in differentiating the broadcast model from the spreadable one: broadcast requires people to come to a single place (often at a specified time) to access content, while the spreadable model allows for many points of entry available at any time. The appeal of this model to a niche genre like big band is clear. Spreadable media allows for content to engage more deeply within a particular community. While this engagement is not enough to qualify for a mainstream viral phenomenon, the content producer is able to reach more people in the intended audience. Big band music that would have a limited reach within the traditional broadcast and distribution model is thus spread among fans. It is also able to reach new audiences serendipitously, as shared music and videos on social media will reach a person’s various networks, some of which do not consist of big band enthusiasts. This lateral movement creates new fans, who may eventually become part of the niche community and engage with other big band content producers.

**Participatory Culture**

The proliferation of spreadable media has made culture more participatory. Where the distribution model isolated both content producers and audience members, the circulation model encourages active participation, and this participation is not simply limited to a mere “thumbs up” or “thumbs down.” People are not only sharing media with one another, but also refashioning and remixing it
as well, actually changing the substance and perspective of the original content. This new way of interacting with media is happening on a global scale, with re-formed content spreading far beyond an individual’s local community.\textsuperscript{11} It should be noted, however, that while it is certainly true that there are more ways to directly interact with media texts today than there were before the rise of digital circulation, culture has always been participatory to some degree.

Speaking about the early big band audience, Lewis Erenberg notes that most historians have viewed the young crowds as passive recipients of the music, rather than active participants in it. He argues that despite objections from the elder generation, the young big band audience sought to express themselves through music and dance, regardless of the difficulties of living during the Great Depression. In fact, these difficulties reduced the differences among the youth, even across racial and ethnic lines, and helped revitalize the idea of mass culture.\textsuperscript{12} So while participation has always been an important factor in any culture, there are perhaps more measurable ways to participate in a networked society. The tools of participation also provide niche communities with ways of interacting with one another that effectively erase geographic distances. In the case of contemporary big bands, many fans might have only a few people they see on a daily basis who are also fans, but social networking platforms – Facebook, Twitter, internet forums, etc. – allow fans who may never meet in real life to connect with one another. Daily contact with other fans acts to strengthen the community.

The sharing of content among the big band community also creates cultural capital for the sharers. Sharing videos or audio files of songs that others have not
heard affirms that the sharer is a connoisseur of the genre, and earns them respect in the community. Jenkins and his colleagues explain this dynamic in niche communities, stating that the perspectives held in niche communities are rarely represented in mass media, and the content produced and shared in this DIY fashion provide a way to express those perspectives. Further, since members of niche communities are spreading material that is personally meaningful to them, there is special importance in the circulation of this material, which encourages more honest and meaningful interactions with family and friends.\(^{13}\)

In addition to facilitating communication among fans, new technologies allow for fans to communicate directly with creators. Perhaps the most adept at fan communication in the current big band scene is Darcy James Argue. When Argue’s Secret Society began performing in 2005, he also created a blog to share not only concert reviews and upcoming gigs, but also to share his thoughts and feelings about performances, running a big band, and eventually other topics. Through this blog, his fans were able to get to know him in a way that most fan communities are not able to connect with artists. In an interview with Howard Mandel for *Down Beat* magazine, Argue stated that blogging was a way of humanizing his music and insuring that he did not appear distant or unwelcoming.\(^{14}\) Argue closed the blog site in 2013, but continues to interact directly with fans via Twitter and Facebook. The deeper engagement fans have with him and his music help foster a community around the band and keeps fans involved with new developments.

There is a precedent for this type of fan engagement in the Stan Kenton band of the 1970s. The ensemble had been in decline for decades, yet Kenton’s band
remained hugely successful due to the inclusion of the fans in the inner workings of the band. Jim Szantor outlined Kenton's method in his “Straight Talk” article on big bands in 1972:

“The return of Kenton to the wars full-time has been encouraging on many fronts. First and foremost, the accent has been on music, new music, and the band is clearly a band of today. Also, Kenton, thanks to both the band’s excellence and his close ties with music education through his famous clinics, has perhaps the youngest (and fastest-growing youngest) following of all the bands. But equally important is the success of Kenton’s Creative World. Unless you’ve been totally out to lunch for about two years, you know Kenton is producing and selling his records through his own company, which has a growing ‘membership’ that receives monthly newsletters in which band news and itinerary plus catalog information are made available. Kenton, then has accomplished two things: he has expanded his fandom while ridding himself of the problems involved with being attached to a commercial label and he has seemingly found a very nice, simple, and logical way of bringing that fandom closer to the day-to-day operations of the band. Every band has its loyal following but too often these loyalists don’t have the foggiest notion of where the band is or what it’s doing (or what the record companies will put out next). There’s also a psychological factor here. The Kenton fans feel like they’re a part of things and what could be nicer than that?”

Like Argue, Kenton's inclusion of the fans in more than just albums and performances helped build a community around the band and create deeper engagement with the music.

**Access**

A key issue in any discussion of technology that facilitates interaction is who has access to this technology. Some technologists promote a fully networked future as a utopia where information can be shared with everyone and connections can be made among diverse groups of people. The problem with this vision is that many people are excluded from the online activities most of us take for granted. The largest barrier to participation in networked society is an economic one. The cost of
internet-enabled devices and the accompanying internet service is too high for many poor families. Tablets and smartphones have increased access due to their lower cost, but there is still progress to be made. Economic divisions sometimes also run along racial borders, as a legacy of racial inequality in the United States results in people in minority communities being more likely to be among the poor. Additionally, people learn how to use social media from friends and family, meaning a person from a poor community is less likely to know how to use these technologies. Even if they do have the opportunity to participate in online culture, without family and friends to act as digital role models, it is highly unlikely that someone could learn to effectively navigate social media platforms.

The technology of dissemination of big band music in the 1930s had a direct effect on race relations, due to the fact that the race of band members was not immediately apparent, given the audio only formats of records and radio. Lewis Erenberg notes:

“A combination of ready access and the mechanical reproduction of music removed some of the sacredness surrounding works of art, enabling young fans to treat swing as particularly theirs... At the same time, swing musicians operated nationally, in more open, democratic spaces. Those spaces now included greater interaction between whites and blacks than ever before. As aural media, radio and records removed some of the visual definitions of race, allowing music played by blacks or whites to reach the senses in direct, unrestricted ways. The swing era thus witnessed the possibility for mass personal liberation and the democratization of cultural connoisseurship.”

Radio helped democratize big band music in terms of race and allowed more people access to it. Those who could not afford to buy records or a phonograph could listen to regular offerings on the radio, as radios were cheap and readily available.
Stripping the music of racial associations also allowed people from diverse ethnic backgrounds to engage with it, as it was not marketed to a specific race.

Radio also offered access to rural populations who previously would not have had access to music created in urban centers. Online circulation has had a similar effect, granting people in many areas of the world access to media that previously might have only been available in certain countries or major urban areas. The spreadable model goes a step further by not only allowing rural populations access to urban material, but also allowing material created outside urban centers to be spread among various communities. While most big bands are still located in large cities (primarily New York and Los Angeles), bands situated in smaller cities are now able to play a role in the national scene. These bands include the Airmen of Note in Washington, D.C., The John Labarbera Big Band in Louisville, The Captain Black Big Band in Philadelphia, and many others.

Creating a New Moral Economy Based Around Free Content

Although media is more accessible to target audiences, an issue for content creators is how to monetize their content. Bandleaders obviously want people to hear their music, but most spreadable formats typically do not generate significant revenue. Erenberg describes a parallel situation of the early 1930s, stating that radio offered a free alternative to purchasing records. Surpluses of records clogged warehouses, and sales remained low even after prices were lowered from 75 to 35 cents because people would not (and in some cases could not) pay for something they could get for free. Similarly, the recording industry has experienced a decline
in recent years, with 50% fewer albums sold in 2014 than in 2000. iTunes, the largest source of paid downloadable music, experienced a drop in downloads of 13% in 2014 alone. At the same time, the music streaming service Spotify reported in November 2014 that it had 50 million users, 40 million of them using the free version of the service. While Spotify does offer royalties, many industry experts argue that the royalties are too little and do not provide the same level of return as traditional album sales.

Jaron Lanier and Mark Helprin also warn that aggregators such as Spotify, Pandora, and YouTube in particular, have used the ubiquity of their services to leverage payment away from artists. YouTube’s business model allows users to place advertisements on uploaded content (provided the user owns the copyrights to the content). YouTube collects 45% of this revenue, with the remaining 55% going to the content creator. When full albums began showing up on YouTube, obviously not uploaded by artists or their record labels, some worried that YouTube was becoming the new Napster (a file sharing service popular in the late 1990s that was mostly frequently used for free sharing of music). YouTube responded in 2011 by implementing the Content ID System, which allowed content creators to claim ownership, with an algorithm finding any instances of the same content uploaded by other users. The content creator could choose to have YouTube delete these videos or divert some of the ad revenue to the copyright holder. Copyright holders could also file a claim against a specific video. In an article for Forbes magazine, Paul Tassi explained some of the misuse of this system, as predatory users filed false claims against videos. The issue was that YouTube automatically diverted the ad revenue,
while the user who uploaded the video in question was left to file a counter claim in hopes of recouping the lost revenue. In the mean time, YouTube was still collecting its 45%, so there was no incentive in resolving these conflicts quickly. YouTube has since implemented more stringent requirements for potential copyright holders, but the underlying problem remains. In November of 2014, YouTube announced that it would soon begin offering its own streaming music service, with premium subscriptions costing $9.99 per month (the same as Spotify’s premium service). The royalty agreements have not been released, but one can assume they will be similar to Spotify’s royalties. In the case of big bands, the higher cost of maintaining and recording the ensemble means that big band leaders will have a much more difficult time making any profits from the current royalty agreements.

Exposure

While many see the practices of aggregators as predatory, the argument in favor of such arrangements is that services with the high visibility of YouTube and Spotify offer greater exposure for artists than traditional album sales. Niche genres stand to gain the most from increased exposure, and as Jenkins et al. note, niche artists have little to lose financially from a change in the current system, so many are willing to lose complete control of their material and accept the spreadable model in order to further the circulation of their work. Big band leaders certainly fall into this category, considering the old system rarely allowed a leader to break even on an album. In an article for Down Beat, Paul de Barros cites Maria Schneider’s first album, Evanescence, as an example, stating that she invested $30,000 into the
recording of the album. Although her label paid her $10,000 and offered a reasonable royalty rate, she never recouped her original investment despite selling around 20,000 copies.\textsuperscript{22} Production costs are naturally higher for a big band record, so while small groups may be able to get by on the old system, a new arrangement needed to be made for big band leaders to make any money from their albums.

While free circulation would seem to be a step in the wrong direction, Nancy Baym points to a model for niche genres in the independent Swedish music scene. The idea is that smaller bands with small budgets are unlikely to be promoted by any mainstream media sources, and therefore are unlikely to be heard by many people. By allowing people to access the music for free and giving them an opportunity to financially reward the artists in some way, bands are able to reach a much larger audience than they would otherwise. Even if most of these new listeners do not pay any money to listen to the music, the end result is that the artists still end up making more money. According to Baym, for many of the smaller Swedish labels, embracing spreadability has dramatically increased CD and mp3 sales, with between half and two-thirds of all sales coming from places outside of Sweden, places that would not have had access to this music had the labels used the traditional methods of publicity. While the artists lose some control in how their music is spread, that loss of control allows it to be spread to audiences they might not have found otherwise.\textsuperscript{23} A similar approach may be effective in the big band genre, as many people who might not buy a big band CD would at least give the music a listen if there were no cost involved. If a portion of these people then purchased an album or contributed to the band in some other way, the overall
revenue might be more than the traditional system would bring in. The one big problem remaining is once again the exorbitant costs of recording such a large ensemble.

**Self-Publishing and Voluntary Payments**

Another option for established musicians is starting a record label. Self-publishing ensures that the artist collects an appropriate amount of royalties, as the apparatus of production is tied directly to them. One artist to take advantage of this option is Dave Holland. Holland stated that his "30 years with ECM Records have been great, and they've been very supportive to me over that time, but it's time to do something for me and my family." Although Holland is indirect (likely to maintain good relations with his former label, from whom he still earns royalties), it is implied that he stands to make more in returns on his own label. This also gives him complete control of his copyrights.

While this chapter has focused primarily on recordings, another source of revenue that benefits from self-publishing is the selling of scores and parts. With the rise of sophisticated notation software, composers no longer need to rely on traditional publishers to sell scores. Many big band composers offer scores and parts for sale as pdf files, and with little production costs involved, they are able to do so at reduced prices while still collecting more revenue per sale. Alan Ferber and Darcy James Argue even offer pdf downloads of their scores for free, as well as accompanying mp3 files. Many local big bands and universities run on limited budgets, so new music must be chosen carefully. Being able to see the scores for free
allows local bandleaders to assess the compatibility of the given chart with the players and resources they have on hand. This allows them to choose charts wisely, and they will be more likely to purchase the parts from new composers if they can be assured that the money will not be spent on a chart that will be unusable.

Offering free downloads of recordings and scores amounts to a type of gift giving that is becoming increasingly popular among musicians, writers, filmmakers, and other artists who circulate material online. These gifts, however, are not necessarily free content, as it is implied that if a fan enjoys the content, they will show their appreciation monetarily. Two contrasting examples of this type of gift giving (with very different outcomes) are the preemptive release of Radiohead’s *In Rainbows* and the free download of Nine Inch Nails’ *The Slip*. In 2007, Radiohead announced that their new album, *In Rainbows*, would be available for download in advance of the traditional release. Fans could pay whatever price they chose, from £0 to £99.99. Despite the option to pay nothing, Thom Yorke stated that Radiohead made more money from digital downloads of *In Rainbows* than any of their other albums. This is due to a combination of fans choosing to pay for the album and not having to split the profits with a record label or distributor. In fact, purchasing the album directly from the band may have inspired fans to pay more. What's more, the popularity of this model created market expansion, leading to higher digital sales of the album after the official release. By contrast, Nine Inch Nails allowed fans to download the 2008 album, *The Slip*, for free, with no option of payment. The free download remained available after the traditional release, and sales of the album were significantly lower than previous releases. In their study of these two
examples, Marc Bourreau, Pinar Dogan, and Sounman Hong suggest that the lagging sales of The Slip were not due to fans’ lack of desire to pay. Instead, fans who would have paid downloaded the album for free (having no option to pay), and once the traditional release occurred, had no reason to download or purchase the album again. By not allowing for reciprocity, Nine Inch Nails made it more difficult for fans to show monetary appreciation. It should also be noted that the Radiohead release received far more media attention than the Nine Inch Nails release, so there may also be other factors that contributed to the difference in outcomes.26

In another study of the pick your own price model that is perhaps more relevant to big band music, Tobias Regner and Javier Barria use data gathered from online music website, Magnatune. The site specializes in niche artists, providing full access to albums before purchase and allowing users to pay anywhere from $5 to $18 to download an album, an approach very similar to the more popular website, Bandcamp. Regner and Barria stress that utilizing this method for niche artists will be more successful than established ones, as fans are more likely to donate to artists who are not millionaires.27 They do mention that the Radiohead example contradicts this, but insist that other factors account for the discrepancy, namely the fair sharing of revenue with the artist. Nonetheless, they found that the average customer paid more than the recommended amount ($8), and they attribute this to a combination of engaging with the music prior to payment, thus creating value, and the ability of the customer to show support for a relatively unknown artist. This voluntary support contributes to what they refer to as the “warm glow” effect. They note that neoclassical theory predicts that most people would pay as little as
possible, but actual results show that most paid more not only because paying the artist increases the possibility of future releases, but because it makes them feel good to contribute to something they see as a good cause. This feeling is the “warm glow” effect, and they show it to be a powerful motivating force in the success of the voluntary payment model.  

The desire to contribute to artists who will directly benefit from the support may be a good model for circulating niche cultural goods such as big band music. Animator Nina Paley, who posts her videos for free on her website and allows fans to make donations or buy DVDs, refers to the traditional methods of distribution as “coercion and extortion.” She believes that if her fans value her works and take enjoyment from it, they will reward her by paying for those works. Regner and Barria’s research suggests she is correct, as do her financial reports – she reported making $119,708 directly from fans between 2009 and 2010, while she made only $12,551 from theater and broadcast distribution. Under the right conditions, the spreadable model can work for niche and relatively unknown artists.

**The Value-Added Model**

Another possibility in online circulation is the value-added model, in which additional content is included with the purchase of an album or score. In his first book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, Jaron Lanier suggests one option for value-added content: the songle. The idea is that in order to play a certain song, you would need a physical key (a dongle). The songle could come in many different forms, from necklaces to coffee mugs, but would create artificial scarcity for the music. Lanier
insists that this could be a green technology as well, since all the present ways used to convince people to pay for music involve the manufacture of new hardware, such as iPods. There are a few problems with Lanier’s idea. First, the infrastructure required for this to work would entail a standardization that would almost necessarily come from one company. This puts the control of the content into the hands of an aggregator, something Lanier opposes in this and his other book, *Who Owns the Future?* If a company like Apple controls the market this way, power is not given to the artist, which is Lanier’s intent. Also, the hardware created for the implementation of the song would be no different than the extra hardware Lanier mentions in current distribution schemes.

In her book, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, Kiri Miller suggests another value-added possibility: adding a performance aspect to the content. She suggests this specifically with reference to the popular video game, *Guitar Hero*. Miller proposes that new music be sold as downloads to be played in the game. The value added in this case is being able to “perform” the music, creating an active engagement rather than passive consumption. Miller argues that this is no different than piano arrangements of large ensemble works in the 19th century. A four-hand arrangement of a Beethoven quartet allows amateur pianists to engage the work directly, which in theory leads to a deeper appreciation of the music. The principle problem with her idea is that music that does not include guitar might provide for an odd experience in this format. Nonetheless, utilizing a more abstract form of rhythm game might be a means to approach the value-added model in this way.
Maria Schneider, in her partnership with ArtistShare, has perhaps pioneered the best option in the value-added model for contemporary big bands. In an interview with Down Beat magazine in 2004, Schneider voiced her dissatisfaction with the traditional recording industry. Schneider stated that everyone in the music industry profits before the artist, and she began to understand over time that she was essentially giving her music away. The real benefit of having a record deal is recognition, Schneider claims, and without the accompanying financial reward, that is simply not enough compensation for the people creating the content. As stated previously, Schneider never made the money back from her first album, which was distributed in the traditional way. Schneider partnered with ArtistShare in 2004, which not only offers music for download and on CD, as well as scores (both printed and pdf), but also includes additional content with every purchase. This content ranges from pdfs of sketches to interviews to Maria’s analysis of her own work. As Schneider asked, “What’s the one thing that can’t be duplicated?... It’s not the recording, but the artists themselves.” By allowing unprecedented access to Schneider and the process that goes into her compositions and recordings, ArtistShare offers a value-added product that offers deeper engagement with her music. As De Barros stated:

“You don’t just see albums for sale, you see Schneider sitting at the piano, demonstrating how the flamenco chords develop in her new piece, ‘Bulería, Soleá Y Rumba,’ Schneider talking with Ed Baker about composing, Schneider’s musicians talking about playing in the band, even video of Schneider skydiving. For $10.95, you can download Concert in the Garden as MP3 files and print out the liner notes. For $16.95, plus shipping, you can order the CD. An assortment of packages, with names like ‘Composer Participant’ and ‘Friend Participant’ offer various combinations of recordings, scores, parts and an impressive catalog of streamed material. You can buy all her old CDs, too, since she bought back the masters from enja.”
The ArtistShare approach is much more convenient than either Lanier or Miller’s suggestions and does not necessitate new systems or physical devices. In fact, the lack of physical devices is one of its strong points. The ArtistShare model also does not rely on creating artificial scarcity, instead relying on supplementary content. This is ultimately a better solution, as fans are more likely to appreciate added content that deepens engagement over scarcity. The royalty agreement, in which the artist gets half of all revenue, is also a much better arrangement than the previous agreements in the record industry, and far superior to the royalties offered by aggregators. Brian Camelio, creator of ArtistShare, also notes that it is easier to reach fans of a niche genre like big band when the artist can communicate directly with them. He explains that if an advertisement goes out to 10,000 people and reaches 2 percent of them, 200 CDs are sold. When the next album is released, there is no better way of advertising it because it is impossible to know who those 200 people are who responded to the last album. But with direct marketing, the 200 people who bought the last album will receive an email about the new one, making it easier and cheaper to target advertising. Customers who purchase Schneider’s recordings and scores receive regular emails from Schneider herself about upcoming projects, concerts, lectures, etc. This approach is somewhat analogous to the blogging and Tweeting of Darcy James Argue, and has proven incredibly successful.

In addition to purchasing recordings and scores, fans can support Schneider’s future projects. Howard Mandel describes this support at the recording sessions for Schneider’s 2007 album, *Sky Blue*, describing the executive producer as an older
man who prefers to remain anonymous. He came to the recording project through ArtistShare, and donated $18,000 to the budget simply because he respected Schneider’s work and wanted to help facilitate the realization of her ideas.\textsuperscript{36} So not only is Schneider able to profit from her album sales while communicating more effectively with her audience, but she is also able to attract funding for future projects, a key advantage over the voluntary payment model.

Los Angeles big band leader, Gordon Goodwin, illustrates another approach to the value-added model. Goodwin’s 2008 album, \textit{Act Your Age}, was released as a traditional CD with a supplemental DVD. The DVD included 5.1 mixes of all the tracks on the album with higher sample rates, the intention being to give the listener the perception of sitting in the middle of the band. Also included on the DVD were live concert footage, band member biographies, solo transcriptions, an interview with Goodwin and producers Dan Savant and Lee Ritenour, and commentaries on each track. Additionally, the DVD allowed fans to adjust the mix of each track, emphasizing certain sections while turning down the main mix. For big band fans, this ability to remix the tracks in order to hear sections more clearly encourages a more in depth appreciation of the performances. Goodwin had previously created a contest called the “Big Phat Jam,” in which up and coming jazz players could record themselves playing with the Big Phat Band recordings and post them to Goodwin’s website. In each round, visitors to the website could vote on their favorite in the five available categories (brass, saxophone, piano, bass, and vocal), and the winners would progress to the next round. Members of the band critiqued the final round. The winners are featured on the DVD, with biographies and their final recordings.
This promotion of up and coming jazz performers helped build the community around the band and developed a sense of goodwill toward Goodwin as he helped to elevate young jazz artists. In terms of album sales, it is difficult to determine what effect, if any, the supplemental DVD had on album sales. *Act Your Age* peaked at number 15 on the Billboard jazz charts. This is higher than the previous album, *The Phat Pack*, which peaked at number 20, but lower than the subsequent album, *That’s How We Roll*, peaking at number 6. *That’s How We Roll* was released without any supplemental content, implying that the band’s popularity has been steadily rising regardless of the supplemental materials included.

Goodwin had previously released the band’s first album, *Swinging for the Fences*, as a DVD with 5.1 audio, but chose to release it separately from the CD. This DVD contained many of the same features as the bonus DVD for *Act Your Age*, but many fans were disappointed. Some felt that the $25 price point was too high for a DVD that contained little video (a slide show played during the 5.1 tracks), and although the increased fidelity of DVD audio (with a 96 kHz sample rate versus 44.1 kHz for a standard CD) may have been enticing to audiophiles, the majority of people lack the proper equipment to take advantage of the superior sound quality. DVD audio, along with its cousin, the SACD, never established strong sales, with the trend toward more portable (albeit lower quality) formats clearly gaining control of the market. While the inclusion of the DVD with *Act Your Age* garnered a more positive reaction, the ubiquity of downloadable and streaming content indicates that this approach to the value-added model is not sustainable.
New technologies of dissemination not only allow for wider circulation of media texts, but also affect the texts themselves. Radio offered early big bands widespread exposure for the first time and helped generate the interest in the ensemble that led to the peak of its popularity. However, the broadcast model also decreased the number of regional variations and styles and only allowed a select few bands the popularity and economic rewards to continue to be successful. By contrast, the spreadable model encourages unique approaches and regional differentiation. Additionally, the ability to communicate directly with fans and circulate recordings and scores digitally allows big band leaders to forego traditional record labels and publishers, keeping more revenue per purchase than was previously possible. With the rise of free content, bandleaders must continue to build rapport with their audiences and experiment with new systems of circulation. It is evident from the success of properly implemented voluntary payment and value-added models that fan communities have a desire to support these niche artists, and big band leaders would be well served to continue engaging these communities and utilizing innovative systems of circulation for fans to show reciprocity.
CHAPTER 3: BIG BANDS IN THE UNIVERSITY

As the popularity of big bands was in decline in the late 1940s and 1950s, jazz education slowly became a part of university music departments. Early jazz programs were small and generally did not award degrees, with the first undergraduate degree in jazz being offered in 1947 at the North Texas State Teachers College (which became the University of North Texas). Most of the early jazz programs focused on small group playing and improvisation, and big bands did not become a regular feature of jazz departments until the late 1950s, particularly at the Berklee School of Music, Westlake College of Music (until its closing in 1961), Los Angeles City College, California Polytechnic State University, and the aforementioned University of North Texas (called North Texas State University during this period). Departments began to incorporate big bands as a lab ensemble for learning various jazz styles, with older students in the ensemble passing on knowledge of phrasing and articulation to younger students.

The relationship with the university system was well established by the 1970s, with ensembles in almost all jazz departments. Professional big bands also added universities to their performance routes, often giving workshops for the local students. In an article on the workshops of Woody Herman, Jim Szantor described the congenial atmosphere between the players and students, arguing that as exciting as the concerts were, music is learned through experience, and that experience is elevated by having professionals on hand who can relate to the students' struggles.¹ This tradition continues, with major jazz performers and
composers visiting universities regularly to work with the students and have their works performed. Alex Stewart notes that there is a cultural benefit to these workshops, keeping jazz current and allowing students to work directly with master musicians, rather than relying on recordings or books. This is an important step in creating the notion of big band as a vibrant, living tradition.

The leader who utilized this relationship to the fullest and fostered an entire generation of big band players was Stan Kenton. Kenton began playing universities in the late 1960s when it was hard to get enough bookings to keep the band on the road. As discussed in the previous chapter, he created his own record label and mailing list to keep fans apprised of the latest happenings within the Kenton band. Keeping students – his largest audience – involved with the workings of the band during the interim between school visits is one of the most important factors in Kenton's success. The most successful modern bands have continued to use this model, utilizing social media to keep fans apprised of new releases and performances, and maintaining a close relationship with many universities in order to expose the next generation of jazz musicians to their music.

Apprenticeship

Jazz is still very much an oral culture, and even interpreting the written music is something that can only be learned through apprenticeship. The big band provides the ideal format for young players to play alongside more experienced practitioners of their instrument and absorb stylistic intricacies. Gary Giddins remarks that there are very few famous jazz musicians that did not have big band
experience, and mentions Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and John Coltrane as examples of jazz innovators who started in big bands. When I spoke to Ralph Lalama, he noted that young players without big band experience are often technically proficient, but lack the ability to blend and match style even in small group settings. He stated that the big band is the only place for young players to learn these skills that are important in all types of settings within jazz.

Even players who were not initially interested in big band have extolled the virtues of the experience. A notable example is Lew Tabackin, who was not interested in big band at first, but changed his stance toward the ensemble. He found that playing in the ensemble caused him to try harder to come out of the music when soloing, rather than forcing his own style on the music. Joe Lovano, a tenor saxophonist who only became popular in jazz circles after recording several small group albums, exhibits the same sentiment:

“When I started to really emerge in some of these bands I had had already a kind of a history playing in more free music and in the bebop school. When I started to play in a big band, I absorbed the music around me that other people were playin’ and started to really feed off the energy and the ideas that other cats were playing. It gave me a lot of inspiration about how to approach my little solo moment, playing with a sense of orchestration. When I could come out of an ensemble part and how I could use that as a springboard into my solo excursions and then knowing what was gonna follow, or what background, that gave me a conception about leading somewhere, developing solos within the framework of the piece. That’s always been a strong foundation of my playing. Playing in big bands helped crystallize a lot of that stuff. And gave me a conception of how to play and not just deal with what to play.”

This idea of “how to play” versus “what to play” is a recurrent notion among big band improvisers. The solo breaks in a modern big band arrangement sometimes occur between contrasting sections of a tune, and creating a bridge between the two
sections helps improvisers shape solos and develop directional improvisation. In tunes that do not have contrasting sections, it becomes even more important for the soloists to determine how to take the listeners on a journey away from the tune without violating its sonic world, and then how to bring them back. If background figures are present, these allow the soloist to interact with yet another element, either choosing to let the background figures push the solo forward or in some cases offering a confrontational voice against the background figures. All of these skills learned in big bands transfer to all other forms of jazz and help players have a more sophisticated dialogue with one another in small groups.

Jazz educators, many of whom learned their craft in this earlier apprenticeship style outside of academia, have sought to bring this style of learning into the university while maintaining academic standards. Rich Shemaria described this approach to me, in use at New York University:

“I love the master and apprentice approach to learning things that the world has used for hundreds and hundreds of years. That’s one thing I like here at NYU, is that, as you know, we basically have that kind of thing happening here in the jazz department. There’s a real close affinity between the students and the teachers, and they get to play with us, they get to write alongside us. There are one or two other places in the world that I know of that have this kind of thing, and that whole process is time tested, and it still stands up.”

When I interviewed Billy Drewes, he echoed this sentiment, although he admitted that the style of learning is not exactly the same because of the setting. Nonetheless, he asserts that the best way of preserving the traditions of jazz without arresting its evolution is to continue passing the music down while being open to all of the new ideas and approaches emerging from academia.
One of the challenges jazz educators face is how to evaluate students’ progress in a way that meets with the standards of the university system. Dave Pietro commented to me that learning music is not something that can be easily graded or tested, and worries that teaching to the test runs counter to how we learn anything, not just music. Certainly there are elements of learning music that can be assessed (e.g., scales, theory), but the danger is that these quantifiable attributes become the primary focus, while individual expression – perhaps the most important aspect of jazz – becomes secondary. This emphasis on easily assessed skills could also create an environment that does not allow for as much creativity if students are directed to learn specific things at specific times, rather than letting each student determine his or her own path.

The solution to this problem seems to be a combination of maintaining a base curriculum to satisfy the university’s standards and professors teaching in a non-scholastic manner. Alan Ferber described to me his experience in the jazz program at the University of California, Los Angeles, as one that taught him jazz through the joy of playing it rather than through traditional lecture courses. He specifically pointed to a class taken with Billy Higgins, in which the class members played Thelonious Monk tunes every week without much discussion, as one of the reasons he wanted to continue playing jazz. Learning through direct experience and finding one’s own voice is perhaps the best method for learning jazz. In this way, the long used system of apprenticeship is maintained within the university setting and what is passed on is not only the quantifiable knowledge required to play, but also the un-quantifiable feeling. In an email interview with me, Julian Tanaka suggested
that in addition to the knowledge and feeling inspired by the music itself, important life lessons are learned through the apprenticeship approach, and these lessons are just as important when making one’s own music as technique and style issues.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition to teaching in a non-scholastic manner, many jazz educators provide a point of entry into professional and semi-professional circles in which a student may continue to learn in a more direct manner. Michael Breaux described to me an early experience in which his teachers gave him access to a local big band:

“‘And come to the back door of Toby’s Oak Grove, have your mom and dad drop you off at 9:00. They can stay there, and we’ll bring you in and let you play on the bandstand.’ So in front of all these drunken customers, I was playing ‘Stella by Starlight’ on my tenor saxophone, and they went wild. That was the first time I got a taste of it – doing it myself – and it snowballed.”\textsuperscript{12}

This sort of early direct experience with the ensemble and the music is common among many professional jazz musicians. In addition to the experience provided by educators themselves, introductions into the professional world can facilitate further progress.

Many successful jazz musicians also agree that it is up to each player and/or composer to seek out mentorship and other opportunities outside the university. Steven Feifke encourages students to introduce themselves to experienced jazz musicians and educators, and notes that it is not a university’s responsibility to provide introductions or mentorship.\textsuperscript{13} While the university can provide an environment conducive to learning and making connections, the ultimate responsibility is on the individual. Nate Kimball also pointed out to me that some opportunities to gain experience may not be paid ones, such as rehearsal bands. He argues that these gigs should not be approached with only financial gain in mind,
but also as opportunities to grow as a musician and make connections needed for future success.14

**University Big Bands as Music Laboratories**

University big bands offer student composers the opportunity to try out new compositions on a regular basis. This gives students a chance to take risks one might not take on a paid commission, as there are no significant consequences for failure. Writing new music for the ensemble on a regular basis ideally produces composers who have found their own style and are confident and experienced by the time they graduate. Darcy James Argue described to me his experience at Boston Conservatory, stating that he had access to a big band every week that did nothing but read new music written by the composition students. Argue realized that having that sort of weekly feedback from both the band and a world-class teacher (Bob Brookmeyer) was a rare situation, and one that he would utilize to the fullest.15 Argue's decidedly unique style can be at least partially attributed to his access to a big band on such a frequent basis. Through his successes and failures, he was able to develop a personal sound that works for the ensemble.

In addition to offering student composers a laboratory to test out new ideas, university ensembles also keep players in touch with the current jazz composers – not only their own classmates, but also faculty members and visiting composers. Perhaps the most well-known university ensemble is the University of North Texas One O’Clock Lab Band. The band was created in 1947, the year that the University of North Texas (then known as North Texas State Teachers College) became the first
institution to offer a degree in jazz studies. After a request for a professional recording to be broadcast on the radio in 1967, the band began recording albums on a yearly basis, and became the first student ensemble to be nominated for a Grammy in 1975 for an album consisting of music written by future Pat Metheny Group member Lyle Mays, who was then a student. The band’s repertoire consists of student and faculty compositions, as well as compositions from leading big band composers, many of whom have residencies with the ensemble. Bringing professionals in to work with the students not only helps them develop their musicianship, but also helps to build networks that the students may use to become successful themselves when they finish their education. In fact, many successful jazz musicians are alumni of the band.

While the freedom to fail in big band writing can be a great opportunity for young jazz composers learning their craft, there is also a danger of not getting the proper feedback in order to prevent future problems. Julian Tanaka elaborates:

“One of the major negative effects university has had on big band music is that the pragmatism of the music is lost. Ellington’s music has that radiance and natural vibration because he wrote shit that was playable. It seems that a lot of academic writers don’t think about that too much. It is up to the player to make the composition sparkle. That’s not to say that hard music is bad. It’s just that there aren’t tremendous consequences for writing bad music in college. Back in the day, you wrote a shitty chart and you were fired or the players in your band could find some other band to play in. Today, you get a college degree in jazz composition.”

Tanaka’s point also brings up another issue that has arisen since big bands moved into the university system: the relationship between the composer and the players has changed dramatically. Mirroring a similar shift in classical music from more than a century earlier, composers have become increasingly specific about how they
want their compositions performed. This is not necessarily bad, but sometimes
performers feel that they do not have the opportunity to put their own
interpretation on the music. Combine this with overly complex changes in solo
sections and over-written background figures, and the experience for the performer
becomes a much less enjoyable one. Bruce Paulson noted during our conversation
that jazz composer Tom Garvin solved this problem by writing complex tunes with
simplified solo sections. The simpler form during the solo allowed the players to
express themselves more freely, and in the end both the voices of the performers
and the composer were heard.17

**Jazz Education as a Business**

An increasing concern within jazz education is business-oriented composers
who write charts with specific criteria in mind. The ensembles looking to perform
these charts are more likely to be at smaller colleges and some high schools, where
most of the students do not learn to improvise and parts are sometimes taught by
rote. Alan Ferber expressed his thoughts to me on this type of composition:

“I think where the danger comes in is when people write big band music for a
school and they start putting grade levels on it, and it’s specifically for a
school. Then you’re getting into the business side of things, you’re writing it
as a business choice rather than an artistic choice, and to me that’s reflected
in the music. If your motivation is to write a chart so you can sell it and make
money, then it’s going to sound like that in a way. If your motivation is just to
simply write a great piece of music that makes a really honest artistic
statement, then I think the university’s role in playing that kind of music is a
valuable one: to help disperse good music.”18

This is not to say that writing charts specifically to sell or on commission detracts
from their ability to be personal artistic statements of high quality. Certainly many
of the big band writers of the 1960s and 1970s who wrote to order for Count Basie, Buddy Rich, or Doc Severinsen did so to make money. The problem Ferber refers to is specific to music written for school bands. There are an increasing number of jazz festivals at which bands compete with one another and are judged. A win at one of these festivals can be important for the school, as it might draw more attention to the department, encourage more funding, etc. Judges score sheets often include specific criteria they are to judge, and business oriented composers will write charts that cater to these criteria. The problem is not so much what is included in these works as what is missing. Often there is no improvisation and the rhythm section parts are completely written out, which would never be done in a professional big band. Realizing a typical rhythm section chart takes years of experience and many mistakes, but directors looking to win festivals sometimes trade the opportunity to educate – which includes the possibility of failure – for a seemingly more polished result and greater chance of winning.

Another problem related to treating jazz education as a business is the existence of jazz educators with no real world experience. The university system has become increasingly business oriented in the past several decades. According to a 2014 article in *Time* magazine, tuitions have risen 1120% in absolute dollars since 1978. In modern academic culture where students are sometimes viewed more as customers, attracting more of these customers to a business that will likely not increase their salary but certainly increase their debt is difficult, so university rankings have become an important tool in recruiting more students. Many university ranking systems take into account the number of publications per year
from the faculty, as well as degrees held. For this reason, departments necessarily look to hire professors with impressive academic pedigrees. Unfortunately, some of these people do not have the level of real world experience in jazz to match their academic accomplishments. Dave Pietro told me that while he attempts to recreate the apprenticeship environment for his students, it is not entirely possible within academia. He said he is troubled by the fact that at many schools, “the people who are teaching are people who haven’t had that experience, so they’re going from academic experience to academic experience.”

When I interviewed Tom Kubis, he noted that many schools seem to be “more about theorists than actual players.” He worries that younger players going through the university system may be missing the opportunity to learn from some of the great players who do not also have the proper pedigree to be hired.

There is also a large business in writing for beginner big bands, as essentially the entirety of the big band repertoire is too difficult for these young players. Many writers choose to create simplified arrangements of big band standards in order to give students something they can play that is also exposing them to the history of the ensemble. Some professional writers also write multiple versions of the same chart, as is the case with Sammy Nestico’s *Samantha, The Queen Bee, Fancy Pants,* and *Basie-Straight Ahead.* Occasionally professional writers are commissioned to write a tune for beginner bands. In 1990, the Penfield Music Commission Project commissioned a beginner work from Maria Schneider, which resulted in *Baytrail Shuffle.* There are a few professional big band writers with an interest in education who write tunes specifically for younger bands. One of the most well known writers
to do this is Bob Mintzer, and given his 2009 letter to the editor in *Down Beat* magazine declaring big bands to be alive and well and asking for fans' continued support, it is no surprise that Mintzer invests time and effort in the future of the ensemble.\(^{23}\) Writing original charts for a beginning band does have an incredible set of challenges that keep most composers away. In our interview, Nate Kimball expressed some of the frustrations that accompany writing for young bands, stating that it is almost impossible to focus on the artistic side of writing when writing charts for grade 1 and grade 2 middle school big bands. Kimball says he tries to write a simple catchy melody that is singable, and hopes for the best beyond that.\(^{24}\) Keeping the music simple enough to be approachable for a beginner big band while maintaining some musical interest is indeed difficult, but thanks to the efforts of Kimball, Mintzer, and others, many educators are pleased to see an increasing number of quality charts available for developing musicians.

In addition to breeding new jazz musicians and jazz lovers, there are plenty of reasons to continue to support these young bands. Dave Pietro pointed out to me the importance of keeping these ensembles (and music in general) in schools:

“[I]n any large ensemble it’s crucial to listen to one another and to interact. This is why I think it’s critical to keep music in schools. It’s science. It’s social science. It’s not about entertainment. The argument in a lot of schools... is that music is entertainment, and that’s how it’s treated by the administrations. But to me, music is social science, and especially in the school systems, because music (and team sports falls into this category) teaches you many things. In a large ensemble, in any one piece of music, your part may require you to take the lead, to support someone else, to blend with someone else, to solo, and it’s constantly moving. You have to be listening all the time and know what your role is at that moment.”\(^ {25}\)

Pietro implies that being involved in musical ensembles such as big bands increases interpersonal skills and perhaps might create better citizens. For these additional
reasons, it’s important that composers like Bob Mintzer and Nate Kimball continue to write quality music to keep young players engaged.

**Homogenization**

In the decades since jazz moved into the university system, the standardization of a jazz curriculum has led to an unfortunate subconscious attitude: that graduates should be fully developed professionals. The idea is that if students go through the entire curriculum of a jazz department – which is designed to be exhaustive – they should have absorbed all of this material and found their own voice. The problem with this subconscious attitude is that it takes many years to truly absorb the music in the jazz tradition (or any tradition for that matter). In fact, it would be difficult to absorb the music of the big band tradition alone, much less the entirety of jazz. Finding one’s own voice from there also takes many years of experience and a certain amount of failure from trying new ideas and taking new risks. Darcy James Argue pointed out to me the severity of this problem, lamenting that musicians are expected to arrive on the scene fully formed with their musical identity firmly in place. Graduates are expected to have the experience needed to be comfortable and confident in their own identity in order to play gigs, but in reality need to play more gigs to find their identity.

There is also a danger in sounding too different in the world of mainstream jazz gigs, which has led to what some view as a certain amount of homogenization among players. The attempts by jazz departments to make the curriculum thorough might also be partially to blame, and many believe that the more haphazard and less
exhaustive method of learning jazz in the past resulted in more stylistic variation among players. Bruce Paulson elaborated on this problem in our telephone conversation:

“[I]n the past I think players were much more individual because there was no pedagogy, no curriculum. I think the one thing that has happened with the university bands is that even though many players are probably more adroit – they’re technically better and have more musical knowledge – they tend to sound the same in certain senses. So I think that old system where we were all self taught – I didn’t have any jazz education per se, I learned it all sitting in bands with other guys – I think it created a more personal approach, and I think one of the biggest compliments that I ever got was that a guy said he heard a recording on the radio and he knew it was me. Somebody could identify your style.”

In addition to university curriculum being comprehensive, technology has given musicians access to so much more music than was previously available. It is difficult to digest this volume of music, and it is entirely possible that while today’s musicians have a much broader range of influences, the depth of any one of these influences might not match previous generations, who spent more time listening to less music. Dave Pietro pointed out that there was a real relationship with the music when people only had a few recordings to listen to, and listening to these recordings repeatedly created a depth of knowledge that is difficult to attain. When I spoke to Billy Drewes, he took a slightly different position than that of Pietro or Paulson, stating that there was an overwhelming amount of music available even decades ago, and musicians like Kenny Dorham, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane were so accomplished that naturally players wanted to emulate them. The desire to sound like one of the great players is present within every generation, and with so much music available now there is even more to emulate, but the challenge of finding
one’s own voice is essentially the same. It’s a challenge that not every musician is able to face successfully, but this has always been the case.

**Changing Sounds and Changing Faces**

Since jazz entered academia, the music written for big bands has seen a dramatic shift in style. Most big band composers since the 1970s have studied jazz in the university setting, which has had a significant impact on both the ensemble and the music written for it. Stylistically, perhaps the most prominent development in big band music has been the dramatic increase in harmonic sophistication. This is certainly due to the codification of jazz harmony that naturally came about as jazz educators sought to establish a curriculum. The detailed study of established big band charts, along with solo transcriptions, not only clarified the theoretical underpinnings of earlier jazz musicians, but also led to the discovery of new possibilities and an overall depth of knowledge that previous jazz musicians could not achieve. In our interview, Ralph Lalama noted, however, that as this increasingly sophisticated harmony has been incorporated into big band composition, the ensemble has lost its swing. He states:

“But it’s swinging [the music of Thad Jones] – that’s another thing that’s missing from a lot of newer stuff. That’s just my opinion, of course. I’m digging some of the harmony – it’s getting more modern, and there are more layers in the sound – but it’s more about orchestration rather than swing.”

In this case, the swing that Lalama refers to is not only the use of trochaic eighth notes, but also the attitude of the music. There is certainly evidence for this in the music, but it may be a necessary trade off – denser harmony requires purer timbres and softer dynamics. When played aggressively, the harmonies are often lost to the
ear. The result is that during these moments of dense harmony, composers often ask the band to play softly and to blend their timbres (which is not always the standard case in a big band – it is often an accumulation of individual timbres more so than an evenly blended ensemble, although not all bands subscribe to this notion). A brief example of this principle can be seen in Bob Brookmeyer’s “Hello and Goodbye.” At rehearsal C, Brookmeyer employs cluster voicings, and he uses several techniques to keep the harmonies intelligible (see fig. 1).

In the first two measures, although the entire 13-piece horn section is voiced within a 12th in each chord (from F3 to C5 in the first chord), the voicings within each section (saxophones, trumpets, trombones) are not overly dissonant. In this way, the voice leading within each section can be parsed by the ear and the resulting clusters maintain coherence. In the following four measures, the chords further
collapse to the point of maximum dissonance, with the horns playing 8 notes in the space of a minor 7th. This is accompanied by a decrescendo, which keeps the extreme dissonance from becoming overwhelming. The voicings slowly open back up over the next 6 measures, until they return to standard voicings in m. 61, accompanied by an increase in dynamic to forte. This shift back to standard voicings is then confirmed stylistically with a rhythmically characteristic big band phrase to end the section starting on the upbeat of 3 in m. 64 and continuing until the downbeat of the next section at the Coda sign in m. 71. This type of aggressive musical gesture would not work with the previously used cluster voicings, as the dissonance would undermine the strength and vitality of the line. Brookmeyer also presents the melody at the beginning of the tune in simple octaves, then gradually adds harmony during the B section. When the A’ section occurs at rehearsal C, the cluster voicings sound like a natural evolution of the tune, and the familiar melodic patterns and extra space between the top two voices keep the lines intelligible.

Brookmeyer’s many students at the Boston Conservatory, several of whom are current leading big band composers, have continued to utilize and develop this sort of harmonic sophistication, but some would argue that the power and attitude of more traditional big band lines and voicings has been diminished in the process.

Although there may be less swing incorporated in the music of contemporary big bands, one could argue that the styles of individual composers have become more personal and varied than in the decades prior. While one might understandably not be able to tell the difference between a Sammy Nestico and Neal Hefti tune, even a casual listener would hear a drastic difference between the music
of Maria Schneider and that of Darcy James Argue (two big band composers who both studied with Bob Brookmeyer). The outside influences incorporated in the music are also increasingly diverse, perhaps as diverse as the elements that originally formed jazz. One finds guitar techniques from rock and heavy metal, electronic instruments and sampling, pop style vocals, pulsing post-minimalist rhythms, and even arrangements of classical music in modern big band compositions. This wide-ranging field of influences may partly be due to the comprehensive nature of music education, encouraging exploration of many different forms and styles of music. So while students may or may not absorb influences with the depth of their predecessors, who had a more limited access to different kinds of music, they certainly are making use of a wider variety of influences, often in a cavalier fashion that results in a very personal style.

The change in style reflects another significant shift in the ensemble since it moved into the university system. Nate Kimball made a point to me about the stylistic change in music written for the ensemble, commenting that music changes as the people who create it change, and that placing blame on universities for changing styles is an oversimplification. While in this case Kimball is speaking more to the responsibility on each student to put in the work to develop his or her own voice, it brings to mind the change in the demographics of big band players, as well as jazz musicians in general. Perhaps the most notable effect is the influx of white musicians to jazz. While there have always been white jazz musicians, it has traditionally been a genre predominately populated by black musicians. The legacy of institutional racism in the United States has created a system in which many black
musicians who lack the same financial and educational opportunities as their white counterparts are often excluded from the genre simply because they are unable to pursue higher education. In an article from 2010 titled “Addressing Institutional Structural Barriers to Student Achievement,” Eustace Thompson attributes the achievement gap between white students and students of color to three forms of racism: personal, structural, and institutional. Personal racism is defined as the underlying attitudes of teachers that white students will perform better than non-white students. Structural and institutional racism are related issues. Although segregating schools is no longer a legal practice, the segregation of black and white communities often leads to schools that are highly segregated and varying in quality. This structural racism is compounded by institutional racism, in which policies created by government and school systems often favor white students. The combination of these three forms of racism makes it increasingly difficult for students of color to achieve academic success, leaving many without the option to attend college.\textsuperscript{32} Julian Tanaka commented on this situation in an email to me:

“The university system makes jazz far less accessible as a career choice to certain people. It is near impossible to make a living just playing jazz these days. Attending a university as a jazz major not only provides students with a possibility of graduating with a degree, thus increasing the potential for getting a teaching gig; it also is a place where one will make connections with other musicians. I am not qualified to analyze how and why a lot of people get shafted the opportunity to attend college (especially the “conservatories”). All I know is that almost all jazz majors I have ever met have been well-to-do white people.”\textsuperscript{33}

Alan Ferber noted that the business of jazz education is larger than the business of jazz itself, and Tanaka rightly points out that it is nearly impossible to make a sustainable living simply as a player.\textsuperscript{34} Teaching is a necessary part of a career in
jazz, if only for financial reasons, but many creative people are not well suited for a career in academia. It would be difficult to imagine a jazz great like Miles Davis in an academic setting, and it is unfortunate that so many are excluded from participating. It should be noted that this is not the only reason for the racial shift – jazz is no longer a major part of the black community that it was in the early half of the twentieth century. Hip-hop, which grew out of the funk of the 1970s, has become the predominant music present in the black community. The shift in tastes is a complex issue, but it seems that jazz and the American black community simultaneously retreated from one another.

At the same time, the role of women in jazz has increased significantly, and this is no doubt a result of their increasing presence in the university system. In fact, many of the most prominent living big band composers are women. Maria Schneider has noted that composition might be the easiest entry point for women in jazz, as it is a role that is still outside the “boys club” atmosphere of jazz performance and improvisation.\textsuperscript{35} It is difficult to assess this statement in the current scene – perhaps it was true during the 1980s when she began her career in jazz, but it is hard to find a working big band without at least a couple of women. In 2000, the National Endowment for the Arts commissioned a study of jazz musicians in four cities: New York, New Orleans, Detroit, and San Francisco. This study found that women make up roughly 20 percent of jazz musicians.\textsuperscript{36} However, it is only recently that women have begun participating in jazz on all instruments. Saxophones, brass, and drums in particular are stereotypically masculine instruments, leading most women in jazz to piano and composition. In order to achieve more diverse horn sections, children
need female role models in order to overturn gender biases toward certain instruments, and thankfully the number of those potential role models has been increasing. The university system offers women access to jazz that might not be found as readily in the often male-dominated networks of performers. That said, there is still far from equal representation in both the ensemble, and jazz as a whole. Ultimately, most women in jazz would like to be known as great musicians first, but this cannot be accomplished until more gender diversity normalizes women’s presence in the big band community.  

**A Way Forward?**

Most would agree that the diversity of voices, in terms of both race and gender, is integral to the genre moving forward, but solutions to the problem of exclusion within the university system are uncertain. In our interview, Darcy James Argue commented on the situation:

“[U]ltimately what’s the alternative? If there aren’t those gigs and aren’t those opportunities to learn on the bandstand, something has to take its place. Academia has taken its place, so I think everyone’s trying to figure out how to make their peace with this situation. Everyone’s trying to figure out how to make it better, how to bring more diverse voices back into the equation, and how to make sure that African-Americans – who created this music – can still play a really vital voice and be represented at all levels, including in university programs.”

Certainly including the voices of all people of color is important to the future of big band music, as well as jazz music as a whole. Jazz is often referred to as “America’s music” because it reflects the story of the United States: people from many places in the world arrived here under dramatically different circumstances and melded all of their native traditions into a new culture. Jazz is the musical representation of this
blending of traditions, incorporating rhythms and blue notes from the African
tradition (both directly and combined with Hispanic influence via the Caribbean),
forms and harmony from European marches, and elements of the blues (itself a
blending of African work songs and folk music). Jazz finds its strength in the
diversity of the voices within it, and if jazz is to primarily exist within the university
system, the university system must continue to increase the diversity of its students.
Wynton Marsalis compares jazz to the ideals of American democracy, in which every
person’s humanity is embraced.39 Progress has certainly been made in gender
diversity, but there is still much work to be done to increase racial and economic
diversity.

Additionally, if jazz is to continue to exist primarily within academia,
educators must endeavor to maintain the apprenticeship style of teaching as much
as possible, sitting in with their students, working with them directly on their
compositions, and giving them life lessons at the same time. Administrators need to
allow faculty enough freedom to teach in this way, rather than implementing a
purely test-based curriculum. Further, professors must encourage risk taking, both
in playing and composing, and allow for a certain amount of failure in order to give
students a better chance at finding a unique voice. Universities should maintain
close relationships with professional jazz players and big band leaders, and should
continue to bring these professionals in to interact with students. Students in big
bands should not only be learning classic tunes, they should be playing new music
by living jazz composers. Nate Kimball remarked, “I know there are a lot of bands
that are really on the cutting edge, and everything they do ultimately is preserving
history through progress." Keeping students engaged with these composers keeps the history of the ensemble alive. Perhaps most importantly, jazz educators need to pass on the joy of the music. The university setting has a tendency to focus too much on quantifiable elements that can be tested, but in music (as in many other creative disciplines) often what is most important for the later careers of students are the intangible elements passed on directly from the professors, the love and joy of the music. For the ensemble and the music to continue, there must be enough space within the curriculum for educators to pass on this joy and deep appreciation.
CHAPTER 4: THE ENSEMBLE’S TIES TO MUSICAL CONSERVATISM

Defining the Issue

One of the largest issues keeping contemporary big band music from reaching new audiences is the ensemble’s connection with musical conservatism. Big bands are typically associated with swing music that was tremendously popular in the 1930s and early 1940s. This early success has contributed to the myth that big bands are an anachronism and that the ensemble died out decades ago. The Grove Dictionary of American Music defines big band as “A type of dance band popular especially in the 1930s and 1940s, typically consisting of ten to 15 instruments, predominantly wind.”¹ This definition clearly applies only to a small number of bands from a certain time period playing a specific genre of music, with most contemporary bands falling well outside the stylistic and functional constraints of this characterization. Within certain parts of the big band community, accusations of musical conservatism can be a particularly biting insult, but the issue is complex and has a history that encompasses even the early years of the ensemble.

Simply defining musical conservatism as it relates to big band is a difficult task, and its meaning may change depending on context. Generally what is meant is that a musician or band plays either canonic tunes exclusively (like some of the repertory orchestras), or they play in an older style, even if some of the tunes are newly composed. Most musicians labeled as conservative will include all the jazz styles up to the hard bop of the 1960s. It was after this point that rock and pop elements began to enter jazz, and the inclusion of these outside influences is treated
by some as a dilution of jazz. Perhaps the musician most frequently accused of
musical conservatism is Wynton Marsalis. Composer/arranger David Berger
defends Marsalis, and recasts the accusation in a positive light, stating that
conserving means keeping quality music while creating new music rooted in its
predecessors. This statement is not at odds with the opinions of more progressive
big band leaders and players, but most would add that the individual composer
must find his or her own voice, which might include other musical influences. In a
1992 interview, Marsalis himself even said that jazz should “evolve through a
certain type of individuality,” but just how it should evolve this way is unclear, given
that Marsalis had just stated that jazz is not supposed to develop like European
music, that the earliest jazz should stay modern.

A middle way, suggested by Rich Shemaria in our interview, would be to
argue that learning and respecting the history of big bands and the history of jazz in
general helps preserve the depth of the music, a depth to which each new voice is
added. Likewise, Alan Ferber asserted that it’s incredibly important to gain
experience with the history and tradition of the ensemble, but that in order for it to
survive, composers must bring their own personalities and own music to the group.
In this way, the music stays current and relevant. Ralph Lalama argued that if the
future of big band music is to be of a high quality, it must be rooted in the past, but
added that this does not mean that modern composers should simply emulate their
predecessors. It is unlikely that there are any current big band composers who
would argue against knowing about the traditions of the ensemble, but the primary
divide between the more progressive leaders and the more conservative ones are
where one draws the line in terms of outside influences. Conservative-leaning leaders tend to focus on older styles, excluding rock, pop, hip-hop, avant-garde classical, electronic, and other outside influences. Musically progressive composers tend to freely integrate music from many genres into their compositions.

**Authenticity of Expression**

A related issue to defining the boundaries of musical conservatism (or at least presenting a spectrum of possible views) is the depth and authenticity of the music. Some composers and bandleaders deemed conservative argue that what is missing in some of the more recent music that includes many outside influences is the depth of expression available in simpler forms and traditional styles. In essence, they argue that jazz musicians have traded depth for breadth. In defense of his brother, Branford Marsalis stated in a *Down Beat* interview:

"Today’s musicians are far more versatile in the things they can do but have light, compact sounds and massive limitations in terms of swing. The emphasis of the songs becomes harmony and odd-meter forms. It’s more of a race toward scholarship. Wynton’s band was the absolute antithesis of that... Neither the song forms nor the meters were complex. It sounds simple until you get your ass on the stage and try to do it... There was an easier and more difficult way of playing back then, and we gave it up for a more difficult, easier way of playing now."  

Wynton would likely agree with this assessment, given his recurring statements that all jazz is modern music. This issue is also related to the issue of the homogenization of style discussed in the previous chapter. As forms and changes become more complex, it is possible that individual expression during solos can be lost. While the more progressive bandleaders would agree with learning the roots of big band jazz, one of the specific complaints about Marsalis’ music is that it lacks a unique voice. In
a 2004 *Down Beat* article, Dan Ouellette wonders whether Marsalis might be the Salieri of his time, building a strong band and presence in New York, but never creating music that is unique or even emulated by younger contemporaries.\(^8\)

In a 2007 interview with Christian Scott, Marsalis also reveals that the notion of the authenticity of expression found in simpler forms may not be the true reason behind his championing of traditional big band music. In the interview, Marsalis is asked if he listens to hip hop music. His response is that he has listened to some (he gives the example of 50 Cent) with his sons. He stated that he analyzed the music and talked with them about the key, form, and other musical factors. He then proceeded to play classical sonatas and Duke Ellington tunes for them to demonstrate the superiority of these pieces. He goes on to say that not one "piece" of hip-hop music "satisfies all the requirements of contemporary Afro-American experience."\(^9\) Marsalis’ reception of hip-hop seems somewhat narrow, and his methodology for rejecting the entire genre belies an academic approach. Even the designation of a hip hop song as a "piece" carries certain connotations that are at odds with valuing authentic expression through simple means. His true opinions and motivations are always difficult to ascertain, and Marsalis himself has often stated that he sometimes says things in an exaggerated way in order to stir up emotions and get a conversation started.\(^10\) This issue will be further explored after detailing the history and programming of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.
Mistaken Views

One of the factors in the persistent myth that the big band is an ensemble of the past is the focus on the small group by jazz scholars as the most fertile area of innovation, as outlined in the introductory chapter. Prewritten large ensemble music naturally connects big band music to classical music, overlooking the freer aspects of the music. The use of the term “jazz orchestra” by many big band leaders in more recent times may have, in fact, further cemented this spurious connection with classical music. In terms of ensemble blend, some big band writers do take a more generalized approach, but many write with specific players in mind, so that each individual maintains his or her musical personality within the texture of the larger ensemble. Duke Ellington famously wrote the name of the player on his parts. More recently, the Mingus Big Band openly encourages players to play in a confrontational style, and musicians whose sounds do not blend well are often booked for this reason. Michael Phillip Mossman, longtime arranger for the band, says that the band is more successful when all of the players are exuberant and sometimes clashing with one another, rather than subduing themselves and trying to blend sounds.  

Additionally, the term “big band” has been so deeply connected with older styles that many composers refuse to use this label with their ensembles. Alan Ferber points out that it is a problem that exists on a larger level in jazz as well:

“When you just say the word ‘big band,’ there’s a crusty connotation to that. It’s like the word ‘jazz.’ People refer to it as a four-letter word. People are afraid to use the word ‘big band’ when they actually put together their own big band, because they don’t want people to think that it’s like Shiny Stockings, you know. [laughs] As long as people keep doing new things with it, I think that those two words will hopefully regain some kind of hipness
factor [laughs], you know, where people won’t be like, ‘Oh god, big band is boring,’ or, ‘Big band is for my grandparents,’ but will be like, ‘Oh yeah, big band’s cool. I’m going to go check that out.’”

Freeing the label of its baggage might be an impossible task, but many big band composers, including Gordon Goodwin, Dave Holland, and Monika Roscher, have recently reclaimed the term. Throughout the 1990s and well into the 2000s, many bandleaders released albums under their own names, with no mention of the ensemble used. If the ensemble was identified, it was usually referred to as a jazz orchestra. Sometimes that “four-letter word” was dropped as well and the groups were just labeled orchestras. Taking a look at the big band recordings released in 1993, only 2 of the 11 recordings released were specifically labeled as big bands, with 3 jazz orchestras and 6 big band leaders releasing the albums under their own names with no mention of the ensemble used. By 2003, the jazz orchestra label clearly had gained some popularity, with 10 out of the 27 albums released falling into this category. 7 of the albums released in 2003 were labeled as big band, which is roughly the same percentage as 1993, while 10 were either under the leader’s name or called something else entirely. The releases of 2013 show that many more people are becoming comfortable with using the term “big band” once again, with 12 out of the 22 albums being labeled as such. In addition, part of the reason the term may be growing in popularity again is the increasing number of albums being

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jazz) Orchestra</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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*table 2: ensemble names*
released in Europe, where both the term and the ensemble are not as closely associated with the past.

**Nostalgia**

Perhaps the most prevalent issue regarding conservatism in big band music is the nostalgia associated with the popular swing bands of the 1930s and 1940s. In a recent letter to the editor in *Down Beat* magazine (labeled “Chords & Discords”), Herb Stark remarks remarked that while he enjoyed the yearly Readers’ Poll, he suggested adding a “Nostalgia” category that would honor the early big band years. The results of the Readers’ Poll, along with the yearly Critics’ Poll, are intended to represent some of the best jazz of the year, including polls for individual instruments, ensembles, and composers. There is already a big band category in the Readers’ Poll, but the winners are active big bands that play mostly new music. While Stark’s fond recollections of the early years of big band music are certainly understandable, it is difficult to justify a category in a yearly poll in which no new entries are allowed from one year to the next, and such a category would further reinforce the idea that the term “big band” denotes a specific style and time period, rather than simply designating the ensemble.

Thankfully, there are others who are aware of the full history of big band music. In another recent letter to the editor in *Down Beat*, Gordon Webb chastises the magazine for not having enough variety in an article written by Frank-John Hadley titled “My Favorite Big Band Album: 25 Essential Recordings”:

“I was disappointed with your “My Favorite Big Band Album” article (April). When 12 of your list of 25 essential big band albums are from the same three artists (Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Miles Davis), it makes having a list rather pointless. Also, I was shocked not to find any mention of Toshiko
Akiyoshi. The Akiyoshi–Tabackin big band ruled the '70s and beyond, with Akiyoshi becoming the first woman and first Asian to win a Down Beat award.”

Each album listed in the article is accompanied by praise from jazz musicians, and all are arguably masterpieces, but Webb’s critique addresses the fact that half of the entries are taken by three artists, while many later big band composers were not represented. In fact, only two big band composers on the list, Kenny Wheeler and Maria Schneider, are still living.

Tied in with the issue of nostalgia is the related issue of audience expectations. Given the connection of the ensemble with the early swing genre, there is an instant mental association that can make it difficult to court younger audiences. Some bands (particularly the repertory and legacy bands) use this to their advantage, playing well-worn tunes for older audiences who expect to hear what they know, rather than be exposed to new music. The modern bands that play almost entirely new music, on the other hand, tend to be aimed at younger audiences who are interested in new music that reflects contemporary culture. As stated earlier, many of these bands forgo the term “big band” in order to stay clear of the genre association. Even bands that lie somewhere in between, such as the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, find that the audience often appears to enjoy the standard tunes more than new compositions (even if those new compositions are in an older style). After a week on tour with the band, journalist Paul de Barros describes the audience reaction to a new tune by Andy Farber as lukewarm, while a performance of “Take the A Train” elicits cheers and inspires many to dance. While it is likely that the primary reason for this difference in audience reaction is the
recognition of the tune, a secondary reason might be that the Farber tune was written in the Ellington mold. Although both tunes were similar in style, the Farber tune might have been lacking in authenticity or individual character. This provides another counterpoint to Marsalis’ assertion that the older, simpler styles allow for more authentic expression – when it comes to soloing, perhaps the older styles do allow more room for personal expression, but authenticity through composition may require a more up to date approach. Alan Ferber’s statement about creating a unique voice and keeping the music relevant by being of our time rather than mimicking earlier styles may be the better route to authenticity when it comes to creating new works.

**The Role of Repertory Bands**

Repertory bands are both a prevalent and sometimes contested institution in the larger big band scene. While there is an admitted need for continuing performances of standard tunes, scholars, critics, and musicians alike are divided on how standard tunes should be approached, and whether or not special big bands need to be established to perform this repertory. Some might argue that repertory tunes should be incorporated into performances given by modern bands; however, most modern bands will only include a small number of standard arrangements in a performance (if they include any). Many bands only play new compositions by the bandleader, with the goal of creating a unique sound that sets the band apart from other acts.
One of the largest issues when approaching standard tunes is how a band should interpret the music. Chuck Israels explains the issue, outlining two approaches: a band can either try to sound like the recordings of the band they are trying to emulate, or they can reinterpret the tunes with their individual players in mind. So a repertory band has to decide whether to mimic the approach or the sound of the original band. Bands that attempt to recreate the exact sound of the original recording (even playing transcribed solos) are often disparaged by jazz critics, some of whom feel that taking away the improvisational element and active interpretation sterilizes the music. That said, there is also danger in reinterpreting classic tunes. During its short existence, the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band often performed new arrangements of standard tunes that were so different from the originals they might be considered recompositions. The band was routinely criticized for this practice, and eventually lost funding after the ascendance of the more conservative Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

A subcategory of the repertory band is the so-called “ghost” band. Ghost bands (also called tribute or legacy bands) are bands that play only the music of a single big band whose leader is no longer living. For the most part, the bands aped are the white big bands of the late 1930s and early 1940s, such as Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman, although Count Basie also has a popular ghost band. These bands often work more than their contemporary counterparts, but the nostalgia that feeds ticket sales is on the decline, as the generation that grew up with the swing music of the 1930s and 1940s passes on. The first ghost band was the Glenn Miller Orchestra, and the precedents set by this band largely influenced all
the ghost bands to follow. The band began in 1946, shortly after the death of its leader. It was led by Tex Beneke, and consisted mostly of Miller band veterans. Beneke’s initial idea was to continue the band in a natural way, incorporating new tunes and moving in a direction he thought would have been favored under Miller. The Miller family disagreed with Beneke’s approach and promptly fired him. Since then, the Miller band continues to tour 48 weeks a year, and has performed the same book for over 60 years. Playing a book for that long is not a problem in itself; the real issue with the ghost bands is that the most successful of them are modeled after mediocre bands of the 1930s and 1940s. John McDonough clarifies:

“Ironically, it was precisely the Miller band’s lack of individual strengths that made it possible to continue. For there was nothing in the Miller cocktail that could not be easily substituted or replaced—even Miller himself, who had no particular stage excitement or gifts on the trombone. His great achievement lay in a collective scoring gimmick that any group of good musicians can approximate—a clarinet lead on top of a quartet of saxes and framed in soft, muted brass strokes.”

In fact, when new players are auditioned for the band, more individualized sounds are discouraged (sometimes costing a player the job), and one is expected to be able to mimic the exact width and rate of the vibrato used by the original band. One would expect jazz musicians to be irritated by this lack of individual expression, but the musicians in the Miller band see it differently. Although many of the musicians in the band are true jazz musicians, they view the Miller band concerts as shows, in the same way they might view a Broadway production. Former lead trombonist of the Miller band, Bruce Paulson, echoed this understanding that the band “wasn’t a real jazz band” during our conversation.
The real problem with this approach is not that the Miller band is a show band, but that the typical audience member does not think of it as a show band, and assumes that it is representative of all big bands. There is certainly nothing wrong with being a show band performing older tunes, but it is unfortunate that the ghost bands are placed in the same category as a contemporary big band, being that the two groups have little in common in terms of intentions, working methods, or even basic sounds. The end effect is that the contemporary bands might not receive the right kind of exposure because it is assumed that because they are big bands that the music performed will be canonic swing music.

**The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra**

One very famous band that has walked a careful line between repertory band and working band is the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. Established in 1988 by Wynton Marsalis, the band was initially composed of older players, many of them alumni of the Ellington band. The initial concerts were part of the Lincoln Center’s “Classical Jazz” series, and in the early years the JLCO was essentially a repertory band. Marsalis was influenced by Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch, two leading jazz critics who held very specific (and notably conservative) beliefs about the definition of jazz and what big bands should perform. Jazz scholar Alex Stewart notes that the rhetoric used during the inception of the JLCO matched up with an “era of ascendant neoconservative values.”

Rob Gibson, the original director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, stated in an interview that such a program had been suggested as far back as the 1960s, but was
never able to find funding. He suggested the fact that Wynton Marsalis’ early career consisted of both classical and jazz performances was key in convincing primarily conservative donors to sign on to the project. One of Marsalis’ early statements confirm the musically conservative agenda, in which he says the freedom in jazz is with restraint, and when played properly within the structure, a person can put their freedom at the service of the larger group. This statement, in combination with Murray’s direction to improvisers “not to violate the beat” established the rhetoric behind the JLCO, which sought to create an image opposite that of the rival Carnegie Hall Jazz Band. If the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band insisted on playing new music and drastic reinterpretations of standards, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra would not only recreate the performance traditions of its preferred models – the Ellington orchestra in particular – but also include Ellington veterans in the band itself.

After the initial success of the JLCO, Marsalis began to move the band away from standards and into new music (still written in a conservative style). Around this time, he also fired all of the older band members, who were replaced by inexperienced players from outside New York. Marsalis claims that his interest is in continuing the tradition of apprenticeship, but many of his critics viewed it as a consolidation of power over the ensemble. David Berger, one of Marsalis’ allies and a longtime supporter of the repertory movement, admitted, “He’d rather have young cats that don’t have a style so they can develop one. If he thinks you’re rushing, he wants to be able to say you’re rushing and you’ll do what he says and not question it.”
In an interview with *Down Beat* magazine in 2008, Marsalis claimed that some of his past controversial statements and decisions were meant to incite the press, and that his goal was always to spread the love of jazz. He also began to focus more on the new directions of the orchestra and the variety of current programming. In another interview with *Down Beat* in 2010, he continued to emphasize the amount of new music being produced by the orchestra, pointing out that they were helping showcase jazz to new audiences and raise funds for future endeavors. It should be acknowledged that regardless of any agenda behind the group, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra has led the effort to give big bands a more sophisticated and refined musical image. Alex Stewart judges the effort to be a success, noting that Marsalis was the first jazz musician to be awarded a Pulitzer, an honor that was denied Ellington when he was nominated in 1965.

**The Dangers of Establishing a Big Band Canon**

The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra has been tremendously successful, but questions arise concerning the motivations of its leader, Wynton Marsalis. One of Jazz at Lincoln Center’s known goals is to construct a jazz lineage and establish a canon within the big band world. During the early 19th century, as the orchestra became one of the preferred ensembles for serious music and the genre of the symphony rose to prominence, there was a need to establish a lineage and add legitimacy to the genre. The works of Mozart and Haydn were chosen to represent this Classical era of the symphony, and these works began to be looked at much
more seriously than they would have been during the composers’ lifetimes. According to Rob Gibson, the original director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, the classical canon was used as a model for the establishment of a similar jazz canon. Marsalis and Gibson’s reasoning behind the creation of a jazz canon were both to elevate the status of the music and to offer a guide for future jazz education.27

The “Classical Jazz” concerts that marked the arrival of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra became an effort to posit Duke Ellington in particular as the Mozart of jazz (a statement that is made in the Ken Burns documentary, Jazz).28 Marsalis’ choices of which jazz artists to include in his canon results from drawing a lineage back from himself to some of the early greats, such as Ellington and Louis Armstrong. The danger in this exercise is that any musician or composer that falls outside of this specific line of descent is left out of the canon. Classical music has experienced this same problem, as the countries containing the greatest number of revered composers (namely Germany, France, and Italy) happened to be the same countries where those who pieced together the classical canon resided. In Marsalis’ jazz canon, he is well aware of the music he is excluding. One famous example of this comes from the previously mentioned Ken Burns documentary, Jazz. Marsalis was the primary collaborator on this film, and while the early history is covered with depth and insight, the later developments are either entirely missing or mentioned with derision.

According to the narrative of the film, somewhere around the late 1960s jazz is “corrupted” by outside musical influences. The savior of jazz does not arrive until the 1980s, in the person of Wynton Marsalis. Marsalis certainly deserves to be
represented in the documentary, but it is unfortunate that so many jazz musicians were excluded because they fell outside of this specific lineage. One of the musicians left out of the interim span in particular was Stan Kenton. On the surface, the music Kenton’s big band created in the 1960s and 1970s would appear to fall well within the type favored by Marsalis. Kenton expanded the lush orchestrations of Ellington (or rather, the composers and arrangers he employed did), and most importantly Kenton was one of the pioneers of jazz education, a topic that Marsalis claims is central to his goals. The Kenton band traveled to schools in every part of the nation, giving clinics and performances. Michael Breaux described to me the inspiration of meeting the Kenton band members and being enthralled by their performance, and credits it with being one of the key moments in determining the course of his life. The impact of the Kenton band on a generation of jazz musicians is well documented, and Kenton clearly deserves a place in any comprehensive history of jazz.

It is unclear why exactly Marsalis would purposefully exclude such an important figure in jazz history (and someone whose goals seem to be in line with his own). Some have suggested a racial agenda, although this does not seem to be the case, given that the documentary as a whole seems to be organized around the theme of jazz as a multicultural music reflecting the unique makeup of American society. It is more likely that Kenton simply did not fit the narrative Marsalis and Burns constructed for this time period, one in which jazz was dying and being overtaken by rock music. A significant portion of this final chapter in the documentary, in fact, is dedicated to the passing of Louis Armstrong and Duke
Ellington, an unusual choice since this one episode covers almost as many years as the prior nine. Jazz educator, George Colligan, notes that at this point the documentary gets “preachy,” with Marsalis taking center stage and almost single handedly determining the future of jazz.\(^{31}\)

The other major issue with Marsalis’ canon is that its limited scope almost ensures the demise of jazz as a relevant art form. As Alan Ferber stated in our interview, “If it became museum music, it wouldn’t last. It would become petrified, and that would be that.”\(^{32}\) New works must continue to incorporate outside influences and encourage unique musical personalities in order to stay current and have an impact with new audiences. Alex Stewart notes that the repertory available to big bands is minimal when compared to the classical symphonic canon, and certainly not enough to sustain the ensemble for a longer period of time.\(^{33}\) Again, this is not to say that young jazz players should not learn classic charts, but the type of historicism Marsalis has employed in his attempt to establish a canon does not allow for more current influences. Perhaps the best way forward is to eschew meta-narratives in favor of micro-narratives, meaning that it is okay to trace influences from one composer or musician to the next, but there are many such lineages, and choosing one to the exclusion of all the others is a far too narrow approach.

**The Mingus Big Band: A Conundrum**

The Mingus Big Band has gained significant notoriety in recent years, and its leader, Sue Mingus, has positioned the band in many ways as the antithesis of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. Many big band fans believe that the band has
brought a fresh sound into the genre, and the group has won both the *Down Beat* Readers’ and Critics’ Polls a number of times in the past two decades. The irony of the Mingus Big Band being a source of fresh material and innovation in the genre is that it is essentially a repertory band. As Geoffrey Himes notes, “No other dead jazz composer has benefitted more from repertory bands.”

While the Mingus Big Band is fundamentally a repertory band, there are some important differences in the way the band operates and the way the music is handled when compared to the average repertory band. Charles Mingus never led a big band of this sort during his lifetime, and left no charts for this instrumentation. All the music played by the band is arranged by its members, with the majority of the arranging work done by Michael Phillip Mossman. Mossman has stated that he tries not to change too much from the small and medium group originals, which sometimes necessitates more doubling than would normally happen in a big band score. This gives the opportunity for players to create tension through multiple interpretations of a line all being played at once, which fits with the Mingus aesthetic. Mingus’ widow, Sue Mingus, runs the band and books the players. Sue Mingus is not a musician, and has a very unorthodox management style, often booking players who do not match styles (and sometimes do not get along). Some of the musicians, notably Howard Johnson, a tuba player who actually played with Charles Mingus during his lifetime, have stated that they would prefer someone with more musical knowledge take control of the band. Alex Stewart, however, believes that this disjunct and chaotic method to booking the band and hiring players is essential to the sound and success of the
The chaos is a necessary ingredient to keep the performers on edge, which some define as a prerequisite for performing Mingus’ music.

This chaos in many ways allows for an authenticity of expression that is absent in many repertory bands. In a way, each band member adds their own unique voice to the already unique compositional voice of Mingus. Mingus’ idiosyncrasies are what keep his output sounding fresh decades later, and adding new and younger voices to his music (many of whom were born after Mingus’ death) might be the proper way of updating the tunes in the way Stewart suggested to keep orchestral jazz vital and relevant. While the band does not have the polished sound of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, this quality is sacrificed for the feeling of immediacy, which may be the principal reason the band elicits such a strong response from listeners.

The other question regarding conservatism and the Mingus Big Band that deserves attention is a much broader issue that also affects classical music: is the performance of avant-garde music from the past immune from accusations of conservatism? Patrons of contemporary classical concerts have become accustomed to the idea of “new” music as more of a genre marker than an indication of a recently written piece, as many concerts feature new music that is more than a century old. In many ways, this does a disservice to the many great living composers of classical music, much in the same way as focusing primarily on the jazz greats hinders the creation of new great jazz composers. In the case of the Mingus Big Band, the music they play is that of an outsider not as accepted by the jazz establishment as Ellington, Basie, or Armstrong, so in some ways it remains new. The full
participation of the band’s members, as arrangers and performers maintaining their own unique voice, further allows this music to retain its vitality and relevance. How long this can continue, however, is uncertain.

**Differing Approaches: the JLCO and Mingus Big Band’s Treatment of Mingus’ “Dizzy Moods”**

Members from the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, led by Wynton Marsalis, performed the music of Mingus in celebration of his 80th birthday on November 10, 2001, at a children’s concert with Sue Mingus in attendance. Dan Ouellette describes the chaos section of “The Shoes of the Fisherman’s Wife” as being “rendered with kid gloves, unlike Mingus’ own barreling outbursts.”37 The children were apparently fidgety during the concert, a fact that Marsalis apparently associated with the avant-garde nature of the music, but Ouellette seems to suggest might be because of the inauthentic performance. Regardless of what caused the children’s fidgeting, the suggestion of a lack of authenticity is echoed by James Hale in a review of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra’s 2005 album, *Don’t Be Afraid... The Music of Charles Mingus*. Hale compared the performances to a Madame Tussaud wax figure, noting that this sort of museum treatment and careful planning does not work with the spirit of Mingus’ music. Hale continues:

> “Their handclaps, yelps and precision tempo shifts sound premeditated. Their collective weight keeps them flatfooted when the music demands butterfly moves. And, above all, they lack the danger of implosion that Mingus’ music must carry in its DNA to sound authentic. Trombonist Ron Westray’s arrangements often go the other direction, reducing ‘Black Saint and the Sinner Lady’ to a pleasant suite with a series of tight solos with none of the passion and pain of its source material. Worse, ‘Don’t Be Afraid, the Clown’s Afraid Too’ sounds like slick formulaic big band music.”38
Since these two bands are often put at odds with one another, it is often overlooked that many of the JLCO members have also played extensively with the Mingus Big Band, including some of the members on this recording. The difference appears to be in the approaches of the leaders. Marsalis’ tightly controlled band is certainly more polished, but this approach drains Mingus’ music of its vitality. A comparison of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and Mingus Big Band’s handling of the same tune will illuminate the vastly different approaches taken by the two ensembles.

Charles Mingus recorded “Dizzy Moods” in 1957 with his sextet, consisting of himself, Shafi Hadi on alto and tenor saxophone, Clarence Shaw on trumpet, Jimmy Knepper on trombone, Bill Triglia on piano, and Dannie Richmond on drums. It appears on the album, Tijuana Moods, which was released in 1962. The tune’s name comes from the fact that the changes are based on the Dizzy Gillespie tune, “Woodyn You.” Rather than simply starting the tune, Mingus employs an introduction that features all of the players in the sextet. The three horns begin with a standard jazz figure that is made unusual by the voicing and the style of performance. The chords are all voiced as root, b5, and 11, leaving out the 3rd and 7th of the chord (see fig. 2).

![Opening measures of "Dizzy Moods"

fig. 2: opening measures of “Dizzy Moods”]
A more traditional approach would have been to simplify the chords, but this voicing conveys Mingus’ complex harmonic language within the limitations of three pitches. In addition to the non-traditional voicing, the horns play this figure straight, with heavy accents on the upbeats. This is followed by a four bar bass solo in which Mingus swings the eighths, but maintains the upbeat accents to provide a transition to a more standard swing feel. A four bar drum solo and four bar piano solo that is played as if it were a solo break finish the introduction.

The form of the tune is AABA, but as expected, Mingus includes some surprises. The A section is a cool, bluesy melody played in unison by the horns (save for the last note, which breaks into a chord). On the repeat, rather than play the melody, Mingus instructs the horns to improvise collectively. This room for both conversation and confrontation in the music is an important aspect of Mingus’ work. The B section is somewhat of an off-kilter waltz. The use of a hocket technique in combination with purposefully loose rhythmic playing provides a fresh contrast with the tight, bluesy A section. Even the drummer plays with the time, thwarting our musical expectations given the content of the A section. It is apparent that this loose playing is on purpose, as the B sections during the solos are rhythmically tight. At the end of the solos, rather than bring back the head directly, Mingus chooses to use the horn intro, but has the horns play it several times and twice as fast.

The handling of this tune by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and Mingus Big Band is quite different, and reveals differing attitudes toward the source material. The Mingus Big Band recorded the tune in 1998 on their Que Viva Mingus! album, while the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra recorded it seven years later for
their Mingus tribute album. In the introduction, the JLCO chooses to swing the horn figures and remove the accents. This, in combination with the harmony being filled in, essentially normalizes this passage and gives it a more traditional sound.

Westray even adds horns to the original Mingus bass solo, but again the accents are left out, and the line is modified to become a somewhat hackneyed big band figure (see fig. 3). Westray does incorporate the horn voicings from the beginning to give the introduction coherence, but the predictability of this figure undermines the strangeness of the original introduction. Instead of the four bar piano break at the end of the introduction, the JLCO plays the opening eighth notes of the melody in a hemiola over three bars, followed by three random notes divided among the sections. One would assume this final bar is to try to recapture some of the peculiarity that is integral to Mingus, but it is so obviously planned and cleanly executed that it falls flat.

The Mingus Big Band opens the tune with a metrically ambiguous Latin groove. This is quite a change to the introduction, but it sets up the B section, which has been altered from odd waltz to odd Latin groove. The rhythm is tight in the B section, but increased hocketing helps maintain the chaotic nature of the section. The strangeness of this groove is certainly in the spirit of Mingus, and it was no doubt added because the album, *Que Viva Mingus!*, is intended to be a celebration of
Mingus’ exploration of Latin music. The presence of the Latin groove in the beginning and in the B section helps unify the arrangement, rather than having a new element added that sounds out of place. In the JLCO version, Westray adds some faux-odd figures to the end of the tune that are not only extraneous, the forced nature of the figures is almost patronizing to the listener. After the opening Latin groove in the MBB arrangement, the horns play the intro figure, but twice as fast, like the return in the original. They also only use three horns, keeping the voicing the same as the original. The bass solo is extended to eight bars, and John Benitez improvises his own solo rather than copying the original. The JLCO’s rendition of the B section is closer to the original, but is so tightly controlled that the effect of the section is lost. The hocketing in the melody is changed so that the primary melody comes in on the downbeat rather than the upbeat, and the trombones play upbeats to simulate the original effect. However, with the melody line normalized, the almost out of control original is turned into a standard jazz waltz.

The solo sections are handled in a traditional format by the JLCO, with soloists playing over the form. Westray includes background figures, which are to be expected in a big band chart – after all, if most of the players are barely used, there is no point in a chart being written/arranged for a large ensemble. While there is nothing wrong with doing this, Westray’s background figures are far too traditional for Mingus and sound out of place. The Mingus Big Band’s arrangement (this particular tune is a collective arrangement) also includes backgrounds during the piano solo, but they are short and quite simple. These backgrounds do not violate the spirit of Mingus’ music, but they do not add any interest to the arrangement
either. The MBB’s handling of the solo section is quite different, alternating between
double-time swing, the Latin groove, and the original tempo. This holds the
listener’s interest, and is naturally the part of the tune where it is perfectly
reasonable to expect the band to allow room for their own voices.

Perhaps the largest and most significant difference in the handling of “Dizzy
Moods” is in the A section. The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra swings the eighths
much harder than in the original, almost resulting in a triplet feel. The coolness of
the melody from the original becomes almost too snappy. This style of swing was
more popular in the 1930s and 1940s, and given that the JLCO plays more Duke
Ellington than anything else, it is possible that this older style of swinging has
become the standard for the ensemble. The MBB’s A section is swung in the style of
the original, and on the repeat they forgo collective improvisation for call and
response figures between the trumpets and trombones. This is probably a practical
choice, since collective improvisation would sound cacophonous here and violate
the laid back spirit of the section. That said, it does normalize the section and
diminishes the eccentricity of the original. When the JLCO repeats the A section, the
band plays the melody again while Wynton Marsalis solos over it. This would be a
perfectly acceptable solution, but Marsalis blows over every occurrence of the A
section for the rest of the tune. Not only does this replace the musical conversation
and confrontation that is so important to Mingus’ music with monologue, but at a
certain point a listener would be right to wonder who’s tune this really is. Marsalis
remakes Mingus’ music in his own image, which somewhat ironically is giving his
own authentic interpretation of the music. However, it violates the preservation he
supposedly seeks, whitewashing Mingus’ music of its confrontational style. The Mingus Big Band’s treatment includes more drastic changes, but all are done with the spirit of the original in mind, and in this way they are able to add their own voices to the music without simply recreating it.

**Balancing Innovation with Preservation**

So how should band leaders, composers, and players balance the preservation of the big band tradition with continuing to push the ensemble forward? Most agree that there should be some element of both, but there is a wide spectrum of opinions pertaining to exactly what that balance should be. At the center of that spectrum is Carla Bley, who argues that the balance between preservation and innovation is essential, if difficult. In an email to me, Bley made a comparison to the classical world, noting that some of the best orchestras program both canonic repertoire and new music.\(^{39}\) Several classical orchestras have used this technique of programming both new and old music together to great success, most notably the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony. This approach is one used by many university ensembles, which is also useful in teaching students the music of the tradition. Frank Vaganée, leader of the Brussels Jazz Orchestra, told me that this study of earlier big band charts by students helps better prepare them for the performance of contemporary big band music.\(^{40}\) Tom Kubis agreed, adding that if students are considering working in a studio environment at any point, comprehensive knowledge of prior styles is a necessity.\(^{41}\)
At the other end of the spectrum, Heinrich von Kalnein, one of the leaders of the often-experimental Jazz Bigband Graz, stated in an email that he sees no reason for maintaining traditions beyond jazz education, arguing that as long as something valid is created, innovation is the most important part of any tradition. How one would determine whether a creation is valid or not is unclear. Kalnein’s opinion might seem a bit harsh, but he certainly does not mean for all learning of traditional practices to be removed from jazz, but rather for innovation to be the primary focus outside of jazz education. Many of his fellow Europeans have similar opinions regarding the preservation of tradition, and tend to produce music of a more experimental nature. Wynton Marsalis points out, however, that there is more than one path to innovation:

“Someone can be creative inside or outside the mainstream of a tradition. Inside, you create new ways to do existing things better. Outside, you create a new world. Both options can be innovative.”

This approach allows for a multitude of musical personalities to approach the music with their own particular leanings, although it should be noted that Marsalis has often been critical of those outside the mainstream.

At a professional level, perhaps a good balance between innovation and preservation is the approach outlined to me by Nate Kimball, in which the composer openly discusses his or her influences with the audience. If a particular tune is specifically influenced by a previous jazz composer, the audience gets to hear a new composition while planting seeds of interest in the older composers. Ralph Lalama stated in our interview that all the best composers and arrangers have a solid foundation built upon their predecessors:
“If you listen to any great jazz arranging, they’re influenced by the past. It gives the music a core that you can add to. A tree has a trunk; a house has a foundation. You don’t hang your house on a tree limb, you dig into the ground and build it up. It’s the same in music.”

This type of innovation on a foundation keeps the music fresh while acknowledging influences and maintaining a connection with the tradition. However, it is important not to merely ape earlier composers and styles. Alan Ferber argued that new relevant music keeps the ensemble relevant, and is essential to its survival.

Although he does not go so far as to directly make this point, his statement also suggests something that is not typically considered about the future of the big band: not all of the music written for the ensemble has to be jazz as traditionally defined. In fact, many of the currently active big band composers write music that would hardly be considered jazz if it were not performed by an ensemble so tightly linked with the jazz tradition.

Big Band music, and jazz in general, has arrived at a point in its history when it is important to make at least preliminary decisions about what music from earlier years should be kept alive in performances, and what approach would best serve the music. Given the emphasis on individual musical personalities (both in improvisation and composition) essential to the immediacy that grants power to the art form, simply recreating the sounds of earlier bands is certain to drain the music of its vitality. Tunes must be updated to maintain their relevance and perhaps even provide a point of entry for new listeners to discover classic arrangements and compositions. New music must also be given an appropriate chance to thrive. The various outside influences available to today’s composers should be absorbed into the works written for big band, so that the ensemble may move beyond its ties with
1930s and 1940s swing music. In the following chapter, we will take a closer look at some of the musical personalities of several contemporary big band composers and observe how each incorporates influences from both inside and outside of jazz to create his or her own unique voice.
CHAPTER 5: SIX FACES OF THE CONTEMPORARY BIG BAND SCENE

Speaking with optimism about the current big band scene, Alan Ferber noted to me that there is a greater diversity of approaches to writing for the ensemble, and he sees a good possibility of this diversity continuing to increase.¹ With these new voices and new approaches to the big band format, the flexibility and range of the ensemble is not only revealed, but also further expanded. In our interview, Dave Pietro observed that a big band can create large orchestral sounds, but also is small enough to allow for individual expression, both in improvisation and interpreting written parts. Pietro praised this “combination of the individual and the society all in one.”² The ever-increasing number of instrument doubles available also adds to the flexibility of the ensemble, giving it a more varied timbral palette than any group of its size. A number of contemporary big band composers have continued to push the timbral and stylistic variety by incorporating techniques and sounds from many different genres of music, including rock, avant-garde classical, pop, electronic, and film. This chapter will seek to offer a snapshot of six contemporary big band composers through the exploration of one composition from each. The six composers included are Carla Bley, Maria Schneider, Jim McNeely, Gordon Goodwin, Alan Ferber, and Darcy James Argue. They have been chosen to represent a number of current approaches to writing for the ensemble. Given that there is no method to impartially choose six individuals to represent many, one should not view this list as totalizing, but rather as a sample of some of the current active composers for the ensemble. It is intended to serve as a tasting of the current scene, designed to
inspire hunger in the reader for more of the sonic flavors offered by the modern big band.

**Carla Bley (b. 1936)**

Carla Bley is one of several jazz performers and composers who increased the visibility of women in jazz in the 1960s and 1970s. Although women had been a part of jazz from its inception, the majority were involved as singers, and there were very few who were accepted as instrumentalists and composers (Mary Lou Williams being one of the few notable exceptions). Bley’s style is experimental and at times confrontational. Her early works, in particular, utilize a large amount of dissonance and abrupt meter changes. She became involved with the big band (as well as other large ensemble formats) relatively early in her career, and founded the Jazz Composers’ Orchestra in the late 1960s along with her second husband, Michael Mantler. The Jazz Composers’ Orchestra provided an outlet for avant-garde composers to work with a large ensemble at a time when there were few working big bands.

After the Jazz Composers’ Orchestra disbanded in 1975, Bley only worked in the big band format occasionally until the 1990s. Much of her work since then has been for the ensemble, and her style has evolved to be more controlled and less brash. She has stated that in her early work she was simply trying out every possibility, and after seeing what works for her she has a much clearer sense of what types of musical ideas to use.³ Bley has also admitted that her personality has softened as a result of regular work with a big band. At one point, she even jokingly
claimed that she became “Countess Basie.” Jazz scholar, Lewis Porter, notes that Bley’s strengths include a natural rhythmic flow (despite odd meters and phrase lengths), surprising harmonies, and the ability to transform a short motive into an engaging theme. Some of Bley’s techniques seem to be derived from classical practices, but she maintains that she has had no formal training and little knowledge of music outside of those she has worked with or heard directly. She also does not consider herself a jazz musician, but rather a composer who writes for jazz musicians. Although she rarely solos on her albums, it is quite clear that she is a capable improviser. She has stated that soloists who can maintain an audience’s attention over an extended period of time are rare, which is why she prefers a certain amount of prewritten music to keep a tune going. This is perhaps the reason for her infrequent solos and refusal to call herself a jazz musician.

"Beads" (1996)

The 1994 tune, “Beads,” first recorded on the album, The Carla Bley Big Band Goes to Church, provides an example of Bley’s mature style. The form of the tune is essentially A-B-A, with each 24 bar A section containing two subsections. The opening melody is built from a three bar motive (see fig. 4) that is then repeated twice, transposed a whole step higher each time. The line suggests a diminished scale (octatonic in classical nomenclature), but never allows a single diminished
scale to be completed due to the half step relationship between the C# at the end of
the first iteration and the D at the beginning of the second. The notes of the melody
do not correspond to the underlying harmonies in any predictable way, sometimes
falling within the harmony while at other times not. With its two against three
rhythmic design, this slinking melodic figure would seem to undermine both the
harmony and rhythm, but its internal coherence and occasional alignment with the
harmony provide an ebbing tension that drives the music forward. The b section
melody is also derived from the six note motive, but is only repeated twice before
making a final four bar descent.

\[ \begin{array}{cccccccc}
\text{A} \\
\text{a} \\
& \text{F#} & \text{Eb} & \text{F#} & \text{B} & \text{Ab} & \text{B} & \text{Bb} & \text{G} & \text{Bb} & \text{A} \\
& \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \downarrow m2 & \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \downarrow m3 & \downarrow m3 \\
\text{b} \\
& \text{D} & \text{B} & \text{D} & \text{G} & \text{E} & \text{G} & \text{F#} & \text{Eb} & \text{C} & \text{B} \\
& \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \downarrow m2 & \downarrow m3 & \downarrow m3 & \downarrow m3 & \downarrow m3 \\
\text{B} \\
& \text{Bb} & \text{A} & \text{D} & \text{Db} & \text{C} & \text{F} & \text{E} & \text{Eb} & \text{Ab} & \text{G} \\
& \downarrow m2 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m2 & \downarrow m2 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m2 & \downarrow m2 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m2 \\
\text{A'} \\
\text{a} \\
& \text{D} & \text{B} & \text{D} & \text{G} & \text{E} & \text{G} & \text{F#} & \text{Eb} & \text{F#} & \text{B} \\
& \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \downarrow m2 & \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \uparrow \text{P4} \\
\text{b} \\
& \text{Bb} & \text{G} & \text{Bb} & \text{Eb} & \text{C} & \text{Eb} & \text{Ab} & \text{F} & \text{D} & \text{Db} \\
& \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m3 & \uparrow m3 & \uparrow \text{P4} & \downarrow m3 & \downarrow m3 & \downarrow m3 & \downarrow m2
\end{array} \]

*fig. 5: chord root relationships in “Beads*
The underlying harmony in the A sections consists entirely of dominant seventh chords with a lowered fifth. If this occurrence of the tritone in every chord were not strange enough, the relationship between almost all of the chords is either mediant or chromatic (see fig. 5). In order to create some sense of coherence, Bley once again employs repetition, with the a and b sections within each A section essentially utilizing the same progression, only transposed down a major third (with the exception of the penultimate chord and two fourths in the closing section). The descending third motion between these sections creates an overall descent of an augmented fifth. Additionally, the a and b melodies start an augmented fifth apart (C/G# and B/G). This creates a structural contrast with the overwhelming amount of lowered fifths present in the individual chords.

The B section provides both melodic and harmonic contrast (see fig. 6). This section contains the only major seventh chords in the entire tune, save for the final
chord. That being said, there are still many lowered fifths present. This balance keeps the aesthetic of the tune unified while providing contrast. The flowing eighth note lines act to counter the slinking A section melody. The diminished scale suggested by the A section motive is fully present here, used to accompany the lingering b5 chords. For the remaining major seventh chords, Bley uses a mixture of major scales and Lydian modes. Given that each Lydian mode used either starts or ends on the second degree (depending on whether the line is ascending or descending), and starts or ends on the raised fourth degree, these passages sound tonally ambiguous. If the lowest note of each scale were taken as the root, one could alternately interpret the scales as Locrian mode, or even as the altered scale with the missing fourth added. Bley is able to utilize just enough of this ambiguity without the music becoming incoherent. The final chromatic descent in the harmony of the B section coupled with the rising melody line suggests an approaching climax. This suggestion would seem to be confirmed by the presence of the altered chord (a dominant seventh chord with added b9, #9, #11, and b13) at the end, a chord that is strongly dominant. Bley voices these final four measures with trumpets screaming, only to drop the melody two octaves and return to the A section motive. The effect of this sidestepped climax is one of surprise, but not disappointment. Bley has in many ways prepared the listener for the unexpected through subtle sleight of hand throughout the tune.

Bley incorporates the full instrumentation of the big band to provide counter melodies and keep the solo sections moving forward. The saxophones have the melody throughout the head, and Bley utilizes short motives in the brass similar to
the construction of the primary melody, but at half the speed and in conjunction with the chord changes. This increases the apparent disconnect between the melody and the accompanying chords. At the end of both solos, the remaining horns enter with punchy background figures to spur the soloist on. This may be Bley’s way of reconciling the need for solos without completely leaving the pacing up to the soloist. After a brief interlude between the two solos, consisting of more punchy figures and a chordal section built from motivic cells similar to the ones used in the head, the trumpet soloist seems to preemptively respond to the punchy background figures by beginning his solo with isolated staccato jabs. Following the trumpet solo, Bley utilizes more punchy figures in sequence to finally circle back to the head. “Beads” provides an apt example of Bley’s compositional style: tightly controlled, yet still transgressive.

**Maria Schneider (b. 1960)**

Perhaps one of the most well known figures in the current big band scene is Maria Schneider. After completing a degree in theory and composition from the University of Minnesota and a Master’s from the Eastman School of Music, Schneider was hired as a copyist for Gil Evans. Evans was a master orchestrator and often used instruments that are not often present in jazz, such as the French horn and tuba. He is best known for his work with Miles Davis, first in the late 1940s on what became known as *The Birth of the Cool*, and then again on a series of albums in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including *Miles Ahead, Porgy and Bess*, and *Sketches of Spain*. Schneider also studied with Bob Brookmeyer, then composer in residence for The
Vanguard Jazz Orchestra and Professor at New England Conservatory. Both mentors encouraged Schneider to express her own style and disregard conventions. According to Schneider, Brookmeyer helped her move past the typical jazz template, convincing her that by using it she was relinquishing control over her own music. Over time, much of Schneider’s music has come to embrace smooth orchestral textures and mostly consonant sounds. David Hajdu noted that after attending a performance of hers in 1994 with Bob Brookmeyer, he was asked his opinion of the music. He noted that it was “much more than beautiful,” (emphasis in original) to which Brookmeyer responded, “Isn’t beautiful enough for you?”9 Hajdu goes on to articulate a point that many have noted about Schneider’s music: creating something new and fresh does not necessarily mean that it has to be avant-garde.

“The Pretty Road” (2007)

“The Pretty Road,” from Schneider’s 2008 album, Sky Blue, showcases her compositional style. Like many of Schneider’s works, the piece is programmatic and does not contain the stylistic markers of jazz. Schneider does not seem to be concerned with typical jazz performance practices, including trochaic eighth notes, multiple solo sections, and standard forms. In fact, since the 2000 album, Days of Wine and Roses, she dropped the term “jazz” from the name of her group, and it is now simply known as the Maria Schneider Orchestra. Schneider has said that she does not want her band to sound like a traditional big band because while the traditional music is powerful and fun, she feels that it lacks more nuanced expression.10 However, she does borrow one convention from earlier big bands,
which is the use of a wordless vocal line. This was a popular device used frequently in the Ellington band, but she often doubles the vocal line with accordion, an instrument not often seen in current jazz, to create an entirely different timbre.

The piece is about a memory from Schneider’s childhood growing up in Minnesota:

“[The] song transported me back to our family station wagon, driving home on any of many nights on a flat, two-lane, corn and bean-lined highway from a country restaurant five miles outside of Windom, Minnesota. Somehow this tune conjured up the excitement of approaching town with Dad at the wheel, who, if convinced by his three begging daughters, would take an alternate route into town. This alternate road landed us on a hill (a word used liberally here) that overlooked all the sparkly lights of Windom. We named it The Pretty Road (with an emphasis on ‘Pretty’). In those moments I secretly dubbed Windom the most beautiful, magical place on earth. There’s a wide gap between the place I see now when I stop at The Pretty Road and my distant but colorful memories. I’m not sure I’d even qualify it as a hill anymore. They say that the view from The Pretty Road changed with the trees that now block the view. I feel the hill somehow shrank. But whether the geological shift is based in reality or perception, I remember it as heart-stoppingly spectacular.”

The piece is really about a feeling in time and recapturing the wonder of a youthful gaze more so than it is an exact recollection of events. She also allows for others in the band, particularly trumpet soloist Ingrid Jensen, to put their memories into the piece as well, and hopes that the sounds will evoke similar feelings contained in memories of the listener.

One of the most unique features of “The Pretty Road” is a sequence during the solo in which Schneider allows for much free improvisation. Within this section, Schneider also creates a collage of sounds that represent different parts of her childhood, including church bells, children running, her crow, a meadow lark, a friend’s mother calling for her in a peculiar way (Hopey!), and the tune, “As Time
Goes By,” a favorite of her parents, and perhaps a reference to the temporal distance between the composition and the original memories (see fig. 7). Those not playing one of these themes are asked to improvise freely in A Ionian, with the instruction “Everyone think ‘twinkly lights.’” Added to this is the continued solo of Ingrid Jensen, who utilizes a delay effect on her trumpet to fit into the shimmering sound.

This free section acts almost as an auditory dream sequence, in which fragments of remembered sounds are reassembled into something resembling Schneider’s memory, presented to let the audience experience the memory of the feeling she had as a child directly. At the end of the dream sequence, Schneider transitions back into the tune through repetition and harmonization of the "Hopey!" theme.

Stylistically, Schneider states that “The Pretty Road” is essentially a pop tune. One should be warned not to associate pop style with a lack of sophistication, and in fact without her advanced compositional techniques, something written in this style could easily become vapid kitsch. She says that the piano opening was the first thing
she wrote, and its pop style reminded her of home. The theme in this opening can be divided into two phrases, which will be referred to as $P_1$ and $P_2$ (see figs. 8 & 9).

Although the piece is through composed, this particular theme is found throughout the piece in an ever-evolving form. Schneider's choice of instrumentation for this
theme throughout is unique for the ensemble, with the voice, accordion, and piano being the primary voices used. It is highly unusual for the saxophones and brass not to carry the tune at any point during a big band composition. Schneider does allow the second reed to accompany the trio on alto flute at m. 37, and a tenor and bass clarinet join at m. 210, but the darker and less assertive timbres of these instruments make it clear that the voice and accordion are still the lead voices.

In the first phrase of the theme (P₁), Schneider intended the original presentation to pause momentarily at the end, as if letting out a sigh after remembering something.¹² This moment of pause evolves over the course of the piece, first by eliminating the suspension figure and shortening the bars at m. 73. It is notable that this is the fifth presentation of P₁, and the last before the solo break and dream sequence. P₁ is quite consistent in the first half, but the second half brings new variants entering much more often, sometimes one directly following the other (with no statement of P₂). This almost obsessive reiteration of P₁ suggests that the direct contact with the memory in the dream sequence blurred the filtered memory of the remainder of the piece. P₁ tries to discover itself through many variations, finally settling into a version that is rhythmically similar to the opening presentation (and melodically similar until the last three notes) in m. 252. P₂ evolves much more during the opening section, providing three different variations that are paired with the four iterations of P₁ unchanged. In fact, it is when P₁ changes for the first time that P₂ is absent, and P₂ does not return until P₁ has essentially returned to its original form in m. 252.
Two other motives are significant in the development of the piece. The first is the melody that first appears at m. 21 (see fig. 10). Schneider says she created this melody to allow the primary theme to breathe, with the long notes allowing for lush orchestrations and the bass clarinet/trombone countermelody to be heard. This secondary theme only appears three times in the piece, but provides an important contrast to the primary theme, particularly in the second half. The second variant of the theme appears in m. 226, temporarily breaking up the chain of P1 variants (appearing in m. 210, 212, 214, 219, 221, and 223). Without this secondary theme,
the second half would be in danger of monotony, due to the frequent recurrence of $P^1$. The other significant motive is what will be referred to as the “car theme” (see fig. 11). On a behind the scenes video that is bundled with the purchase of the score via her Artistshare website, Schneider states that when she hears this motive, she feels like she is in the car with her dad. It is significant that this motive is the least varied of all, perhaps representing the safety and stability of being in the family car with her father. It should also be noted that this theme is the last thing heard from the wordless vocal part in m. 260. The voice part throughout the piece almost always has the melody line, suggesting that it might represent Schneider’s own voice. Shortly after the voice sings this as its last melodic passage, a flute and clarinet play it one after the other as the last melodic lines of the piece, with the other musicians producing light “chatter” that fades out. Since the return of what is essentially the initial version of $P^1$ happened only eight bars before this ending, it perhaps suggests that we have recovered the memory and are back in the car, with the sparkling view from the Pretty Road fading into the distance.

![fig. 11: “car theme”](image)
Jim McNeely (b. 1949)

Jim McNeely is renowned as both a jazz composer and pianist. He started his career in New York in 1975, and played with many of the leading jazz performers of the time, including Phil Woods and Stan Getz. He was also a member of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra from 1978 to 1984. Although McNeely has a degree in composition from the University of Illinois, much of his style can be attributed to his absorption of the New York jazz scene of the 1970s. He describes listening to Red Garland voice a chord with a 9 in the right hand and a b9 in the left (which was against the rules being established in jazz education), and after studying some of the scores of Thad Jones, McNeely said he realized that so many great jazz musicians and composers not only broke traditional rules, but the way they violated standard procedures was what helped create their own unique voice. McNeely also credits Bob Brookmeyer for encouraging his composition. Brookmeyer was the musical director for the Mel Lewis Band after the departure of Thad Jones in late 1978, and after working with the WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk) Big Band for several years, Brookmeyer convinced them to do an album of McNeely's compositions. According to McNeely, this led to a chain of opportunities that brought him back to the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra (as the group was renamed after the death of Mel Lewis) as the composer-in-residence, a position he still holds. McNeely's style is complex and decidedly serious, utilizing dense harmonies and structures, and can be aggressive and confrontational at times. In fact, Down Beat magazine once referred to Up From the Skies, a Vanguard Jazz Orchestra album of his works, as "concert jazz at its headiest."
“Lickety-Split” (1996)

“Lickety-Split,” the title track from the first release of the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra under the present moniker and the first recording released by the band in seven years, demonstrates Jim McNeely’s ability to utilize complex compositional procedures to create music that is both sophisticated and accessible. According to the album’s liner notes, the genesis of “Lickety-Split” was a thought experiment: “What if the baritone saxophone player in James Brown’s band started to o.d. on Woody Shaw, Sun Ra, and Witold Lutoslawski? And one night he lost it and went completely over the line?” McNeely filters these dramatically different influences through his own sensibilities to create a tune that, while still clearly showing the source material in its DNA, is a new synthesis of his own creation.

The head of the tune is in an A-B-A format (see fig.12). The A section contains the homage to Woody Shaw: the lines are highly chromatic and angular, yet the resulting sound is not overly dissonant. The melody is split between two instrument pairs, tenor sax and trumpet 4 in the first half and soprano sax and trumpet 2 in the second. The wide range of the melody coupled with the succession of fifth and tritone leaps in m. 22 would make this incredibly difficult for a single player to perform, so McNeely wisely creates a composite melody by having the instrument pairs overlap on the Bb. Underlying the melody is a James Brown style vamp that is loosely adapted from the song, “I Got the Feelin.’” The B section is more typical of McNeely’s style, with dense voicings consisting mostly of minor seventh chords with
the root in the lead voice and the seventh in the lowest voice. The simplicity of the “I Got the Feelin’” bass vamp allows space for this added complexity in the B section melody. At m. 188, rhythmically augmented versions of the B section lines are introduced as background figures that eventually lead to the pseudo saxophone solo at m. 205, which is similar in character to the A section. In both cases, the “reprise” of each section is somewhat of a caricature, with its notable features exaggerated.

The tune opens with a shocking six measures that present a tone row in staggered, overlapping entrances. This row will become involved in an increasingly dramatic back and forth with another James Brown-esque bass line that accounts for the latter third of the tune. This final section begins in m. 257, with a bass line

**fig. 12: “Lickety-Split” head**
fig. 13: opening tone row

presented by the bari sax (the featured soloist), piano, and bass (see fig. 14), with no competing figures. Although there is a certain amount of chromaticism in this line, the aural effect is to suggest that we are at least centered on D.

fig. 14: bass line at m. 257

What follows is a continuing back and forth between the rhythm section with bari and the remainder of the horn section playing material developed from the opening tone row in a style McNeely refers to as “swinging pointillism.” This material is abrupt, syncopated, and takes the horn section to extremes of register, spreading the lines between sections for maximum distance. The first of these sections begins in m. 266, where McNeely presents the row in prime form with an
added major third below, followed by $R_1$. There are a few deviations that should be noted, including two instances where McNeely used the added third below to account for one of the row pitches (the Eb and B in m. 268, and the E and G# in m. 271) and the octave C's in m. 270. Also of interest is that what should be the first note of $R_1$ in m. 270 (Eb) is missing, instead replaced with an F#. It is difficult to determine what McNeely's motivations were for changing this one note, but it is likely that he just preferred the sound of the F#.

Following another statement of the bass line in the bari and rhythm section, the pointillism returns in m. 281. It is presented first in prime form transposed a tritone ($P_6$), and then in retrograde ($R_7$), but this time McNeely adds a minor third below each pitch. Once again, there are two places where he uses the lower note to express a row pitch – the simultaneous Bb and C# in m. 282 and B and F in m. 285. These occurrences are in similar places within the six-measure phrase as the ones in m. 266-273. After having two presentations of the swinging pointillism, the bass line re-enters, but it, too, has been adapted to fit the serial practices. In fact, it is an exact
presentation of $R_0$ that has been adapted to be in a similar rhythmic and registral configuration as the original bass line from m. 257. The row is presented up until the last note, which is withheld in m. 293. Instead, McNeely repeats the phrase, adding a bar to allow for the final A to be presented. This process is repeated in m. 313-321. The bass line changes again at m. 302, offering a four bar presentation of $R_{14}$, minus the final note as before. Instead of adding a bar to allow for the resolution, McNeely has the pointillism interrupt after seven measures. In this interruption at m. 309, $R_8$ is presented with more varied accompaniment intervals and in an increasingly agitated yet concise fashion; McNeely is clearly signaling an approaching climax. The final entry of the swinging pointillism in m. 337 is the most dramatic and extended appearance of this idea. McNeely presents four versions of the row: $P_0$ at m. 337, followed by $I_6$ at m. 342 (beginning with the Eb), $R_{17}$ at m. 346, and finally $I_8$ starting on beat four of m. 350. There is one instance of an anomaly
in the row presentation in m. 344, where McNeely puts a B instead of the D required by the row. This section not only contains the widest range utilized for this idea, spanning well over four octaves (the highest and lowest notes even occur in the same measure, 348), but the rhythms become increasingly agitated until the sections begin to play over one another. Finally, the horns collapse into octaves in m. 352. After the collapse of the horn section, the bari sax and rhythm are left alone to finish the tune, and do so by revisiting one of the earlier vamps that oscillates between two chords, much as a funk tune would. However, not only is the power and drive of the funk sections gone, the dreamy Db\(^{13}\)/Eb and Eb\(^{13}\) chords in the piano suggest that perhaps the addled protagonist is descending back to reality.
Gordon Goodwin (b. 1954)

Gordon Goodwin has led a big band in Los Angeles since 2000, consisting of many of the top studio musicians in the area. In an interview for *Down Beat* magazine, Goodwin says that his love for big band began when he heard the album, *Straight Ahead*, by the Count Basie Orchestra. Although Basie was the leader of the orchestra, all of the tunes on the album were composed, arranged, and conducted by Sammy Nestico. Nestico is most associated with the Basie band of the 1960s and 1970s, but he also had a fruitful career in film and television music. In many ways, Goodwin is a modern day Nestico, working in film and television while writing for big band more so for personal enjoyment. Stylistically, Goodwin is also in many ways descended from Nestico, whose charts are known for their highly accessible style. Goodwin draws from a wide variety of material, including funk rhythms, Latin clave, and classical music, but the synthesis of these influences is colored by humor and optimism, giving Goodwin’s band wide appeal. One particular demographic this accessibility and humor has allowed Goodwin to reach more so than any living big band composer is the youth. Many have noted that a sizeable part of Goodwin’s fan base consists of middle and high school students, and have suggested that they might be less interested in the avant-garde and more interested in hearing a polished band play fun music. This assumption is somewhat dubious, but the approachable nature of Goodwin’s music undoubtedly plays a large role in its widespread appeal.
"Hunting Wabbits" Timeline of Events

A
a - saxes
(circle of 5ths prog.)
m.1
G minor
Ab-D G

b - saxes
(repeated 8ths)
10

transition
15
A7 D7 G7

a - saxes
(circle of 5ths prog.)
20
Db-D C

transition to
bone entrance
(repeated 8ths)
25
G C 30

C minor

a variation - trombones
rising chromatic line
40
A minor
45

bones-dramatic register &
dynamic contrast
rising chromatic line
50

a - divided between
saxes and tpts.
(saxes first)
55
all brass in straight mutes
60

G minor

b - divided between
tpts. and saxes
(tpts. first)
transition
same as m. 14, but
w/entire horn section
60 brass open 65

a - div. between
saxes and tpts.
(w/added figures)
70
D7 G7 Dbl1

A7 G7

75
C minor

B

solos
swing feel

transition
w/added 2 bar interruption
contrapuntal lines in saxes
80
D7 C G7

85

90

12 bar blues

C minor

Sax backgrounds

Sax & Bone backgrounds
Tpts. join

90
100
105
110
115
120

4x - new part added each
time over obstinato bass
Parts voiced across sections
120
C pedal 125

(continue C pedal)

Begin obstinato bass line
130

Continue all parts
w/added triplet line
in Gtr. and Piano
135

Unison rhythms
winding down from build
140

Ab13sus 145

150

Transition (repeated 8ths)
circle of fifths
E-C Eb D

A
a - same as m. 74

b - same as m. 74

transition
w/added 2 bar interruption
contrapuntal lines in saxes
Full unison

V7-i

a frag. b frag.
(saxes only)
Contrary motion
fade out
155

160
165
D7 C G7

170
G7 C 175

(triangle on last note)

fig. 20

In “Hunting Wabbits,” Goodwin showcases his humorous side while simultaneously highlighting his connection with the film and television industry. The chart is a tribute to the late Carl Stalling, who was a Hollywood composer most famous for his work on the *Merrie Melodies* cartoons. It was nominated for a Grammy in 2003 for Best Instrumental Composition, and has been so popular that Goodwin has written two sequels (“Hunting Wabbits 2 (A Bad Hare Day)” in 2006, and the Grammy nominated “Hunting Wabbits 3 (Get Off My Lawn)” in 2011). The strength of the composition lies in its tightly controlled thematic material, dramatic contrasts in register, dynamics, and orchestration, modulations, and quirky nature.

The A section of the tune is not swung, and Goodwin instructs the performers to play in a classical, or “legit,” manner. There are three musical ideas that dominate the A section: two motives, a and b, and a transition section that utilizes repeated eighth notes. The a motive (see fig. 21) is a puckish line of almost constant eighth notes. A notable feature is the circle of fifths progression in m. 3-4, beginning on Eb.
and continuing through to D (the dominant), which is followed by sixteenth note lines in contrary motion that set up a restart of the opening material. The second half of the motive begins with the same two measures as the first, but forgoes the circle of fifths progression, opting instead for a legato descending line and a final mischievous resolution to the tonic (highlighted in particular by the grace notes).

The b motive (see fig. 22) is of a slightly different character, consisting of a back and forth motion between G minor and Eb major chords, with Goodwin allowing the line to settle every two beats. In the third bar, Goodwin opens the voicing up before using a chromatic passage to arrive at the dominant before the puckish character of the a motive returns. In fact, the a motive is the dominant material in use during the A sections, returning three times in the opening A section, while the b motive only returns once. In order to keep this section from sounding monotonous, given that the a motive accounts for more than one third of the section, Goodwin employs key changes and what could essentially be called an orchestrational crescendo. The initial two presentations are in the saxophones alone, but Goodwin changes the key from G minor to C minor to keep the line moving forward. At m. 54, the key changes back to G minor and Goodwin adds in the brass in mutes, alternating the melodic material between the saxes and trumpets roughly every two measures. When the motive returns for the final time in this section at m. 74, the key once again changes

(fig. 22: “Hunting Wabbits” b motive)
to C minor and in addition to the alternating melody in saxophones and trumpets (now open), there are additional figures in the trumpets and trombones. In this way, each presentation of the a motive sounds familiar, but changes and grows to the end of the opening A section. The other prevalent element in this section (perhaps one of the most important of the whole chart) is a transition that Goodwin employs that utilizes repeated eighth notes, typically in either V-i or ii-V-i progressions over several measures. This transition is so important that it is used not only to set up all

![Musical notation](image_url)

*fig. 23: “Hunting Wabbits” m. 43*

but one occurrence of the a motive, but also between the A and B sections of the tune.
Goodwin employs the trombones in the A section to provide some material that while consistent in character is nonetheless different from the rest of the section. In m. 32, the trombones present a condensed version of the a motive, which is followed by a rising chromatic line in m. 41. The chromatic line leads to a brief passage in A minor (the only time the tune moves to a key other than G or C minor), in which Goodwin writes extreme contrasts from one measure to the next (see fig. 23). Not only does the dynamic change from forte to piano and back, but the measures are also roughly a tenth apart in all four parts, shifting from A minor to F major. In the fourth measure of this section, Goodwin creates a downward cascading figure that goes through the four parts, with each doubling a note from the previous player. He could have simply written each successive note in the next part, but this overlap adds considerable power to the line. Following this brief section in A minor, the trombones once again use the upward chromatic line to transition back to the full band playing the a motive at m. 54.

The final A section, beginning in m. 160, is a concise reprise. The a motive is presented in the exact same orchestration as it was at the end of the first A section (starting at m. 74), and Goodwin employs the same transition with an added two measure contrapuntal figure in the saxophones (see fig. 24). In the transition to the B section, this figure, followed by the measure of eighth notes in the trombones came just before the entire band played a strong V-i, making this cadence even stronger by virtue of the thin scoring in the prior measures. In the final A section, Goodwin employs this technique again, but delays the resolution a full measure. The
The B section is the antithesis of the silly character of the A section. It mostly consists of an open solo section, which is a twelve bar C minor blues. This section is also swung, and the effect of the swing eighth notes is heightened by the fact that it comes right out of 86 measures of goofy straight eighth figures. The background figures at m. 99 are relatively traditional, beginning with saxophones, adding trombones for counterpoint in m. 111, and finally adding in the trumpets in m. 118 for a big sendoff in m. 120. After the solo section, Goodwin begins a building vamp over a C pedal in m. 123. The eight bar section at m. 127 repeats four times, with an additional voice (or two) added each time (see fig. 25). The interest in this section comes not only from the density of material present, but also the way it is
orchestrated. In all the other parts of the tune, Goodwin scores instruments with their own sections. In this build, however, he scores the different lines across the

sections, with the beginning melody in tenor saxophones and trombone 2, the held F’s in soprano sax and trombone 3, and the percussive line in alto sax, trumpet 3,
and trombone 1. This practice of scoring across the sections is certainly not a new technique, but it is especially effective during this build not only because it helps thicken the timbre of each line, but also because this is the only place in the entire chart to utilize this type of orchestration. The chaos of this section also makes the arrival of the full band on an Ab\(^1\text{3us}\) in unison rhythms at m. 142 all the more effective. “Hunting Wabbits” is a study in balancing extreme contrasts with maintaining familiarity. The small amount of thematic material present through most of the tune helps highlight the contrasts in orchestration, while the dramatic shift from the A to B section strengthens the impact of both.

**Alan Ferber (b. 1975)**

Alan Ferber is the leader of both a big band and nonet, and is known for his skills both as a jazz composer and as a trombonist. Although he is from a musical family and started playing at a young age, Ferber told me that he did not begin writing music until his final year in college.\(^{22}\) From the beginning, he indicated that he has always been interested in writing for several horns because he has a special interest in chord voicings. During a stint with a traveling Broadway production, Ferber began writing tunes for the pit orchestra just to give himself and his fellow musicians something creative to work on, and the result became the music for his first nonet records. Following the success of the albums, Ferber was commissioned to write several charts for big band, and says he realized that some of the nonet tunes were really big band tunes that he had adjusted to fit the smaller ensemble. His first big band album, *March Sublime*, was released in 2013 and was nominated
for a Grammy. Ferber credits his experience as a trombone player in various big bands with allowing him to absorb how large ensemble parts are put together. He says that playing many of the background and foundational parts that are often present in typical trombone parts allowed him to listen to the more prominent melody lines while understanding how the foundation is built. Ferber’s musical style is firmly rooted in the traditions of the ensemble, but his attention to voicings and harmony as well as his adventurous rhythmic explorations give his music a unique personality.

"March Sublime" (2013)

“March Sublime” is partially inspired by Ravel’s “Bolero,” utilizing a rhythmic ostinato figure through most of the tune and employing an orchestrational crescendo during the latter third. It is a mostly modal work, spending the majority of the chart in D Aeolian. It is also characterized by the use of parallel fifths and fourths. In fact, the first pitched entrance is a series of parallel fourths in the bass that, while being consistent with D Aeolian, do not firmly suggest any tonality. The ostinato figure begins the tune as a simple rhythmic figure in the drums (see fig. 26).

![Fig. 26: "March Sublime" ostinato figure](image)

This ostinato figure is present through much of the tune, being passed from one group of players to another. The various presentations of the ostinato figure all center around A, giving it almost the effect of a dominant pedal. The first entrance of the figure in the horns is the tenor saxophones, playing occasional G’s opposite one
another (see fig. 27). Ferber uses this technique of having players play notes surrounding A at different times throughout the opening section. In m. 50, the ostinato is presented in all eighth notes, increasing the dominant murmur beneath the melody line. In the final section, it assumes a melodic role in the first trombone (see fig. 28). It was presented in this form in m. 193 in the piano, but the register and scoring cause this earlier presentation to become subsumed into the other activity. The trombone presentation in m. 201 is clearly meant to stand out, given its forte dynamic, high tessitura, and explicit instruction to play expressively. From m. 209 to the end, the ostinato morphs into a twisting eighth note figure in the trumpets and piano that essentially takes the spotlight away from the long note melody. It begins by supporting the D Aeolian modality, but by the fourth measure it moves into outside territory that cannot be clearly identified with a specific tonality or scale construction. At m. 217, the figure begins again, this time with the alto saxophones and guitar added. It progresses through the same outside figures until
the seventh bar, when the eighths turn to triplet eighths and the figure finally spins out of control, landing on a D open fifth two measures later.

There are only two sections in the entire piece where the ostinato is not present. The first is in m. 86, in which the ostinato eighths are replaced by repeated quarter note chords that essentially act as a B section of the form. In this section, Ferber also retreats from the modal approach and incorporates complex chord changes. He signals for this change in a transition beginning in m. 79, where he only allows two bar fragments of both the melody and ostinato. Under this, the chord rhythm and complexity increases dramatically, with an Ebmaj7(#11), Fmaj9(#11), and Dbmaj13(#11) in only the first measure. In the solo section (beginning in m. 103), the ostinato figure is written in the rhythm section parts, but is not present on the recording. It is likely that Ferber decided that a break from the figure was warranted before the final build. The B section repeated quarter notes do return, however, to provide a transition out of the solo section.

There are essentially two primary melodies, one used in the opening section, and one in the final build. Both are characterized by their use of longer note values to contrast the murmuring ostinato line. The opening melody is first presented in m. 30 (see fig. 29) in alto saxophone 2. Lingering on the dominant and minor third, this line fits squarely in the D Aeolian mode. A tenor saxophone is added in for the second presentation in m. 40, in which many of the pitches change, but the melody retains the same basic shape. This also introduces the idea of parallel fifths in the melody line (which is a natural outgrowth of the parallel fourths that underlie the entire tune up to this point). In m. 50, Ferber introduces a new variant that is
characterized by its downward motion. This line, which appears alongside the original version of the melody, is not allowed to be fully heard yet, but rather is subsumed back into the original version. The downward line and original version combine into a new composite melody in m. 63 in the piano. This is accompanied by open fifths in the left hand, which foreshadow the open fifths in the melody in m. 67. Measures 67-70 are a striking moment in the chart for several reasons. The first is the occasional presence of a Dmaj7 chord, the first time the tune has ventured out of the D Aeolian mode. These new tones are heightened by the open fifth voicing, as well as the absence of the ostinato figure. These four measures, along with the horn
presentation of this melody in m. 75-8, are the only eight bars in the chart thus far that lack the ostinato.

The B section lacks a proper melody, although the offbeat bass line, which is doubled in tenor and baritone saxophone, becomes a prominent line. The melody in the final build (see fig. 30) is again constructed from longer notes, this time entirely consisting of half notes (except for the final note). After the initial presentation in m. 161, Ferber immediately begins layering entrances of the melody in the saxophones, a technique he has used in other charts (e.g., coming out of the solo section in “The Compass”). This layered melody remains present through most of the build, until in m. 217 the half notes begin spelling chords along with the trombones and the ostinato has fully taken over.

Another similarity to “Bolero” lies in the rich variation in timbres employed. Ferber utilizes subtone in the saxophones, cup mute in the extreme upper register and half plunger in the trombones, and bucket in the trumpets in the first thirty measures alone. There are moments where Ferber adds points of color to the melody and ostinato, such as the 1-3 trumpet parts in m. 41-8. While the melody line holds its long notes, the trumpets enter with an accented long note, voiced tightly and in a high tessitura, and in harmon mutes. While this part is not essential to the progression of the tune, it adds an extra color. Ferber also begins the tune and the build with a trumpet solo that is put through electronic effects. While a standard
trumpet sound would have worked in both of these places, the effects help achieve the otherworldly atmosphere conjured by this chart. This atmosphere is perhaps the most notable feature of the tune, created by the combination of serene melodies, a murmuring ostinato, and unusual parallel voicings.

**Darcy James Argue (b. 1975)**

One big band leader and composer who has revitalized the big band scene in the last couple of years is Darcy James Argue. Argue was not initially interested in big band until working with big band composer/arranger Bob Brookmeyer. In a recent interview with Brad Farberman for *DownBeat* magazine Argue recounted his first impressions of the ensemble, describing the thrill of the power and potential chaos. He stated that the feeling of leading a big band was one that could not be replicated by any other ensemble.23 In addition to Brookmeyer, Argue also cites Maria Schneider as an influence, echoing many contemporary big band composers in his assertion that *Evanescence*, Schneider’s first album, was in some ways the first step in ushering in a new generation of big band composers.24

In establishing The Secret Society, Argue said that he cold-called musicians and asked if they would be willing to play in a new big band with no guarantee of payment. To his surprise, most agreed.25 A large factor in the success of the band has been its association with the steampunk aesthetic. This sub-genre of science fiction has become an increasingly popular one, in which an alternate history leads to the construction of futuristic machines descended from 19th century steam technology. In an article for the *Village Voice*, Richard Gehr notes that Argue “borrowed
signifiers from the steampunk scene’s romantic retrofuturism. The metaphor is apt: as anachronistic as big bands may be, they harbor the potential to unleash surprisingly modern sounds.”

This identification with a particular visual style and its accompanying associations has helped set the band apart from a traditional big band while respecting its roots. Argue teamed with Croatian graphic artist, Danijel Žeželj, in 2013 to create the multimedia piece, *Brooklyn Babylon*, a steampunk inspired narrative depicting the construction of the tallest building in the world in Brooklyn. Žeželj’s art style is heavily influenced by the steampunk aesthetic, and the band performed in steampunk inspired costumes. The music juxtaposes many musical styles in an effort to create an auditory narrative to correspond with the visual images. This cultivation and development of many disparate styles is not simply pastiche, but rather an attempt to modernize the ensemble and keep it relevant. Argue explains that he initially believed that jazz musicians should listen to jazz exclusively, but eventually came to the realization that “jazz is so incredibly influential in all sorts of under-recognized and subtle ways that trying to wall it off from popular culture, to make it a museum piece to be appreciated rather than music that’s going to change your life, is clearly misguided.”

The notion of jazz and big band as living practices is what many find refreshing about his approach. Argue also takes inspiration from the motivic unity found in some classical music. In the interview with Farberman, Argue commented on the importance of his motivic approach in *Brooklyn Babylon*, noting that he attempted to create a sense of audible unity among the various movements. The combination of recent musical styles and sounds with a large-scale conception makes *Brooklyn Babylon* an album of
interest to many audiences of differing levels of musical knowledge and sophistication.

**“Brooklyn Babylon - 1. The Neighborhood” (2011)**

In the opening to the first proper tune of *Brooklyn Babylon*, titled “The Neighborhood,” Argue utilizes churning repeated rhythmic figures that are almost reminiscent of a post-minimalist work. The tonality in the opening is notably ambiguous, beginning with open fifth repeated eighth notes in the piano on E and B. Beginning in m. 7, Argue introduces a rhythmic motive that contains a number of eighth notes (from one to eight) followed by four dotted eighths. This rhythmic motive dominates the opening section, with most voices containing a descending pattern of eighths. For example, beginning in m. 7 in the left hand of the piano, eight eighths are followed by four dotted eighths, then seven, six, five, then seven down to four, six down to three (the six starting at m. 19), and five down to two, which finishes in m. 28. All of these presentations begin gravitating toward four eighths beginning in m. 29, which becomes the stable version of this figure. In fact, the four eighth version becomes a stable sixteenth note ostinato in m. 40 that becomes the foundation of the remainder of the opening section (see *fig. 31*). Each entrance of the

![4 Eighth Rhythmic Pattern](image)

![Sixteenth Ostinato](image)

*fig. 31: 4 eighth pattern & sixteenth ostinato*
rhythmic pattern, beginning in m. 7, is voiced in pairs of instruments in open fifths and although at first glance there does not appear to be a pattern, further study shows that the instrument pairs are progressing through more or less the same pitch order, just at different times (see *fig. 32* note: entrances of the rhythmic pattern are indicated only by the notes contained). Each grouping starts with B-E, moves to D-A, C-G, Bb-F, and finally Ab-Eb. Not all instrument pairs move through the entire progression, and in fact Argue makes sure that all fifths are represented in the final measures leading up to m. 40, where the tonality finally settles on Ab (a minor sixth away from the opening fifth). It should be noted, however, that the open fifths remain, with the chord voiced as Ab-Eb-Bb. Argue labels this a sus 2 chord, and this particular sound will feature heavily throughout the A sections. The minor sixth relationship between the opening E-B and the Ab-Eb, as well as its chromatic variant (the tritone from Eb to A), continues in the harmony throughout the presentation of the A section melody (beginning in m. 60), moving from Ab$^{sus2}$ to Emaj, and Eb$^{7sus}$ to Amaj[#11].

The initial melody in m. 60 is accompanied only by the rhythm section, presumably so it can be clearly heard. Once the tenor saxophone begins to improvise, various instrument pairs come in with long notes. These pairs are mostly written in seconds, the exception being trombone 3 and bass trombone, which are mostly in fifths. Argue gives the instrument pairs within families timbral variety, with lower trombones and trumpets in bucket, upper trombones and trumpet 2-3 in cup, and trumpet 1 in harmon. In fact, the timbral palette throughout the chart is
Brooklyn Babylon - I. The Neighborhood
Opening Section

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wind 1-2</th>
<th>Wind 3-4</th>
<th>Trumpet 1-2</th>
<th>Wind 5 Tpt 3-5</th>
<th>Bone 1-2</th>
<th>Bone 3-4</th>
<th>Guitar</th>
<th>Piano r.h.</th>
<th>Piano l.h.</th>
<th>Bass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B-E eighths</td>
<td>D-A</td>
<td>C-G</td>
<td>B-E eighths</td>
<td>D-A</td>
<td>C-G</td>
<td>D-A</td>
<td>fp C#-B-Eb</td>
<td>fp Eb-C#-Eb-C</td>
<td>Bb-F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staggered fp entrances B-F#-G#</td>
<td>Staggered fp entrances F#-E-F#</td>
<td>C-G</td>
<td>Staggered fp entrances Bb-G#-A#</td>
<td>Bb-F</td>
<td>Ab-Eb</td>
<td>E-B straight 8th notes</td>
<td>E-B straight eighth notes</td>
<td>D-A</td>
<td>C-G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

fig. 32
notably wide ranging, especially through the use of instrument doubles. He utilizes piccolo, flute, alto flute in the wind 1 part (normally alto or soprano saxophone), flute and soprano sax in wind 2 (normally alto saxophone), clarinet in wind 3 (normally tenor saxophone), clarinet and tenor saxophone in wind 4, and clarinet, bass clarinet, and baritone saxophone in wind 5. He also includes the aforementioned muting, flugelhorn doubles in the trumpets, and tuba in the bass trombone part.

The melody at m. 60 is written out with a rhythmic specificity that is rarely seen in traditional jazz, almost as if the expressive rubato normally used by a soloist on a simpler melody was written out. Argue maintains this specificity in the full ensemble version of the melody in m. 170, which, while not exactly the same as the original, is essentially the same basic shape (see fig. 33). The voicing of this section, with all but the low winds and low trombones on the melody, is of note, as it is mostly cluster voicings. To allow the lead line to project through, Argue employs two techniques. First, he has it in three octaves between the soprano saxophone,
trumpet 1, and piccolo. He also leaves space between the top two octaves and the remainder of the horns, a technique utilized by his mentor, Bob Brookmeyer.

The fluctuating rhythmic pattern returns in m. 97 in the opening section, slowly taking over from the long note pairs. However, in this presentation, Argue keeps the note choices in line with the underlying harmony. So while the staggered entrances still give the impression of chaos, it is chaos within a more regular harmonic structure. The pattern returns in m. 163 in its four eighth note variant in the wind 1-2, but reversed, to transition back to the return of the A section. Argue continues the figure at m. 171 to accompany the fleshed out melody, but has it in trombone 3-4 in its regular four eighth variant and wind 3-5 in its four eighth reverse form. He plays these two groups against one another for the remainder of the section. Although this keeps with the cacophonous sound of the opening section, it is clear that the fleshed out melody is the focus here.

The B and C sections are moments of repose, and typically focus on rounder textures, with the use of clarinets and flutes, adding trumpets in buckets in the final section. The B section, beginning at m. 136, is in C minor, and the primary focus is a clarinet solo. Although the rhythms here are meticulous as well, they are a bit more regular, and it is clear Argue intends for the soloist to use a lighter touch, indicated by the instrument choice, dynamic, and instructions (espressivo in the B section clarinet solo vs. big sound, ecstatic, raw in the A section tenor saxophone solo). Both sections are short – the first is only into the fourth full bar of the clarinet solo when the trumpets begin to interrupt with triplet eighths that in many ways are a reminder of the A section. All are either open fifths or fourths, or clusters. The C
section sits atop a series of staggered entrances in the low winds, low trombones, guitar, and bass that mostly expresses $G^7_{\text{sus}}$, $C_{\text{min}}^{13}$, and $F_{\text{min}}^9$. Save for the penultimate bar, every measure contains a time signature change. The melody, in flutes and trumpet 4-5 in buckets, is characterized by moving lines followed by long held notes in four bar phrases. This eight bar melody is presented twice, although naturally it is slightly varied on the second presentation. The ending on $G^7_{\text{sus}}$ would normally be an unusual choice, as a suspended chord suggests a resolution that does not materialize. In this instance, however, it works perfectly, as this tune is the beginning of a much larger work.

Although there does not exist a video recording of the live performance of *Brooklyn Babylon*, the visual artist, Danijel Žeželj, published the images created for this multimedia work as the graphic novel, *Babilon*, in 2013. Due to the fact that the novel is divided into chapters that correspond to the movement titles from the album, one may assume that the images presented in each are roughly equivalent to what was shown during the live performance. From these images, one can infer how the images and music were used together to create a narrative. The rhythmic pattern could be seen to represent the bustling neighborhood. In the beginning, we have not met our protagonists, so the harmony remains ambiguous, with each pair of fifths keeping to itself. The settling in of the harmony and solo melody in tenor saxophone might correspond with the entrance of the marching band in the images, with the saxophone pictured prominently. The quieter B and C sections, at m. 136 and 199, likely represent the two indoor scenes, the first in the carousel workshop, with the boy and older man observing sketches of carousel horses. The second ends
this movement, with the boy and man in “Ana” having coffee and a croissant. The vigorous reprise of the melody in m. 170, voiced in all trumpets and in the upper parts of the winds and trombones perhaps represents the boy’s excitement at being outside in the neighborhood. He has come out of the carousel shop and is running along the sidewalk with balloon in hand, and the amplified version of the melody line could well be the sounds of the neighborhood filtered through a child’s excitement. *Brooklyn Babylon* is a monumental work for big band, an ensemble that rarely enjoys large multi movement works. This piece offers evidence that the ensemble is capable of an incredible range of effects and techniques, effects Argue is able to masterfully employ.
CONCLUSION

The current big band scene is thriving and continuing to redefine itself. Jazz composers are relying on a closely-knit community of performers to overcome the economic obstacles faced when forming such a large ensemble, and the bands would not be able to exist and succeed in the way they do without this small but dedicated community. Likewise, the fan community for this niche ensemble is small, yet it is comprised of individuals devoted to keeping the scene alive. Recent works by Maria Schneider, Darcy James Argue, Alan Ferber, and others have elevated the status of the ensemble in the eyes of jazz scholars, and hopefully this study will be one of the first of many into this sophisticated and underappreciated music and the people who create it.

The path towards the continued success of contemporary big band leaders is one that fully utilizes the emerging technologies for networking and distribution. Keeping fans in direct contact with musicians and other fans forms stronger bonds not only between the fans and creators, but also among the fan community. Engagement within the fan community also creates a certain type of connoisseurship in which knowledge of the scene becomes a sort of cultural capital, encouraging members of the community to engage more deeply. In addition to staying in active communication with fans, creators also need to take advantage of new forms of circulation in order to finance recordings and potentially receive some financial reward. Voluntary payment schemes such as Bandcamp that allow for fans to pay whatever they wish are often successful in niche genres; however, they do
not provide help with recording costs, which in the case of a big band is prohibitively expensive. The value-added model, in which additional content is given away with the purchase of a recording, is also an attractive option for creators and fans. The model employed by Artistshare, which additionally provides fundraising prior to a recording, is perhaps the most promising way forward for future big band leaders. However, methods of digital circulation are still relatively new and in flux, so there may yet be a better solution.

The university system will also continue to play a large role in shaping the future of the ensemble. While it is inevitable that this relationship will change the music written for big bands, change itself is inevitable. University professors must continue to offer a certain level of apprenticeship that has always been a foundation of jazz. Almost all of the interview participants in this study agreed that students should learn the rich tradition of big band music so that the changes that occur in the future are rooted in the history of the ensemble. Universities should also make efforts to recruit a student body that is more racially and economically diverse. As in genetics, wider diversity creates stronger offspring, and the big band music of the future will be more relevant if it is created by a number of different voices from different perspectives.

Embracing and promoting the entirety of the tradition is important to the continuing development of big bands. While the deep history of the ensemble certainly includes the high point of its popularity in the 1930s and 1940s, the association of big bands solely with this period is disrespectful to the subsequent practitioners and detrimental to the future of the ensemble. Preserving traditions
and continuing to innovate are not at odds with one another – in fact, the best innovators in any tradition draw inspiration from the masters of previous generations. Balancing a deep knowledge of the ensemble's history with an open mindedness to new sounds and approaches will result in fresh, innovative music that is firmly rooted in the tradition it is serving to maintain.

The contemporary big band scene is home to many skilled and unique performers and composers, and while it exists on the foundation of the great jazz composers of the past, the ensemble must be allowed to continue to grow and change, hosting new generations of musicians with highly individual voices. In an email to me, Monika Roscher noted that while all human beings possess a similar set of basic features, we all have very different life experiences to share. In the same way, although all big bands contain a similar set of instruments, when they speak, they speak of the time and place we inhabit.²⁹ It is fortunate for the future prospects of the ensemble that the current scene is full of dedicated individuals with many new stories to tell. Some of these are included in the Appendix to this study, and while these voices have weighed in on various topics throughout the study, it is important to fully share their unique stories. To this end, the interviews are presented in their entirety as windows into some of the many faces of the contemporary big band scene.
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APPENDIX – INTERVIEWS WITH CONTEMPORARY BIG BAND

LEADERS, COMPOSERS, AND PERFORMERS

Helge Albin

Email Interview

July 21, 2015

Helge Albin is a Swedish jazz composer and leader of the Tolvan Big Band, a group he has led since the early 1980s. He is a retired professor from the University of Malmö, and recently completed a concert-length suite for big band and orchestra entitled “Thetris,” commissioned by the Malmö Symphony Orchestra.

JS: Why did you decide to start a big band? And how has the experience been in terms of funding, finding players, scheduling performances, etc.?

HA: I did not start up a big band. I was asked to take over Tolvan Big Band as artistic director and I accepted because I was interested in renewing the traditional big band concept which in my opinion, in those days (30 years ago), seemed not developed any interesting concepts. My intention was to integrate the big band’s sonic capabilities with the little group feeling like in a quintet. To achieve this, I needed a rhythm group that was used to playing in such settings.
JS: What responsibility (if any) do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts? Should professional bands continue to play classic arrangements and compositions?

HA: I see nothing wrong in maintaining tradition but it does not lead to any development or renewal. In many cases it becomes a trip down memory lane.

JS: The Tolvan Big Band recordings strike a wonderful balance between ensemble cohesion and precision, and individual sounds and expression. Do you compose with specific players in mind? Or do you write the parts in a way that encourages this individuality within the group?

HA: As for the soloistic elements I write with each soloist’s special qualities in mind. And all my musicians in Tolvan are selected to carry out my musical concept. One can say that all of my musicians are rhythmically strong and have a great sense of expression and form. Especially important to me is that the brass section has a warm, round sound that helps the ensemble parts sound relaxed. This, together with Tolvan’s creative rhythm section contributes to how Tolvan differs from traditional big-band-playing.

JS: How did the collaboration with the Malmö Symphony Orchestra come about? This is my personal opinion, but I’ve found that when jazz musicians work with orchestras, often the orchestra sounds out of place, or as a somewhat arbitrary
addition. This is certainly not the case with Thetris – the two ensembles work together brilliantly. How did you approach writing for two contrasting ensembles simultaneously?

HA: Regarding Thetris, I am impressed and happy that your musical analysis is consistent with my own! The reason I did this was, exactly as you say, that I felt that for the most part, compositions in this form were not specifically successful. My intent was that both groups (big band and symphony orchestra) would have equally significant musical challenges. No long uninteresting pads in strings or equally significant musical challenges. I avoided the symphony orchestra would become a backing part. The result was that I had a bunch of symphony musicians that had to use their full musical ability and liked it. Technically, I avoided swing eighths in the symphony orchestra, which is not their big thing.
Darcy James Argue

Personal Interview

May 10, 2014

_Darcy James Argue is a Brooklyn based jazz composer who leads his own big band, Darcy James Argue’s Secret Society. Argue is known for his large-scale works for big band, some of the only such works for the ensemble. He is also a Lecturer in Music at Princeton University._

JS: What led you to the ensemble?

DJA: I first started getting into writing for big band when I went to New England Conservatory. There were two aspects that kind of had a gravitational pull on my life and pulled me towards this big band life that I didn’t know I was getting myself into. First was that I was studying with Bob Brookmeyer, who was there, and of course everyone knows he was a fantastic improviser, trombonist, and composer for large-scale jazz ensemble, and has had such an incredible influence on how a lot of contemporary composers are writing. He was someone whose music I discovered at a young age and I was so excited to be able to pick his brain, and at the time I imagined that I would be talking to him more about long-form small group composition. At the time I started studying with him, I had a working quintet – your standard sort of trumpet, tenor saxophone, I played piano, bass, and drums – and I figured that was going to be my focus. Then when I showed up at NEC and I thought I might write one or two big band charts, I realized that they had an ensemble - a
jazz composers’ orchestra – which meant that you could write for big band every week. You had access to a big band every week. It was a student ensemble that played only student compositions, and so it would be all the composition majors who would come in with whatever they had been working on that week and they’d get to hear it right away. I realized that that’s not something I’m ever going to have again in my life – weekly access to a big band, and also access to feedback on my big band writing from one of the greatest composers for big band who ever lived – so that ended up really directing me for those two years. I would be an idiot if I didn’t take advantage of this situation, especially because one of the biggest issues in writing for large ensemble – writing for big band, orchestra, wind ensemble – is that the amount of time you spend writing versus the amount of time you spend actually hearing what you’ve written is very, very, very unfavorable. If you are a classical composition major and you have an ambition to write a piece for orchestra, most of the time you’re not going to hear it played at all, or maybe you’ll hear it played if you’re a graduate composition student. It’ll be a reading session with the student orchestra, and you’ll hear it read down once. 10 minutes with the orchestra, and that’s it. That’s your only experience of how to compose for larger forces, and with big band it’s often the same thing. You spend months and months and months writing this magnum opus, and you bring it in to the student big band and it gets one very sloppy reading and then gets put back on the shelf. So, to be able to write something on Tuesday and bring it in front of musicians on Wednesday – and it didn’t have to be complete, the whole point of the group is you would bring in a sketch or bring in something you were thinking about and you’d get to try
something out for big band. Bring it in and hear it, and if it didn’t work it’s like all right, I’ll try something different next week. So having that laboratory was such a fantastic experience to be able to get feedback on what I was writing from Bob Brookmeyer, because we would always have a lesson the day after the jazz composers’ orchestra rehearsal. I would tape it with my DAT recorder (this was before all these digital recorders), and then bring it in and listen down, and he would quiz me on “Why did you voice this chord this way?” or “Why doesn’t this last longer?” or “What is the through line?” or “What is the narrative?” – all of these questions. So that experience was really kind of an incubator for me as a large ensemble composer.

JS: Did you then move to Brooklyn and have this crazy idea of “Hey, I’m going to start a big band”?

DJA: Well, before I even moved to New York, I was still living in Boston, and I had graduated. I spent the year after I graduated as a music copyist in Boston, but I knew about the BMI jazz composers’ workshop, which is a really important workshop for professional jazz composers that was actually started by Bob Brookmeyer. At the time, it was directed by Jim McNeely – another one of my big compositional influences – and Michael Abene, and it was completely free. You just had to get accepted and you had to make it to the workshop sessions. I was living in Boston, but there were these very cheap, sort of sketchy buses going from Chinatown in Boston to Chinatown in New York for ten bucks, and so I decided to try it out. It was
the ideal time: I’ve graduated, I’ve got this Master’s degree in composition. I don’t really know what I want to do with my life at this point. I know that I want to do at least a year of this BMI jazz composers’ workshop before deciding, and every Tuesday morning, I’d hop on the 7 am bus to New York and just wander around the city a little bit. Then in the afternoon, I’d go to these workshop sessions and a little hang afterwards at a bar across the street, and then hop on the bus and head back to Boston. Doing that, I got to meet a lot of other composers – young, up and coming composers – people like Joseph C. Phillips, Sherisse Rogers, and J. C. Sanford, and got to hear their approach to big band and their approach to dealing with these same kinds of challenges, and kind of take a look over their shoulder at their scores and figure out what they were doing. It was really a kind of exciting time, and the other benefit was it introduced me to people who were running bands, who were starting their own big bands outside of BMI, and they didn’t appear to be visibly homeless. So I went to my girlfriend and I was like, “Okay, how would you feel about moving to New York, trying that out for a few years, and seeing how that goes?” So that’s what we did. In the fall of 2003, we ended up moving to New York, and moving into a place in Carroll Gardens, not far from here [Shapeshifter Labs], and we’re still there. So I kind of got sucked into this big band demimonde in New York with all these gigs like this, where you get your friends together, you do a couple of rehearsals at the union, come down, and no one’s really getting rich off of anything, but you get to have a venue to present this kind of music, and hopefully people come out.
JS: What are your thoughts on the university’s role in big band?

DJA: That’s a big question. The university has risen up to take the place of what used to be the scene, and it’s an essential development, because there just isn’t the work to learn the kinds of things you would normally learn on the gig anymore. It used to be that people like, for instance, Steve Coleman, could work with the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis band every Monday night and go on the road with them and kind of cut his teeth with a big band. He’s the last major – well, Joe Lovano as well, also with the Mel Lewis band – but those are the last two major jazz artists that I can think of that kind of went that route of coming up in a big band. There are skills you learn playing in an ensemble like that that you can’t learn elsewhere. Even in terms of small group stuff, the kinds of apprenticeship that used to happen – like Dave Douglas coming up through Horace Silver’s band – have become much more rare, just because there aren’t nearly that many gigs anymore. The expectation is that if you are on the scene, you are fully formed, that you have everything together, and that you’re a complete artist. Your entire identity needs to be in place before you start playing gigs because that’s the expectation. There aren’t those kinds of gigs anymore where you can learn on the bandstand. There’s not that same kind of opportunity for the gradual growth and people coming up and learning on the street that there used to be in jazz, for better or for worse. I think the new system excludes a lot of people. I think you look at the identity of who’s graduating from these jazz programs, it’s certainly skewing much whiter and much richer than it has been in the past, and that’s a big issue in terms of representation. We’re talking about black
music and we’re talking about much less representation from African-American artists now, and part of that is because if you want a career in jazz, you kind of have to go to school – to a university or conservatory program – and those programs are $20,000-$30,000 a year. So, what are the demographics of the people who can afford that? What are the demographics of people who have had that kind of family background that allows them to get into the schools in the first place? It’s a big issue, but ultimately what’s the alternative? If there aren’t those gigs and aren’t those opportunities to learn on the bandstand, something has to take its place. Academia has taken its place, so I think everyone’s trying to figure out how to make their peace with this situation. Everyone’s trying to figure out how to make it better, how to bring more diverse voices back into the equation, and how to make sure that African-Americans – who created this music – can still play a really vital voice and be represented at all levels, including in university programs.

JS: What do you see as the future of the ensemble, or what would you like to see?

DJA: I’d like for it to not die, and I don’t think it will. One of the crazy things about being in Brooklyn is that there are so many big bands. There’s a regular Monday night large ensemble series at the Tea Lounge. There are people who, for whatever reason, are driven to continue to try to explore this very archaic and very old-fashioned type of instrumentation and try to make it do new stuff, stuff that it wasn’t originally designed to do, stuff that maybe it’s not really well-suited to do. It’s exciting to me that people are still willing to try, and that people are still really
investing in it. One of the things about this is that no one gets into writing for big band, rehearsing a big band, trying to gig with a big band, unless they really, really love it. It requires such an extraordinary degree of commitment, in terms of the time it takes to write the music, the time it takes to learn the craft of writing music, the time it takes just to get people physically in the same room to rehearse it, and the enormous financial drain it takes to do these gigs and pay people even an insulting amount of money. When you’re paying 18 people an insulting amount of money, that adds up, and it ends up being a pretty significant amount of money for the people who are trying to keep this tradition of big band writing and big band composing/arranging alive. The fact that so many people are willing to do it and so many musicians are willing to make it happen, to be part of it, to do two rehearsals and play these gigs for pocket change, essentially – it’s inspiring and exciting. There’s this romanticization of the starving artist and I don’t think artists should starve or that artists should suffer. The idea that that’s good for our art is not true, but at the same time there’s something to the idea of people who believe in something so strongly that they are willing to make personal sacrifices in order to make it happen, and big band is kind of the epitome of that. There’s no one who’s doing this who isn’t fully committed to the idea of big band as a contemporary venue, as a setting for contemporary music, and to me that’s so exciting that there are people who believe in it so strongly. It’s inspiring for me to hear other people in the same orbit just trying to make a go of it, trying to take this prehistoric musical beast and teach it new tricks.
Carla Bley

Email Interview

July 17, 2015

*Carla Bley is a jazz pianist and one of the first major women jazz composers. She cofounded the Jazz Composer’s Orchestra in 1965 with Michael Mantler, and is known for her 1968 jazz opera for vocalists and big band, “Escalator Over the Hill.” Bley continues to compose and perform with her own big band.*

JS: What sparked your interest in writing for big band?

CB: In the late 1950s I worked as a cigarette girl at Birdland. The Count Basie band was often in residence there, and it was a golden time for that band and its writers. Neil Hefti, Ernie Wilkins, Frank Foster, Thad Jones and a few other composers and arrangers opened me to the possibilities in big band writing.

JS: You are a pioneer in the field of artist-owned independent record labels. With all of the new technologies available for the recording and distribution of music, do you think self-production and crowdfunding are viable ways forward for artists whose work falls outside of mainstream popular music?

CB: Yes, I do. The need for an independent, inclusive music distribution service has been supplanted by the possibilities you mention. But I should add that artists
outside the mainstream still need to connect with each other, by whatever means exist.

JS: What responsibility do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts? How would you balance the continued performance of these tunes with fostering new approaches to the genre and the individual creativity of the players?

CB: Balancing preservation and innovation is difficult, but essential. This balance should exist at all levels, from within ensemble players and soloists to writers and band directors. The best "classical" orchestras often program new music in conjunction with traditional repertoire.

JS: The big band has become a site of musical postmodernism, in that contemporary works for the ensemble engage known sound symbols – be it a specific tune, rhythmic feel, texture, etc. – and often manipulate expectations and shift meanings in a wryly playful manner (In your own work, I have Looking for America and Appearing Nightly in mind). Do you think this dialectic between composer and sound symbol is what gives the music its deeper power (mirroring the obvious sonic power of the ensemble)?

CB: I assume you’re talking about the use of irony in music. This is dangerous. Everyone needs a bit of fun, but music is a deadly serious game. I think music’s
"deeper power," as you put it, resides within the notes themselves, regardless of attitude or perspective.

JS: This last question is one I've been asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big band? Or what would you like to see?

CB: I am hopeful that big bands will in some way re-connect with a broader public. More and more, bands seem to exist only within systems of support: schools, radio stations, government institutions.
Michael Breaux

Personal Interview

February 7, 2014

*Michael Breaux is a multi-instrumentalist and music educator who leads the Music Education Jazz Ensemble at New York University. Breaux has been a music educator for more than twenty years, and is an active studio musician.*

JS: Tell me about your background, how you got into big band music, some of your favorite artists, etc.

MB: Sure. I was lucky enough to have a mom and dad who had music on all the time in the house. We had a monaural radio, and KPEL 1440 AM was what we listened to. It was some pop – you know, “Is That All There Is?” – but a few pieces that I latched onto came from that experience, as well as my mom and dad buying the Time Life Jazz Series: The Big Band Era 1940-43. One of the pieces that I fell in love with was “The Song of the Volga Boatmen,” the Bill Finegan arrangement. How could I not love that? It just came about at a time when I started playing music – my parents bought a piano, so I started picking out songs and composing. Then, my first band director, Earl Parquette, was a Dixieland trombone player, and he just pointed at me and said, “You’re going to be a trombone player,” because I could pat my head and rub my stomach, and you know, whatever. My mom said, “Absolutely not. He’s going to get braces.” “Okay, you’re going to be a clarinet player.” So I started on the clarinet, and the first semester, out of the first division band method – let’s say it’s
“Crusader’s March” – it’s just a regular old fifth grade band piece. At the concert, Earl Parquette picks up his trombone and plays a Dixieland solo over the top. I was hooked. I had to learn how to do that. When I continued through school, Earl ended up going to the high school, and we had a clarinet player, George Wimberley, who was a Dixieland player. All these guys knew each other. They were all band mates. From him, I learned a little bit about what to do, doing some throat gliss, making some fun stuff. I picked up bassoon and started tenor saxophone under George. My brother was a year older – he was a freshman in high school when I started hanging around the band – and Earl Parquette, who was then the band director at the high school, said, “Look, Mikey,” – which is what he called me – “You want to play jazz, you go study with Santy Runyan. Santy Runyan’s shop was about as far as from here [Harlem] to the bridge in the Bronx from my mom and dad’s house, and he was the first teacher that I ever had who was one of those pay it forward kind of people. He took no money, and he really took an interest in me. He made me mouthpieces and never charged me for them, until much later. He was seminal in helping me understand, “These are tunes you need to know, these are players you need to listen to. And come to the back door of Toby’s Oak Grove, have your mom and dad drop you off at 9:00. They can stay there, and we’ll bring you in and let you play on the bandstand.” So in front of all these drunken customers, I was playing “Stella by Starlight” on my tenor saxophone, and they went wild. That was the first time I got a taste of it – doing it myself – and it snowballed. Every one of the teachers that I had played jazz. They improvised. They had a freedom about them that they never talked about, they just demonstrated, because it was never questioned. It was what
they did. It was as much as speaking Cajun French or English, you just did it. I loved the energy of it. I guess I loved it because it was also one of those things that there was nobody else playing your parts, so you were alone on yours and you could make it happen. Then I learned to pick up flute, and that was cool.

In my freshman year in high school – 1973 – the high school big band took a trip to Thibodeaux, Louisiana, out in the boonies. At the civic center was the Stan Kenton big band, and they did a clinic with us. I got to meet Pete Erskine, Roy Reynolds, Stan Kenton, Mike Vax, and all of these amazing players, and they were normal people; really nice, cool people who did amazing things. Then we heard them play, and it was just amazing that this group of people could come together and scream at you, and whisper, and bring you to such heights. “Malagueña” – I had never heard anything like that in my life. So those seminal instances brought by teachers who were important to me – there were three moments. One of them was at home, when I heard “Girl from Ipanema” or “One Note Samba” or one of those from that Antonio Carlos Jobim and Stan Getz album. It was not out yet, so it was probably 1964 or 1965, and I had to get this album, and it was killing me that I couldn’t get it. Finally, I got it and wore the grooves out of it, bought another and wore the grooves out of it. I learned every tune, every improvisation, all the squeaks that Stan Getz had. That was the first sound of saxophone that I had in my ear. The lyricism, the melodic ideas, the humor, the joy – I had no idea about the suffering and the pain that he had gone through at that point. Bossa nova affected me. I know I danced my little prepubescent dance in the bedroom with my tenor saxophone – door closed so
nobody could see me. It changed me. And then not much later, I heard a Phil Woods and Michel Legrand album, titled “Images,” which won a Grammy in 1976, and it was the second side of the album – the whole thing was like a direct to disc big band thing with Michel playing piano with Phil Woods. In 3rd North [the building that houses the NYU Jazz Department], that album is on a shelf, and it says, “To Dave: when in doubt, use chromatics,” and it’s that album, and it has all that stuff: whole tones, diminished patterns, it’s basically all the techniques. It was at that point that I thought, “Oh my god, the stuff that I’m trying to practice, he’s using effortlessly. Maybe I could do that.” It started to dawn on me that this was a vocabulary, this was a language that people used, and again the energy of it, the joy, the wild abandonment was like a drug. It was something I wanted to taste again, and I fell in love with that energy and that sound. Now at the same time I was probably playing at the University of Southwest Louisiana in the orchestra, and in concert bands, and it was okay. We also did marching band, and that was kind of cool, but for me it always came back to the big band. People would say, “What is your favorite kind of music?” and it has always been jazz and big band music. Then I went to LSU, and on one of my drives – I know exactly where I was – this band came on, and I had never heard anything like it before. It was Toshiko Akiyoshi’s big band playing the title cut of one of her first albums, “Long Yellow Road.” I pulled the car over and just stopped. The car was sitting in the ditch, and I was just in awe. Dick Spencer’s lead playing was so gorgeous, and at LSU when I got a chance to play lead alto, a lot of them would say, “ah, Dick Spencer,” and we ended up doing “Tuning Up” and all those tunes. But again, it came down to people and music that connected. Why? It
spoke to me. Grand Funk Railroad didn’t really speak to me. Led Zeppelin didn’t speak to me, although they spoke to my brother, and he would bash the hell out of the drums. I would get off on lines, and for a while I got away from that and wanted to do more of a free thing. I remember coming back and playing with Santy at one of his birthday parties, and Harry St. Pierre, who was the consummate bop player, in the lineage of Chet Baker and all those guys, and he would say, “Yeah, that’s all bullshit that you’re playing. You gotta play lines.” I’ve never thought about what came out of me other than whether it was right, but I began to ask, “Am I telling the right story?” I’ve had a lot of mentors and people who have been coaxing me, cajoling me, showing me through example what they do. At LSU, I was in the marching band. I was drum major. I wrote arrangements. I wrote drill. I was in the big band. I played alto. I played tenor. I doubled on all the flute/piccolo parts. I did recording sessions. I eventually took lessons on all the woodwinds, brass, and percussion, and took juries on them. So I really wanted to know the inside of each of the instruments to the best of my ability because I knew at some point I would probably want to teach. But playing was still there, and I didn’t yet really know how much I wanted to teach. I also got into the Baton Rouge Symphony, where I played second to my teacher on bassoon, and learned a lot about what it meant to be a professional musician in the setting of a professional ensemble. My lessons were there. I ended up following him once he retired, playing principal for a season. I also played in the Foxtrot Orchestra, the big band, the recording orchestra, the ballet orchestra, all of that, which set me up to go to Yale, where I studied with Arthur Weisburg on bassoon and did not do any jazz for at least a year. At that point, the
Chamber Orchestra of New England came about, and I ended up doing some bassoon work with them. There were two bassoonists that were already there, so I was a sub, but every now and then they wanted a jazz thing to happen, and that’s when I started getting back into jazz and making it happen. I got into the big bands around New Haven, doing the recording sessions and getting to know those people, and just got into the scene. And it’s been through the jazz people, I have to say, where I made the deepest connections. It was a lack of ego and a sense of, “Yeah, man, you play great. Come on!” I didn’t really get that from the classical community, because I wasn’t trusted, I was a jazzer, that dichotomy seemed to exist. Every institution that we know has that, but it’s virile, it’s an animus about not being able to do that, so I’ll hold you down so I can push myself up. Again, it goes back to every one of the musicians that I hold in esteem and have worked with. Music is music is music, period. Rereading Kenny [Werner’s] book about getting in touch with the first time you touched that instrument, that childhood dream when you got it, and I remember that prepubescent me with my PJ bottoms, dancing around with my tenor with the joy that I knew how to play it. When I got an alto for the first time, it was like, “Oh my God, Take 5! I know everything about it. I can follow every nuance with Paul Desmond.” So for me it’s about having the ability in my diverse number of voices, and personalities maybe. I don’t know, maybe I’m a little schizo, but I need to have those different voices to say everything, and I’ve been really happy with it.

JS: The classical/jazz divide is something I’ve been thinking about lately. Jazz is at a point where it has been lifted to the level where it’s vying, along with classical, for
the top spot of art music. It’s also interesting to note that the training of classical
musicians has changed so much, especially with regard to improvisation – two of the
greatest improvisers who ever lived were Mozart and Bach. So there’s a strange
tension there, and there’s a related issue that Wynton Marsalis brings up of the fear
of creating cookie cutter musicians in jazz, so how do you balance learning the style
“properly” while at the same time emphasizing the personal expression, the
interpretation, the active participation, and how do you keep some of the older
tunes active without becoming fossilized?

MB: I’ll try to answer both questions at once. I’ll do a mash of things. I was given a
series of role models from Lillian Paulang, my first piano teacher, and my band
teachers. Every one of those teachers had something missing from their personality.
There was a fear of improvising, a fear of stylistic variations that came away from
the classic Western canon. Even John Patterson. I will never forget, one day we went
out, and there was a bar in downtown Baton Rouge, Chris’ Bar, where they had 75
cent goblets of beer – they were huge – and I know we had three. We went back to
his office and he picked up his saxophone, and on his Selmer C Star, with probably a
4 reed, started playing Paul Desmond, and I swore to God that Paul Desmond was in
that room. Like me, he had invested himself to the point where he really wanted to
emulate in the phrase, in the texture, in the nuances, but it was about being honest
with himself. He had severe issues with performance anxiety, and he helped me do
transcendental meditation, but to release that fear, to pull the lens back far enough
so that you were looking at yourself in the third person and not having to do
qualudyes or LSD or shrooms to do it. The problem with classical music is that you can’t do that, you can’t play with it. There’s something about that energy. I questioned whether I had lived as a musician in Harlem during the 1940s, am I that close to that energy that it’s just like grooves on a record, that they get so close that they overlap. There’s some energy of a former life touching and saying, “Come on, baby. Come back to it.” Maybe that’s too metaphysical, but there’s something pulling me. When I heard Bill Chase’s band, I was changed, and it wasn’t just all the pot I inhaled at his concert, I was changed. How could a band do that? Bring people to another state of consciousness, you know. Getting to hear Louis Armstrong in New Orleans, getting to hear the Woody Herman band in New Orleans, getting to see Maynard Ferguson traveling – we don’t have that anymore. No longer are those progenitors of that art form still on the road. Who do we have? Gordon Goodwin, we’ve got the guys here at Columbus Circle, but we don’t have anybody really going out and traveling, and I know it speaks to people. We went to the jazz festival at Wilton last year, and it spoke to people. Why don’t we have more improvisers? I think it stems back to the fact that if you can’t do it, you can’t teach it. You can’t exemplify it. You can’t bring the joy of it, because if you can’t do it, you’re going to bring fear no matter how much you try. I am not the world’s greatest improviser, but I have a lot of joy about it and I want to provide for my students in all of my ensembles, even in the concert band, the space to explore who they are, to explore why they are there. From the very first audition that I had for the concert band and jazz ensemble, every single person wanted to be there and play their instrument. That’s a fabulous place to be. Now if we could take those ensembles on the road, we
would deepen that experience because we would find out about everybody – good, bad, and ugly – and that’s okay. There’s that trust, there’s that inevitable ability to say, “Okay, I give up. You know me.” And then you start saying, “Wow, that didn’t hurt.” Is there an issue in the jazz world about being gay? Yeah. Gary Burton just came out with a book and really has been realizing that issue, so for me that’s something. There’s a wall between the guys who are “normal” and the gay guy.

Sonny Costanzo had a little problem with that, but I pulled his ass out of a fire in a recording session here. I came in just to play bassoon on some charts for Marlene VerPlanck – her husband, Billy, did all the charts, and they’re great. Jim McNeely was on that chart. It was everybody I knew. But Jim Lawson, the guy who was playing the low reed book, was not cutting it. He was stiff on a stick. So Sal came up to me – not Sonny – Sal came and said, “Hey Mike, do you think you could dub in those parts?” I said, “Yeah, how long do I have?” “Well, we got a lunch break.” I said, “Sure, how many charts?” He said, “All of them.” “I don’t have my horns.” He says, “Well, do you mind playing his?” So I went and played them, and he had some different reeds, but I worked it out, and said, “Fine.” So I sat there while everybody else was eating lunch and dubbed in all the tracks in one take. Now what did that prove to me? That the classical sight-reading, being prepared, being able to lay shit down was important. I also did shows, and I didn’t get to blow any jazz, but being part of a section was okay. Then when they came back, Jim said, “Hey, do you mind playing the rest?” I said, “No. Am I going to make any more money on this?” And Sonny looked back and said, “Yeah, kid.” So we have to work harder to prove ourselves. I have a funny feeling that if you interview Toshiko, she had to work three or four times harder
than any man to make it happen. I think that tenacity is an important component of it, a deep knowledge that you can do this, despite the fact that there’s this thing on your shoulder saying, “You’re going to fucking fail.” The other thing is just saying “Yes” with a smile on your face, and letting people enjoy you and enjoy the hang.
That’s huge. Classical players not as much, but with jazz players it’s about the hang. I know of one violinist in New Haven – we started a conductor-less orchestra – his name is Netta Hadari. He can play anything – gorgeous Paganini, he can do Lalo, and he’ll start playing “Giant Steps,” and the transition is effortless. I hold him in incredibly high esteem, because for him it’s music, it’s not a style for which he has to be afraid of anything or protective of something, it’s music, it’s his voice, and he works a lot. So I hope I covered all of it.

JS: I feel that as Americans, we have a different relationship with classical music than Europeans do. For instance, there’s the two Strauss albums that the Vienna Art Orchestra did where they’ve jazzed up the waltzes, and I feel like they have a much more comfortable relationship with it. When classical music arrived in the United States, it was already fully formed...

MB: Absolutely. That’s an interesting perspective. When we’ve gone to recitals, Reggie and I, at the University of Illinois, I have a hard time going to a bassoon recital because it’s so specific, and it says only a few things. I go to support students, I go to support colleagues, but he said, “I don’t find any joy in it,” and it would be interesting to hear what spouses who are brought to these things have to say about
it. We went to Yoshi’s in San Francisco and caught Poncho Sanchez, and his statement was “That was perhaps one of the best things we’ve ever seen, musically.” It spoke to us, it was so real, it was alive. It wasn’t distant and of the 15th or 16th century. It wasn’t purported to be something that we should like, we just liked it. If arts organizations did not get federal funding and state funding and private grants, the arts scene in the United States would be in worse shape than it is, and that alone is forcing programming people, directors of music organizations, to rethink the paradigm. The beauty of it is that the old crowd that was very much against playing jazz – and my saxophone and bassoon teacher, John Patterson, said, “You can’t be everything to everything. You have to pick one to be good at.” And I sort of did, but I tried to always do the doubling, Broadway, and soundtrack work at a very high level. Now that I’m, at 55, one of the older guys, and younger people have had the experience of interactions with me, I’ve brought my students to recording sessions, to pit orchestras, to big band concerts, to sit on stage with me. I did a session in Oakdale with Michael Favreau, a freshman my first year of teaching – he played second tenor and I played lead alto for Johnny Mathis. What a joy. What a joy to play with students who now have become friends, peers, equals in a way, and in many ways he probably plays better than I do. I think the influences of those who bring that joy, who say, “Come on guys, let’s have fun. Don’t worry about it,” as opposed to “Das ist verboten!” Then they say, “Okay, I’ll dip my toes in it.” And the moment they get it, the moment the heroin metaphorically hits the bloodstream, you’re sold. And for everyone it’s different. I don’t find hip-hop and rap anywhere near appealing, and I’ve thought a lot about it. I was listening to Kenny Baron and Stan Getz’ “People
Time," and it’s about lines, it’s about this wonderful conversation. Piano and tenor, that’s it. I listened back to a concert I played, and Gary Bennett was playing tenor and I was playing bari, and it was “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If it Ain’t Got that Swing).” And he ends his solo, and I pick up from where he left off, and it was one of those moments when the entire section was cheering. We were in it. You’re involved. You’re in the moment, and I think that’s what we all chase, trying to be in that moment. Casals was asked why he keeps practicing at his age, and he said, “Well, I think I’m getting better.” Santy Runyan, ‘til the day he died, was practicing, and he’d say, “Man, I just came up with this gorgeous turnaround thing with whole tones,” and I just saw him as a 12 year old kid, and he was 94. I want to be like that, to still have that joy, that spirit of inquisitiveness and exploration, and not to be so conservative, so cloistered in my beliefs, and I want my students to feel the same way. I don’t want to have them sound like me, but have them sound better than me, and hopefully I can learn from them. So I’m hopeful that both the classical and jazz music scenes become vital, because we’re important, we’re vital to listeners, we develop a cadre of people for whom this music is important, and that we don’t do what has often been the case, and I’m paraphrasing E. M. Forster: “To confuse what’s impressive with what’s important.” I listen to some of these big band charts – “Malagueña,” the recording, how long will people listen to that? Pick any kind of thing from Mackelmore and Lewis, and how long will people listen to that? They’re very different, and maybe I’m being a little too much of a curmudgeon, but there’s some music that connects to people, and I think whether it’s classical, or Broadway,
or whatever, you find that voice and you work towards making that art form the best possible.
Billy Drewes

Personal Interview

May 20, 2014

Billy Drewes is a jazz performer whose primary instruments include saxophone, flute, and clarinet. Drewes has been featured on more than one hundred recordings, and has been a member of the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra since 1990 (formerly the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra).

JS: Tell me a little bit about how you got into music, and your experiences with big band.

BD: I guess I have to go back to one of my first influences: my dad. He played piano. He wasn’t a professional musician, but he could have been. He could really entertain a crowd, better than I can playing music alone. [laughs] I could probably do tap dancing and entertain alone better than music. Having him around the house, he would play standards all the time, his way of playing them. He had a thing. Just hearing that was great. We always had a piano, and my brother, who is 3 ½ years older, started playing. He’s a great trumpet player, Glenn Drewes. He took up piano first, so that sound was around the house. He actually took lessons, and then he added the trumpet later. So soon after he started playing trumpet, it was like, “Well, what do you want to play, Billy?” And I was like, “Not the trumpet, I guess. How about clarinet?” So I started on the clarinet, which was a nice thing for doubling. People always ask, “Did you play clarinet first?” and I say, “Yeah.” Not that there’s a
specific advantage to it, but it’s a little quirkier. With the saxophone, you can maul it, you can hit it hard, you know. [laughs] So I eventually added the saxophone to it. My father came home with a saxophone. It was silver, looked like an alto, and I said, “Dad, I think this thing’s out of tune or something.” It turned out to be a C Melody, which I wish I still had, because it was an old Conn. He said, “Oh, I’ll take it back and we’ll get an alto.” So just having music around the house was great. My brother and I would play tunes with my dad – standards, which helped getting and playing gigs, you know. As teenagers, we were out doing gigs, and you needed to know tunes. Did I know them that well? Probably not, but we knew the melody and we felt the tunes, what they were about. In the old days, people used to get together and sing and play guitar, which is a thing that I think music should be part of – the culture, you know, it’s part of your life. It’s not just about business. If we incorporate it into our home and really make it honest like that, it could really be great.

So I was lucky enough to have a really great school system early on and really great teachers. I didn’t quite get all the aspects of the great theory classes that we were fortunate to be able to experience; it was almost too much for me at the time to really get it and utilize all those things. I had a great teacher who was a player that taught me saxophone, and the school bands were good – the jazz band, stage band, combos, they were all good bands. We played a lot of music then, inside and outside of the school. My brother and I also played some orchestral things around the community that were nice. It was very important. I wish there was more of that. I was just telling Earl Gardner – who was the lead trumpet player for the Vanguard
Orchestra for many years with Thad – I was talking about that with him, classical music. I said that the conductors didn’t like us that much, the brass and the woodwinds, because on the breaks we’d be playing tunes. So it’s funny. Classical music, older and modern, is another dimension to add to one’s musical journey. And as I said, my brother and I would do a lot of gigs. There were a lot of club dates, and you learned about music. That was generally that, and then I went to Berklee College of Music, and it was a great experience. I met so many people there. I was lucky enough to have teachers like Herb Pomeroy, and I was in his band for most of the time I was at Berklee. All that at the school was great, and outside the school was really incredible too. We had a place in Allston, Massachusetts, right outside the city, and we used to play all the time. It was like a loft over a business building. I found this pad, and so many of us lived there, sometimes we’d have 3 rhythm sections a day – the early session, the early evening, and the late session would start at 1 or 2. So it was really great. All these people would come by, and I still know them today; good friends like Joe Lovano, Kenny Werner, John Scofield, many others. So living in Massachusetts for about 5 or 6 years was a great experience. And since we’re talking specifically big bands, again I want to mention Herb Pomeroy, who was one of the greatest conductors. Joey Baron and I occasionally talk about Herb, who is gone now, but we wish he was still around. He was just a great bandleader, because he knew exactly what was going on and he cared about rhythm sections, which not everybody does. That was an integral part of his conception. I played so much music there, moving on from the high school thing to this great college, it was just wonderful.
JS: So when did you move to New York and get involved in the big band scene here?

BD: I moved back to New York around 1975, and was lucky enough to get called for many gigs, just before the major studio scene was nearing the end, although it was long enough to meet some great musicians. I was never a big studio guy, but I caught the tail end of that and it was great. Things were different then. They had bigger ensembles – not quite big bands, but coming out of that. Moving back to New York was great, because there were different generations of players that you got to play with, hear, and experience. It was just incredible. I guess we should move on to the Vanguard Orchestra. I don’t really do too many big bands these days. It’s funny, because where we’re interviewing we just did an NYU graduation hang with the wonderful big band, conducted by Rich Shemaria, and we played a couple of my pieces that I wrote for the band and another piece that I had previously written. It was wonderful, because I don’t really write that much for big band, but you get a little touch of that power, and to bring your thing to it, you start to get the bug. You think, “Wow, what can I do with it?” So we did that today, and it was really fun. But I was lucky enough – I think it was in the early 80’s – I got a call to sub with the Vanguard Orchestra. And that’s how it is. You may get called to a couple of rehearsals, and if you do a good job, you get called back. It’s funny because I used to see Thad and Mel’s band when I was a kid out in Long Island. There used to be this jazz coalition, funded partly by the union, and it was great – I used to see Cannonball outside. I remember seeing Cannonball with these dancers – after they did the set,
they marched around, all these dancers. It was like Mardi Gras, or being down in Brazil. [laughs] So it was wonderful as a kid to see, and Thad and Mel’s band used to come a bunch. I saw many of those concerts. I forget when I actually came into the Vanguard, because I used to come in to the Vanguard to see people when I was younger. I don’t think I actually saw the band there. So here we are years later and I’m playing all this small group stuff – crazy music – and I get a call, and I hadn’t really gone down and seen the band since I had moved to New York, which I’m ashamed to say. So here I go to play, and wow. Mel was still playing. Thad was gone, but it was like, “Wow, this is special.” And it’s still the same today. I don’t do that many big band gigs today, because there are other projects happening, so it’s hard to commit. But to play with that band still to this day is really special – the beat, the time feel, the conception of the way the band feels it, the conception of the rhythm section, it’s amazing. And the rhythm sections keep evolving, too, and Mel evolved. If a bass player and piano player with some new ideas and directions, still rooted in the tradition, came in to play with the band, Mel would go right along. Mel would go, “Oh yeah, we’re going there?” And he would evolve and take the rhythm section through that, but still keep the band supported, just with a little hit, a little push. Mel was phenomenal, and I wish I was lucky enough to play one gig under the baton (well, he didn’t use a baton) of Thad, but I never did. A bunch of the guys in the band had experienced it for a while. So that’s what’s so special about that band. You may have played the music for a while, and you feel like maybe you should let some younger players experience it, but then the next week you go, “Nah. I still love this.” [laughs]
JS: Yeah, I think one of the things that’s always been distinctive about the Vanguard is how the rhythm section plays. A lot of times it’s a chorus of piano up front to get things locked in, which gives the horn section a nice foundation to rest on.

BD: That’s a big thing. That was always part of the conception of the band, because again it was about the rhythm. A lot of times you may play with a great band, aside from the VJO or Basie, etc., and unless you’re doing some really new stuff (and there’s some really great new stuff) – let’s say you’re playing a Thad Jones chart outside that band, it just may not quite have that thing, or the conception of the band is a little more generic in a sense. This tradition has gone on, it’s been handed down, so when subs come in they just intuitively know, or other people take them with them. If you’re a good musician, it just grabs you right on, after about 2 notes, and you latch on to that. Not to take away from any other situation, because every musical situation is positive, but that is special.

JS: Jazz has always been a genre that involves a lot of apprenticeship. You have young guys coming in and learning from those who’ve been around a little longer before branching out and doing their own thing. A lot of that apprenticeship seems to be moving into the university system – people go to study now rather than learning on the bandstand. Big bands in particular are so expensive to run that the university big bands comprise the largest number of bands in the country. Do you have any thoughts about the potential change in the music that might arise from the university's involvement? Or any thoughts on jazz education in general?
BD: Well, when you talk to people, I guess it’s a double-edged sword. I always like to look at everything positively. Some people say, “In the old days, it was passed down this way,” which I can totally get with, but if you have part of that too, which is hopefully what teachers are giving their students, passing it down in that way, along with all the new conceptions and approaches, is the way to go. You have different teachers, and everyone has their own thing. I don’t think you can get everything from every teacher unless they have a system. I don’t really have a system. Maybe I should. [laughs] It’s incredible, though. There are so many good musicians, and I know everybody will find their path. I just hope that all these talented young people will not go into some sort of depression because they can’t do one of the things they’re really good at. That’s the thing. I’m not losing sleep over it, but I do think about it. It’s good. I can’t deny what I see coming out. There was a young trumpet player tonight, a young woman from the New School subbing. All of a sudden she starts to play, and I was like, “Wow, who was that, it really sounded beautiful.” Everything has changed. Obviously we know that. Just the way we communicate, and there are things about it you question, all this access to all this information. Ultimately it’s got to be good, but there are things that come with it. Is it too easy? Life used to be simple when we were kids. You know, you’d go out and play ball all day. You’d bring some water, and 7 hours later you’d come back, and I don’t think our parents were worried about us. So things have changed, but I think it’s good. To reiterate, I think you see what’s coming out, the talent. And that’s a funny thing, to be yourself. That’s the thing. There’s so much access to hearing things that you want to totally emulate. But it was like that in the old days, you’d hear Kenny Dorham,
you’d hear Bird, you’d hear Trane. It was too good not to want to sound something like it. But now there’s so much. One thing I try to stress is that once a player gets familiarized, if they can’t sing a blues – forget about playing, if they can’t sing it – forget about being yourself, let’s try to really feel that blues. If you’re just playing what somebody else played, it’ll work, and people get pretty good at it, and I love to hear it, but then can you take it and do something with it. Sometimes you rearrange those things too. I was saying to somebody out front, somebody I hadn’t seen for a while, that the world is filled with creative energy. You know how it is when you travel, you meet people from all over who are just incredible. Everywhere, it doesn’t matter. You look into their eyes and you share life, you share music. It’s not about any bullshit. But if we could just get there, and then all these young people would have something to do and use that creative ability and knowledge to better our situation.

JS: Absolutely. One final question that I’m asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big bands? Or what would you like to see?

BD: Well, there’s one school where people want to keep playing the old stuff, which is straight in line classic. I did some last night, and I had never played a lot of that music. But it was fun. So there’s that. But the configuration of a big band I think can change. Thad would add a French horn when he needed it, and Maria Schneider adds instruments when she needs them for a certain project, and that’s what I would like. In essence, you’d have all the power and flexibility of a big band, but for
myself, I’d envision some different instrumentation. But if we’re talking strictly big band, a lot of things are formulated. I remember Brookmeyer said that he wouldn’t write saxophone solis, and I’m kind of with that. Some of it is like, “We’ll do the saxophone soli, then we’ll do the shout chorus, etc.” So how do you get the shout chorus without it being an obvious shout chorus? So if we’re speaking of the configuration of the basic big band, with maybe a couple other instruments, take the power there, and there’s so much music around the world. I think this relates to all kinds of configurations, not just big band. Small groups too, what do you do? How do we get the essence of a ride pattern without doing it? And plenty of people are doing it, they’re experimenting. For big bands, with 16 or more people, I would hope that really expands. And by paying homage to the great composers and keeping the essence of that music and that lineage. So I hope it would be something that I’ve never heard. It’s like playing. A friend of mine at the Vanguard – one last Vanguard story since we’re talking big band – we were playing one of those tunes where you trade on rhythm changes, and I played last. I just felt good, from the first note, and one of my friends said, “You didn’t play one thing that I’d ever heard.” [laughs] And I just said, “Thanks.” But it felt good, and it felt like it was with the essence of the music. You know, sometimes you just go wild, but where do you bring that in? Well, it’s the same. The question is how do we evolve this thing into the next thing. Gil Evans took it a certain way. And you hear Sinatra, and that’s still great, but to do just that with another singer, it would be great, but I’d like to see some other stuff. I know it will be there and I know that somebody coming up will be doing it. And I’m interested in starting to write a little more for big band, too. I want to see where the
next one goes, because the next one could be really interesting. And I just want to say that I’m so glad to be able to play music with friends and fellow musicians, and I’m really honored to spend a little time with you.

JS: Likewise. Thank you so much for speaking with me.
Steven Feifke

Skype Interview

July 17, 2015

Steven Feifke is a New York based jazz pianist and composer. Feifke has led his own big band since 2013, and was commissioned in 2014 by the 23Arts Initiative to write a new arrangement of George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” for piano and big band.

JS: Tell me about your history with big band and what sparked your interest in writing and arranging for the ensemble.

SF: To be completely honest, I have no idea what specifically sparked my interest in writing big band music. I’ve always loved writing music – I wrote my first song when I was in middle school. I still have it, actually. It’s passable, but past that it’s not very good. I just kept writing music, and I was fortunate enough to go to a great high school with a great jazz program. The big band there is pretty good, so I played in the lower big band when I was a sophomore and junior, and then the highest big band when I was a senior. I remember asking my teacher if I could bring in a song to the big band, and he said, “As long as it’s not too hard.” I wrote something, but I stopped after the intro, because after it was obvious where to put the instruments, I didn’t know what to do with it. So I didn’t complete it until my senior year. The small groups at my high school were septets, so I used to write a lot for the septet.
JS: You still have a septet, right?

SF: Yeah, I have a septet and a big band too. So I wrote my first big band chart when I was a senior in high school. I've always loved writing music, and the more toys to play with, the better.

JS: Absolutely. You’ve done some arrangements that re-imagine classic charts – your arrangement of “Caravan” is ridiculous. [laughs] I love it. So do you think we have an obligation to continue re-imagining charts just to try to bring different perspectives to the tunes? Do you think that helps maintain the vitality of the music, just to have different views on classic tunes?

SF: So when you solo, are you trying to sound like somebody else or are you just trying to play what you hear?

JS: Right. You take inspiration from other people, but you definitely have to bring your own thing to it.

SF: Yeah. I can tell you about how I wrote that arrangement of “Caravan.” Actually, let me answer that question first. No, I don't think that way. I don't know what is necessary to push the music forward. I would say maybe more original compositions are probably more helpful in pushing jazz music forward, and just creating new bodies of work. As far as rewriting old charts, I don't think about any
previous charts when writing a new chart. If I have to think about what I want to do with an arrangement – unless I’m being hired to write that arrangement – then I stop there. So what happened with “Caravan” – it was a few years ago, and I was playing with my septet in Boston the night before we went in to record my CD. We were at sound check, and the music for my septet is all old – I wrote it my sophomore year of college – and I wanted to do a big band record for my first one, but recording a CD is expensive regardless of ensemble size. A big band is so expensive that there’s no way I could afford that, but I wanted to showcase my writing, so I went with my septet. So we were in the studio at sound check and I was just fooling around, and came up with this groove at the end of “Caravan.” It sat around for a year and a half, when I had the opportunity to record it, so I wrote it down.

JS: Nice. Since we’re talking about this sort of thing, who are some of your musical influences, inside and outside of jazz?

SF: My first jazz record was *The Atomic Count Basie*. Are you asking just about writers, or are you asking about everybody?

JS: Everybody.

SF: There are a lot of them. Count Basie and McCoy Tyner were my first two big CDs, and then from there it exploded. When I was still really young, I got into Michel
Camillo and his really flashy pianistic technique. I liked that about him. Then I got into Oscar [Peterson] from there, and this Japanese guy named Makoto Ozone. In my younger years, he was the guy I always listened to. Then there’s Gene Harris – I’m just going to keep going with pianists – and [Brad] Mehldau. Then I kind of went backwards and got into Art Tatum, Bud Powell, Barry Harris, Sonny Clarke, and all of those guys. A year later, I got into Ahmad [Jamal]. When you listen to his trio, there’s some killing writing. Holy shit.

JS: Absolutely.

SF: *Live at the Blackhawk* is one of the best records of all time, without a doubt. That arrangement of “Darn That Dream” [from Cross Country Tour 1958-1961] is ridiculous. And then I listened to a lot of Christian McBride, Joshua Redman, Chris Potter, I especially loved [Michael] Brecker, and then I wound up studying with Gil Goldstein at NYU. But what I was going to say before I started listing off my influences, was that I used to listen to records and assume that the cat’s name on the CD arranged all the material. So when I listened to Count Basie, I was like, “Holy shit, he wrote all of that? That’s incredible.” And then I found out it was Neal Hefti. With McCoy it was different, since those were trio records. But as soon as I found out that that was something you could do with your career, that’s what I got into. So I listened to a ton of Frank [Sinatra], Louis Armstrong has some killing big band recordings, and Quincy did a lot of the Frank [Sinatra] charts, and Billy Mays, Bill
Holman, all of those guys. I realized pretty late on that there was a back scene, that there were people that did that instead of playing.

JS: Yeah, I was listening to Sinatra at the Sands – the one with Count Basie and Quincy Jones – the other day, and there are some really nice arrangements on there.

Apprenticeship has been a big deal in jazz – working with an older player, older writer, and learning in that apprentice style. The big band has frequently been the site of this kind of apprenticeship for players especially. You know, back in the day you would go on the road with a band and absorb all of that. So now that there are very few touring bands and there aren’t those kinds of opportunities, things have moved into the university system. So I guess the question is: is this same style of apprenticeship available through the university system, and do you have any thoughts on how the music might have changed, with it moving into a more academic setting.

SF: Well, first, far be it for me to give a correct answer on this, because I’m sure there are many correct answers, so as a disclaimer I suppose, I’ll say that first. It’s such a broad question, because really what you’re asking a question about isn’t – well, it is about the state of jazz and how education has affected it – but basically what you’re talking about is the marketplace, viewing jazz in terms of a market. If you’re going to say that jazz has become an academic art form, then you have to ask yourself two more questions: how do you yourself feel about jazz and classical
music, and how do those compare in your head, and how does that resonate with you? When you sit them side-by-side, you have classical music and you have jazz. Classical music – using the broad term, since the Classical period was only 50 years – is far older than jazz, hundreds of years, however far back you want to define that. But with jazz, I don’t know where you would draw that beginning line. I’m sure that that’s up for contention too, and you could probably give me a better answer than I could give you on that, but let’s just say for argument’s sake that it began in the 1900’s. So we have a hundred years of our art form. So, to get back to the question of how it’s affecting people with mentorships, everybody has to get out of school. If you go to school and then you think that you’re done learning – I don’t know any profession like that. Jazz is an art form, but being a musician is a profession, and there are serious questions that you have to ask yourself, like “How do I keep the lights on?” There are still mentorships available. You go to a university and even if you don’t go to a university in New York City – I don’t know where a small jazz program is, but all of those professors at least studied with somebody, and if that somebody isn’t alive, then they have all of those stories and the music is passed down. What’s been happening recently is that the last people are passing away. Clark Terry is gone. I don’t know how many recordings I’ve listened to over the course of my life that have him on there. Roy Haynes is still around, but his Alzheimer’s has gotten bad. I saw him at Dizzy’s for his last show, and there were the people up front sitting down in the chairs, and they didn’t really know what was going on, but then in the back of the room was everybody from the scene, just checking out Roy. He sounded ridiculous, but then he gets on the mic and he goes,
“David Wong on the bass,” and the crowd applauds, and then he goes, “And let’s hear it for David Wong on the bass.” But positions like that – you have to remember that David Wong is kind of a part of our generation, so is Jaleel Shaw, all those cats that are in that band. The point is that those exist, but they are getting fewer and fewer as the legends go. That being said, there is still a network of people, and if you want to go meet someone, you go meet them. You can’t put the responsibility on a university to provide you with that mentorship. And that brings me to my second question, which is how you separate the academic side of things and the artistic side of things, and is there a difference? I think so. I’ve been copying for David Berger, and I’d say our two styles of writing are very different, but I’m still going into his scores and studying. I’m not the only one who can do that – somebody else could go to David Berger and say, “Hey, I want to copy for you.” Studying with Gil Goldstein in college, it’s not like I graduate from NYU and that’s the end of that relationship. Gil is a busy dude and enters things into Sibelius himself, so it’s not the same kind of opportunity, but it’s still available. You’re right, there aren’t many touring bands left, but even Wayne Shorter calls this cat, Jonathan Pinson, on drums to sub for Brian Blade sometimes. The list goes on and on, like Russell Malone calling Russell Hall and Luke Sellick. The mentorship is so far from done, it’s just that the supply of young musicians is higher and the demand is lower.

JS: I think so. That’s one of the things I’ve always told students – a lot of these famous people are just people, and you can find them and introduce yourself. There
are a lot of students, but there are only a few who are willing to reach out and say, “Hey, I’m here.” There’s something to be said about that, I think.

SF: I agree. Not to spend too much more time on this, but I think that there is too much emphasis put on the university to do for you. It’s an “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” kind of thing.

JS: Absolutely. A lot of people think that if they’re going into a jazz program that it’s the program’s responsibility to give them what they need, instead of using the opportunity to take what they need themselves and meet the right people. My feeling about universities is that it’s an opportunity to get into a good environment where you can work and learn.

A lot of people are taking advantage of new media technologies, both distributing recordings and selling charts. It’s become not necessarily easier, but it’s certainly easier to get music out. Do you have any thoughts on any of that and how people might be able to use some of those technologies wisely?

SF: I think the same thing is true that always was: if the music is killing and you find a way to get it out, shit will happen. [laughs] Just because it’s easier now doesn’t mean that you can write lesser quality music. I’m a little unclear on what the question is.
JS: It was an unclear question. We’ll just skip it because I can’t think of a better way of asking something more specific. One more question.

SF: You can ask more than one if you need. [laughs]

JS: Okay. [laughs] So the last question is one I’ve been asking everyone. This is kind of a dual question. Either what do you see in the future for big band, or what would you like to see?

SF: Oh, I don’t know. [laughs] I have no idea, dude. I mean, I’m thinking aloud, but big band is a subgenre of jazz, which is a subgenre of music. Jazz has never had a big place in the market, and if you think otherwise I think you’re fooling yourself. The time when jazz was pop music, who are you referring to? Duke, Count Basie, and Frank? As time went by, check out what happened to the complexity of that music, even in those three names. No offense to Count Basie, but it’s no Duke Ellington. I don’t know what’s going to happen to big band and jazz. I was interviewed yesterday for a teaching position, and it was interesting. This guy asked me, “How would you teach younger students the basics of music?” And I said, “Well, I think there is a basic understanding that comes from Bach,” and gave some B.S. answer. But he goes, “You know, you’re absolutely right.” And I was like, “Great.” [laughs] But he said something very wise. He said, “I don’t like classifying music from genre to genre because it all shares the common goal of sparking emotional content within the listener.” As a composer – and you’re a composer too – you can’t do anything but
put on paper what you feel. It’s your job to be honest with yourself, and it’s my job too. It’s our job to be open and honest with ourselves and have the necessary skill set required to evoke those emotions as best we can within ourselves and hope that it invokes emotions in other people. Maybe it will be the same emotions you felt, maybe it will be different, but what makes us individuals is how we respond to different inputs, whether it be emotion or sonic or whatever. As far as big bands, I’m just going to keep writing what I hear, and I like writing for big band for now. Maybe I’ll always like writing for big band; I think I will. To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what everybody else has said, but what would I like to see in big band jazz in the future? Hopefully my name, to be completely honest. I don’t want to just fade out. I want to continue writing music, and hopefully people will listen to it. But that being said, most of the opportunities for gigs in New York right now are swing dances, dance band gigs, and that’s probably the case in a lot of places. It’s interesting that in these economically unstable times we’re returning to a style of music that was last big in another previous economically unstable time. But you have to think about what that music means, and the freedom that jazz affords the listener. I don’t know. I think that it should make you move, whether or not it’s a serious song or modern jazz, or if it’s swing. Over the years, that’s the kinds of music that have taken off, from Metallica to the Doobie Brothers, from Frank to Splank. I don’t know if that answers the question. It’s a good question, but it’s impossible to know.
Alan Ferber

Personal Interview

May 15, 2014

*Alan Ferber is a New York based jazz trombonist and composer who leads both a nonet and big band. Ferber’s approach to composition for big band calls for a deep knowledge of the history of the ensemble as a way toward innovation.*

JS: Tell me about your history with the ensemble.

AF: I come from a long line of performers in my family – my identical twin is a drummer – and that ultimately probably has the most to do with why I found myself in music, and jazz. My grandmother was actually a Broadway actress. She sang with Gene Krupa’s band and has a long history with big bands and Broadway singing. When she was younger, she was doing a lot of shows, and she ultimately moved to L.A. because she got hired on the MGM payroll to do a lot of the movies in L.A., some of which were in a Broadway style – movies like Anchors Away. She got to know Frank Sinatra, the Dorsey brothers, all sorts of people. So in a way, I think genetically I was born into this. It wasn’t really my choice; it kind of chose me before I was even born. Even though I never met my grandmother, because she died pretty young, I think that her influence came by way of my mom mostly. My dad was a big music lover too, but he was not a musician. My mother was a musician, very active in our schools in California – I grew up in the Bay area – and I think she put a high priority on music, so my brother and I both got started really early on piano, and then found our
way to trombone and drums at around 10 years old through the band program. I was always really tall, so I was one of the few people who could get down to 7th position [laughs] with my long arms, so I think the instrument kind of chose me rather than me choosing it, but I’m glad it did because I fell in love with the sound of it. When I was growing up, Dean Hubbard, who was my private teacher in the Bay area, really exposed me to a lot of jazz. He was really active as a freelancer, so he played with Dizzy Gillespie’s big band when he came through town, and a lot of local big bands, so I got a lot of exposure through that, and my high school program had a good big band. So just a lot of exposure to the music coming up as a child and as I got older through high school, and when I got to UCLA, which is where I went to college, I happened into a pretty lucky situation because they were just starting the jazz program there. Kenny Burrell was heading the department, and my big band directors were Gerald Wilson and Garnett Brown, and you can’t do much better than that. By way of that, I got to play, and I took a class with Billy Higgins where we played Thelonious Monk tunes every week. He didn’t say much, we just played. What a great way to get the music – the feel and the joy of the music – into your body, and a way to teach it in a way that you’re exposed to it through the joy of it, rather than through somebody explaining to you on a blackboard why this sounds good. It was kind of like, “Let’s play some music,” and we did, and it felt great, and I wanted to continue to do it as a result. Thank you Billy Higgins, you know [laughs, gestures upward]. And through that experience, I met some great players. I was in school with my friend, Todd Sickafoose, who’s a great bass player I played with a bunch. He’s made a bunch of great records – he’s still playing, very active.
Parlato, the vocalist, was in my class, and a guy named John Deversa, and Justin Morell. I think John is the head of the department at the University of Miami now, leads the big band, he’s doing great. Anyway, all of these people were really inspiring figures and exposed me to a lot of music. I think from there – as a trombone player you’re always playing in big bands – so I was ushered into this after I graduated, into the scene in Los Angeles, which was very big band heavy. Really I got my start and created my initial networks through playing big band rehearsals at the union. That’s how I got to know people and that’s how I got my first gigs, and it was the late 90’s, so it was the beginning of the big neo-swing movement. I got hired by Brian Setzer, who I then went on the road with for a year, so I just got swept in by the big band scene and it kind of paid my rent for a while, and in some cases it still does. So that’s sort of how I got funneled into it.

JS: So were you always writing from early on, or was that something you got into later?

AF: No, much later. I was a trombone player first, and I’d never written a tune in my life until I think my senior year in college. Justin Burrell’s father came and did a composition class at school, so we were asked to bring in compositions. I was like, “I don’t know how to write,” but I had a clue, so I wrote a few lead sheets and brought them in and got them played, was really excited about it, and that was kind of the extent of it in terms of writing. I took an arranging class, and there was a little bit of writing involved, but it was more arranging than writing. I think I really learned and
got excited about writing because I’m a trombone player and I got lots of great opportunities to play in lots of great big bands. When you’re sitting in the middle of the band and you’re playing a lot of things that aren’t melodic parts – they’re always interior parts – you’re constantly in this world of counterpoint. I think one’s ear naturally gravitates toward the melody. When you listen to a record, you listen to the melody, you listen to the singer. It doesn’t necessarily direct itself to the middle, to the mid ground, but I think as a trombone player you exist in the mid ground world, but your ear is always naturally gravitating toward the melody. So you’re constantly swimming in this counterpoint, in this texture, the mid texture, but also relating it to the more prominent foreground melodic texture, so I think that’s a big reason why trombone players become writers – there’s sort of an exposure to the inner workings of how everything works. So when I ultimately sat down and started writing for larger ensembles, it really came quite naturally to me. I had studied a little bit of big band scores and whatnot, but really it was just very intuitive and I just had a sense of how it worked. Right from the get go, I think I had a pretty good idea of how things should be laid out.

JS: I was trying to remember who it was who said it – there was an arranger who was talking about big band writing. They were talking about the trombone section as the anchor for the horn section. Sometimes maybe you don’t notice them on the record, but they’re the ones really anchoring the horns down. He was talking about writing for Ferguson’s band and how it was harder because he never had a lot of
trombones – he was down to one at the end – and how hard it was to really get a full sound sometimes, or a big band style sound without a full trombone section.

AF: Yes, it's very true. The less you have, the more difficult it is to fill out that middle spectrum of the sound, and that's where the power comes from. Otherwise, you have sort of a shell of a sound, but the trombones provide the muscle, the body. Without that, you know... [laughs] come on. It's a band, but it's not a big band.

JS: So did you start writing big band tunes from the beginning, because I know that on your albums, the numbers have grown over the years. [laughs]

AF: A lot of people give me a hard time about that. No, I definitely did not start writing big band, nor did I ever really want to have a big band, to be honest with you. I think that originally when I started leading bands, it was a quartet. I did a quartet gig for about a year – a weekly gig in L.A., and that was a really great foundational time for me, to learn a lot of tunes, a lot of melodies, learn how to deliver a melody as sort of the singer, the one person. So I really learned a lot about expressing a melody and trying to really make it sing. Then as I started to form bands, I think I was originally attracted to 3 note voicings, triadic voicings or quartal, sort of fourth oriented voicings. My brother, like I mentioned, is a drummer, and he was playing with some folks around L.A. at the time. He would just kind of leave some sheet music on the piano that he was working on, and I would just kind of sit down at the piano and check this stuff out. Sometimes when it was written by
pianists, it was cool because I would check out the voicings and be like “wow, that's really hip.” A lot of times it was 3 note voicings in the right hand, and I just thought, “Wow, that’s such a great sound.” You know, if you have a triad, and then an alternate bass note, and all the possibilities of the sound you can get with a simple major triad, depending on what bass note. I was just really enamored by that. And then fourth voicings, and all the bass notes, and all the sounds that can produce, and then cluster voicings, the same thing. I was so attracted to that sound, that harmony, that my first band I put together was alto, tenor, and trombone, and we gigged around L.A. for a little while. I feel like that started this ball rolling of horn-oriented bands, where I could write voicings. I think I was always attracted to that, to voicings. So I did a record in L.A. – it was a septet record – and then I moved to New York and I did a series of nonet records for five horns, which I had written while I was on the road for a year. I was doing a Broadway show tour, and I got really tired of playing the same show every night. It was like therapy – I had to do something different, I had to write something different. So creatively, the well was running dry and I had to do something about that. I thought about what I had available in the pit orchestra and I started writing for that, which essentially was five horns. I started asking the guys to come in a little early to the theater so we could try some things out, and they were all psyched to do it because they wanted to play something different. So I began to arrange things and then write some things for five horns, and I started thinking, “Wow, that’s a great sound.” I really started to learn how to write for five by doing that and transcribing some Kenny Wheeler stuff off of records, a lot of Keith Jarrett voicings, that kind of thing. I was a big fan of Dave Holland – still am.
the way he uses counterpoint and rhythm in his writing. I was adopting all these kinds of styles and having fun adapting it to five horns, so when I got off the road and back to New York I put this band together of friends of mine and we did three records. One with strings, the others just nonet, and it was just a band that I had going. We were playing pretty regularly at Smalls and other venues, and it was a blast, and actually I’m going to rejuvenate it because I got a grant to write a new suite of music for nonet, so I’m going to bring those guys back together. It was so much fun, and that was a little big band – three reeds, two brass – so it was kind of like a mini reed section and a small brass section of trumpet and trombone. I wrote about 30-35 charts for that band, and then when somebody asked me to do a big band chart for their college, I thought, “Well I don’t really know how to do that,” but of course I told them, “Yeah, sure, I’d love to.” [laughs] So I took one of my nonet tunes and I just kind of thought about, “Okay, what was I thinking here?” and then I realized that I was treating the brass as a certain choir – a mini choir – and the reeds as a certain mini choir, and then I thought, “Well in a big band, it’s essentially four different choirs – a trombone choir, trumpet choir, saxophone five note choir, and a rhythm section choir.” By conceptualizing it that way and writing in four note voicings and five note voicings for the horn sections, it wasn’t very different from what I’d been doing with the septet and the nonet. I just had to flesh things out a little more, and intuitively it was an easy next step, so I think going from nonet to big band was not a huge leap. In a way, subconsciously I had written some of the nonet tunes for big band, so when I ultimately rewrote them or rearranged them for big band, it was like, “Oh, this should have been a big band chart to begin with. It works
much better this way.” So that’s kind of how I arrived at big band, by doing a few commissions, and then a friend of mine asked me to lead a big band on his series in Brooklyn, and again I just put together a bunch of my friends – “Hey, you guys want to come down and play?” No rehearsal, I just brought my charts and we just went for it, and ten seconds into it I knew that I wanted to keep doing this, it was so addicting. It’s like a really bad drug. You know ultimately it’s going to be really hard on you, leading a big band – financially and time wise – yet you can’t stop doing it once you start. [laughs] A few measures in, I was like, “Oh no, here we go.” [laughs] But I had to do it, so then I made a big band record, and I’m glad I did because it really fulfilled a musical vision that I’d had sort of latently for many years.

JS: What sort of changes has the university’s presence brought to big band and jazz, and what potential pitfalls do you see in the university system?

AF: Ultimately, I think it comes down to the composers writing the music and what their motivation is. My motivation has always been to write good music that I want to play, and that I think people would be inspired by, and inspired to play. I think where the danger comes in is when people write big band music for a school and they start putting grade levels on it, and it’s specifically for a school. Then you’re getting into the business side of things, you’re writing it as a business choice rather than an artistic choice, and to me that’s reflected in the music. If your motivation is to write a chart so you can sell it and make money, then it’s going to sound like that in a way. If your motivation is just to simply write a great piece of music that makes
a really honest artistic statement, then I think the university’s role in playing that kind of music is a valuable one: to help disperse good music. I don’t think it’s necessarily a good thing when the business-oriented music starts getting played a lot, only because sometimes that music artistically – and again, this is all subjective, people can argue this – but sometimes I hear, particularly when adjudicating festivals, music that clearly is pandering in a way to the institution or to a student ensemble, or written for the sake of selling these charts, and ultimately for me, I care about my students and their exposure to good art. If they’re being denied that, that’s where it becomes a problem, because then they’re being exposed to things that aren’t honest and artistic statements. Then that’s perpetuated, and then it becomes a business, because then they want to write charts and sell them, and the business part of it takes over and the artistic part starts to diminish. I think ultimately, it’s not the institution so much, but the institution creates the opportunity to sell charts. So for people with dollar signs in their eyes, that is a road to take, and if you want to sell charts, you can certainly do it. Particularly, there is a certain way you can put a chart together where – and I think this is where festivals come in, because the festivals that are sort of competitive festivals where they’re graded, and there’s a certain score sheet, and there’s a very specific list of criteria on the sheet – sometimes it awards bands for things that one of those business-oriented charts can nail, so a lot of charts are written as festival-winning charts. Very little is improvised, most of it is written out, the rhythm section parts are essentially completely composed, because the writer’s afraid that, God forbid, the students might take some artistic liberties and there might be some failure involved; they
might actually not succeed. In my opinion, it’s really important to fail. As a musician, and particularly as a jazz musician, you have to play music and keep playing music that provides you the opportunity to fail, because it’s only through failing that you are enriched and learn something. If you play charts that are really safe, in a sense that if you really practice them and get all the notes right, they’re going to come off as really impressive, at least for one or two listens, then yeah, you’ll win a competition, but in the long run it’s doing the student a disservice I think, because you’re denying them an opportunity to spontaneously interact. Music that does not allow that to happen is kind of putting a stranglehold on an individual’s artistry and spontaneous decisions, and that’s what it’s all about. If we talk about the big band tradition, and we go back to the beginnings of big band, which were essentially territory bands with no charts, just making stuff up with a big band – Count Basie, for instance. That band in many incarnations didn’t have charts. It was a riff-oriented ensemble. They would come up with things on the spot, and it would feel great. Things kind of developed organically with those bands, and I think that that part of the tradition has, in a lot of ways, been lost as things have gotten more institutionalized, because you’ve got these rigid structures and these competitions, and you’ve got to win because then you’ve got to draw students. There’s pressure from a lot of sides to get students into your program, and it’s not always a good thing to pander. Personally, through my music, I try not to forget about the beginnings of the big band tradition, in which there was a lot of spontaneity and a lot of things just being made up on the spot. With a lot of new big band charts, you’re decreasing a sense of awareness among the musicians, because they’re just focused
on their part and maybe blending with the section, but they’re never actually forced to make creative music decisions because it’s all tightly wound in the arrangement. What if you just give them a lead sheet and then tell them to make music out of that? A lot of times, they have a hard time doing that, because there’s a lack of awareness: “Well, usually my part’s all written out, and it’s creating this sort of background part.” Well, why can’t you make that decision? Then there’s a sense of awareness of how you kind of fit in with the larger ensemble, and I think that’s where the early tradition of territory bands and whatnot is important. They were forced to make those decisions, and I think that that was a really important part of the process. So, jazz education has become big business for sure. Certainly the business of jazz education is, in a lot of ways, larger than the business of the actual music if you look at the general scene in the clubs. At least in New York, most of the clubs where jazz musicians are playing, the leaders are losing money and the sidemen are making 50-60 bucks. For a big band, that’s good. [laughs] You really have to love doing it to make that kind of investment in this day and age.

JS: What do you see in the future of big band, or what would you like to see?

AF: Well, I think one development that is really exciting in the big band tradition – and I can see it continuing to go in this direction – is just that there’s a greater diversity of approaches to the format. You see that a lot here in New York, of course, because it’s such a multicultural city. I play in a lot of big bands here, and just in the last few weeks, I recorded on Miguel Zenón’s big band record, which is totally
unique in the sense that it is a big band, but it’s incorporating these Puerto Rican folk melodies and these really amazing Puerto Rican rhythmic ideas, which to my knowledge hasn’t been done like that before, at least to that extent. It’s just amazing music. Pedro Giraudo, who I just played with over at the Jazz Standard is another great example of someone from Argentina who is beautifully combining sort of a Duke Ellington aesthetic with these Argentinean folk melodies and great rhythmic undercurrent to the music. Guillermo Klein has a band – it’s not a big band per se, but it’s a larger ensemble – and he’s doing a lot of interesting things, drawing from a lot of different sources. So, I think that big band is kind of becoming a format for these really disparate approaches, which I think is great because it’s moving away from the stock kind of approach, kind of wrestling it away from Sammy Nestico – not to say that’s stock, it’s just so established and it’s been done. In Miguel and Pedro’s case, and my case as well, it all starts with a smaller ensemble and then they flesh it out because the big band is such an important part of the lineage of the music. This is where every university should provide some kind of exposure to big band writing, because it’s always been a huge part of the tradition. Playing in big bands, learning about big bands – that’s an important thing, you know – learning about the big band tradition and how to write for it. So it’s inspiring to me to see all these people who 10 years ago I never would have guessed would have made a big band record – I know these people as someone with a quartet, you know, they have small groups, and they just do their thing – to see them making big band records bodes well for the future I think, in terms of setting a lot of new precedents for the ensemble and making it more relevant. The more people like that, that treat the big
band that way, with new, current music – relevant music – then it makes the format of the big band more relevant, and I think that’s what is needed for the big band to survive. It always has been. Without that, the big band would die. If it became museum music, it wouldn’t last. It would become petrified, and that would be that. But, as I look into the crystal ball, I see more developments like this with more people tackling the big band with their music. Just these exciting developments and what they do with it – I think it’s really cool to see what all these people do with a big band. It’s such a rich tradition. There are so many ways to treat that ensemble – I was saying the four choirs, but it doesn’t have to be like that – all these people are writing in ways that have nothing to do with the drop 2 voicing, and spread voicing, and all these things. They’ve just got this format, and they make it work for their music. I think looking forward into the future, I think that’s kind of where it’s going to continue to go. More and more people are going to continue to do that, and fortunately the more people that release big band records that are compelling to listeners, the more I think it bodes well for the future of the music. We need more people to make good big band records that actually have a certain quality to the music where it feels in the now, you know. Big band records don’t always feel like a throwback. When you just say the word “big band,” there’s a crusty connotation to that. It’s like the word “jazz.” People refer to it as a four-letter word. People are afraid to use the word “big band” when they actually put together their own big band, because they don’t want people to think that it’s like “Shiny Stockings,” you know. [laughs] As long as people keep doing new things with it, I think that those two words will hopefully regain some kind of hipness factor [laughs], you know,
where people won’t be like, “Oh god, big band is boring,” or, “Big band is for my grandparents,” but will be like, “Oh yeah, big band’s cool. I’m going to go check that out.” That’s what we need, so that’s what I’m going to be hoping for in the future. I’ll do my part, but I’m just hoping a lot of other people continue to do it as well and not get scared away by it. I think we all want that, at least jazz musicians.
Heinrich von Kalnein

Email Interview

August 2, 2015

Heinrich von Kalnein is a jazz saxophonist and flutist based in Graz, Austria. He is co-leader of Jazz Bigband Graz, an ensemble known for its experimental approach to big band music.

JS: What sparked your interest in writing for big band?

HvK: The task of developing a personal ensemble sound and keeping a large ensemble running.

JS: What responsibility do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts? How would you balance the continued performance of these tunes with fostering new approaches to the genre and the individual creativity of the players? Are preservation and innovation necessarily at odds with one another?

HvK: In my opinion innovation always was an integral part of jazz history. I personally don’t see any reason of keeping any traditions alive. I think that this is an integral part of jazz education! Thus innovation, as long as it creates something valid automatically will be part of any tradition.
JS: Jazz Bigband Graz is known for incorporating non-traditional instruments and techniques. Are there some instruments and/or techniques that you feel should not be included? Or does the addition of these new elements serve to expand the appeal of the ensemble?

HvK: Definitely the latter! There are no limits in searching for new sounds - except musical reasons. On a side note: sometimes it's not so much about the instrument than the instrumentalist! E.g. we didn't take electric hurdy-gurdy player Matthias Loibner because of his (rather weird;-) instrument, but because of his open-minded personality and musical expertise!

JS: Why did you decide to start a big band? And how has the experience been in terms of funding, finding players, scheduling performances, etc.?

HvK: Horst-Michael and I took over the band in a moment of hesitation. We both never thought of working professionally with a big band of our own. Maybe that's one reason why we try to approach this ensemble rather as a large (small-) ensemble than a conventional big band. The financial part (getting funds and grants etc.) in fact is a huge task, which eats up a lot of energy and creativity. Finding the appropriate gigs also is a hard one, since most international promoters are afraid of the "hidden" costs (like hotel rooms, travel etc.). The longer we exist the easier things seem to be with "official" institutions, governments etc., though. Still, it's a lot
of work, which very often has more to do with convincing people than writing, producing and performing. In the end the latter parts are the fun parts!

JS: This last question is one I've been asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big band? Or what would you like to see?

HvK: I'd like to see more political acceptance - and less cliché in writing!
Nate Kimball

Skype Interview

January 8, 2016

Nate Kimball is a Las Vegas based jazz trombonist and composer. Kimball leads his own big band that performs his compositions exclusively. Additionally, Kimball is a musician for Cirque du Soleil.

JS: Tell me about your history with big bands – how you got into it initially as a player, and also what sparked your interest in writing for the ensemble.

NK: I started playing in big band in high school, so I really didn’t know much about it before that. I was actually originally a euphonium player, so I played in the bands, but the jazz band director at the time needed a trombone player, so he reached out to me about halfway through high school, and that’s sort of what sparked my interest. Honestly, before that I really had no inkling of anything big band related, so that was probably the thing that started it, because that was really the first time I started improvising and hearing that color. As far as writing for it, that actually didn’t come until later either. Everything for me I feel came later than most people. That came more towards college, after I had studied for a couple of years with Virko [Baley], and then I just decided to switch over to the jazz department because, again, that color just sort of drew me. For the first time, I started to hear Maria Schneider and Bob Mintzer, and some of those colors that I didn’t realize a big band could do. So that sort of got me more interested in writing for that color.
JS: Absolutely. My interest in it actually came quite late as well. I mean, I listened to it, but it wasn’t until I got to UNLV before I started becoming interested in it, so I definitely feel you on that one. [laughs] So your band recently released an album. Tell me about the process of putting that whole thing together, from a logistical standpoint and finding players, and how you find money to record a big band. One of the things that’s kind of cool about media technologies now is that it’s easier to get your music out once you’ve got it recorded, but recording a group of that size isn’t something you can do in a home studio. [laughs]

NK: That project was a long time coming. A lot of things had to happen to save up for that. I wish I could say that I was independently wealthy and I could just do things like this all the time. It was just something I was planning on doing for a long time, so it was a combination of things that contributed. First, some of the concerts I did allowed me to apply for grants, so I was awarded some grants that contributed to the album. Also, the creation of my company, Natek Music, allowed me to start to get my charts sold, and that allowed me a little bit of passive income from my website from sales of music. Finally, to be quite honest, real estate – I still have my real estate license and was looking at those commissions as going towards the album. So I finally got to a point where I had enough to actually do it. That’s where the financial end came from, so it was a combination of all those things. The logistics of finding 19 people to get in the same place at the same time is tough. I already generally knew the people I wanted to use, so my methodology when booking a big band is book early and communicate frequently. [laughs] The very first thing I did
was book the recording dates. I knew I wanted to try to get it done in two rehearsals, three dates. I wanted to make sure that everyone had already been on top of the music so that when we got into rehearsal it was ready to go. And mostly that’s how it worked, so it was really nice. Once I booked the dates, I tried to make it at times that were early enough that people wouldn’t bitch too much, but also they could get to their shows. I did that, and a lot of the guys I reached out to and asked to do it were totally down. They were willing to accommodate. There were just a few people who couldn’t do it. They just couldn’t budge, so I found some other people for that. But for the most part, they were all down. So we booked the rehearsal space and the studio, and at the rehearsals for the most part everyone could make it – there were a couple of subs, but it wasn’t that big of a deal. We all had worked that out in advance. And then we just recorded it. It was pretty straight ahead from that point on, once the booking was solved. That’s about it, to be honest.

JS: So how did the collaboration with Jennifer Batten come about? I have to tell you, I love that tune. It’s something that I didn’t expect at all. I actually showed it to one of my friends while we were on the road, and he looked over at me and said, “Is this really happening?” [laughs] And I said, “Yeah, this is really happening.” So how did that collaboration come about?

NK: Well, it was very lucky because our guitarist at Zumanity had to go on maternity leave, and she just happened to be friends with Jennifer Batten through her chick guitar circle. So Jennifer Batten wound up on the gig for roughly six months. We
used to hang out and talk all the time. She told old Michael Jackson stories, and it was just so badass and she was just killing, as you can hear. So it was sort of around the same time that I was piecing together the idea of doing a big band album, so I just sort of gave her the idea, “Hey, I might be doing this big band album. Would you be down, because I think I might have something for you to play on.” She was like, “Yeah, cool,” and when the time came I just sent her a Facebook message to make sure she was still down. She cut me a really awesome rate on it because she’s cool. [laughs] I just sent her the music and the really shitty MIDI backing track – well, I sent her the MIDI track at first, but I had all the correct tracks later, so she wound up recording with that. She just laid down one really awesome solo, and that was it. She sent it my way and was like, “Well, here’s your solo.” No questions – it wasn’t like, “Pick one of these,” it was like, “Here’s the solo.” And it was the solo. [laughs]

JS: Absolutely. [laughs]

NK: I was pretty happy with it. It shredded pretty hard. Yeah, so she and I still talk, and she’s awesome.

JS: I also have to say that I was impressed with the breadth of styles represented on your album. It’s really refreshing to hear such a wide range of styles, sounds, and textures. Are you working on any new charts?
NK: No albums right now. I have a lot of things going on, but not writing wise. I was commissioned to write a piece for a British brass band and a baritone soloist. I also have a commission from the Las Vegas Academy to write a big band chart for them, and they actually hired our band to be the headliner on their upcoming jazz festival in April. I’ll probably be writing some new stuff for that, because I’m sure people are sick of hearing “Gaea” at this point. [laughs] I want to introduce some new stuff just to say, “Hey, I can still write.” That’s about it for the newer writing projects I’ve been doing, for now at least.

JS: You write stuff for younger bands too, right?

NK: Yeah, so that’s actually a new thing I just released – the Young Ensembles Jazz Series. I just wanted to make some stupidly easy music for those ensembles to play that hopefully isn’t cancerously bad.

JS: I was going to ask you about that. I know Bob Mintzer has some music for young bands too, but not a whole lot of people write for young bands. I think it’s nice to see some serious jazz composers writing for younger bands, because a lot of the stuff that’s available isn’t necessarily all that great. So how do you go about writing an easy tune that has some level of artistic integrity, something you’re willing to put your name on? [laughs]
NK: Well, there’s a lot you have to forfeit when writing for an ensemble like that, especially when you get to the middle school level. When you’re writing grade 1 and grade 2 material, you pretty much have to forfeit the artistic endeavor at that point because there’s just so many limitations placed on the music. Really the only thing I’m trying to do is write a pretty melody, something that’s singable and catchy, and hopefully the content isn’t so bad that I would feel bad writing music, which it did sort of wind up being, but I had to commit to it. Even the feedback that I got from middle school directors was like, “Yeah, this is good. This is what we need.” And there’s really not a lot of room to reach out too far because it seems like a lot of the techniques I would want to use to write more elaborate music for a middle school is just impossible. I think there are some middle school band directors who are willing to try, and they’re brave souls. I had a high school band purchase “Namaste.” [laughs] It was a band in Stockton, California, so I guess they’re ripping on it pretty hard now. But for middle school, it’s a whole other story. I guess that’s a longwinded way to answer your question. You do have to forfeit some things, I feel. Or maybe I just haven’t found that balance yet and I’m still searching for it.

JS: Well, you know, some of the simplest music in the world is Mozart, so I think there is some middle ground there. I think it’s tough maybe within the jazz world because things have become so harmonically complex that it’s hard to figure out how to dial that back and still get something workable.
Back when there were a lot of working bands, a lot of people came up and got their education on the bandstand. They would sit in and learn from older players, and there would be a lot of apprenticeship going on. Now that there aren’t really touring bands the way there once was and a lot of the big bands are now in the university system, do you think that the same sort of apprenticeship is still possible in that environment, and what effects has the university system had on jazz in general? That’s a big, loaded question, so you can speak to any part of that you’d like. [laughs]

NK: Okay, so I guess I’ll start with my personal experience with this, because I feel that it’s maybe a little different than some people’s experience. When I was getting my undergraduate degree, I was hired on to a 6 piece Dixieland jazz band at the Gold Coast hotel, and I feel like that was my apprenticeship. I worked there for 3 ½ years, and it was a band with 5 other guys, the most important of whom was Tom Ehlen, who was just an absolutely A-list world class trumpet player in town. When I first got on the band, he would pull me aside every set break and say, “No, you don’t play that, you don’t play this. This is how you do this. This is how you phrase this. You’re playing this note too long.” And I could tell it came from just his own frustration with me. [laughs] He just was like, “I need to make this right, otherwise I’m going to go insane.” So he would sit there on every set break and go through things, and finally that list got less and less, and I was really getting it and blending with him on that level, or close to it, and I became much more aware of what needs to actually happen. Even though that opportunity is rare, I feel like there are so many other things, like rehearsal bands and things like that that might not necessarily pay, but
provide that sort of out-of-academia experience that players need. So I don’t think that experience will ever necessarily be dead. I think they just need to be found and approached with an open mind, rather than coming from the very stubborn “how much does it pay?” concept, which I know is important. It is important to earn your bread, but you can work at Starbucks and then go play in rehearsal bands. I’m upset by a lot of young people’s refusal to take a workhorse job just to cover their ass, and then gripe about rehearsal bands not paying. It just doesn’t make sense, that mentality. But that’s one little nugget of people.

Moving on to academia’s role in all of this, I think that just like always, academia is important. I think it makes people well rounded ultimately. It gives them a different kind of foundation and a lot of different knowledge. Where the problem is, and was, and always will be, is in students’ approach to academia. Academia will always be what you take from it, and if you decide that academia is the mother tit that’s going to feed you for eternity, then that’s exactly how you’ll sound, and that’s exactly how you’ll approach life, and that’s exactly who you’ll be. If you take it and realize that there are invaluable lessons to be learned and invaluable connections to be made and you get from it exactly what you need and sort of ignore the rest [laughs], then I think it can be a very, very important and fruitful thing. I guess that’s where I stand on it. I don’t think that having ensembles in every school is a bad thing. I think it’s a great thing. I think the more music we have in the world, the better off we are. I think the reason why genres change and the reason why things change in music is because of the people who generate it and their outlook. It’s not the schools that are
to blame, it’s the people who create the music and their outlook, and how open of a
mind they have and how humble they are in music. That’s where I’m coming from.
The more you find yourself blaming other things for the problems that exist, the
more you’re contributing to them.

JS: Absolutely. I feel like there’s so much available at the schools, and at least in my
experience the students who ended up being successful really soaked up everything
they possibly could. They’re the ones who were spending extra time knocking on
professor’s doors, and I don’t think that kind of thing has changed at all from the
past, it’s just now in a different building. You’re in a different situation, but it’s still
the people who are willing to put in the extra time and are doing it because they
want to do it and not because they just happen to like it.

NK: Yeah, I think that’s exactly right, and I don’t think that will change. People will
be who they are, and if they find a change on their path, then that’s great, but if they
persist and close their mind and keep their ears plugged and eyes closed, there’s not
much you can do for that.

JS: This is a somewhat related question: What responsibility, if any, do you think
current bands have in preserving or continuing to perform older material? And if
there is some amount of responsibility, how would you balance that with the
performance of new tunes?
NK: I think preservation of heritage is crucial to our country, really. It’s crucial to our music. It’s crucial to everything. Whenever I write, I always try to incorporate things that are at least reminiscent if not directly influenced by styles of the past. As far as balancing that, my role as a big band director with my own group would be, and hopefully will be once I have the funds to do it, to perform concerts that are tributes to certain people or tributes to certain styles or eras and really educate people about the music, and then transition to how I learned from it. For example, I’ve always mentioned in the past that Gil Evans is a huge influence of mine, so I would usually preface that comment with a tune that I feel was sort of Gil Evans influenced, and hopefully the people who are familiar with that can hear it in the music, and if not, if it’s just some guy who doesn’t know the first thing about big band and just heard Gil Evans’ name for the first time, maybe he’ll go check it out. So that’s one more person who knows who Gil Evans is. [laughs] So it’s crucial, but I think the other side of it is just as important. It just really depends on what you’re setting out to do. I know there are a lot of bands that are really on the cutting edge, and everything they do ultimately is preserving history through progress. For a group like mine where it’s already a big band, so the instrumentation is set in tradition, I do feel a certain obligation to do that myself, but I wouldn’t blame someone for not feeling that.

JS: Okay, so one last question. This is one I’ve been asking everyone. Either what do you see in the future for big bands or what would you like to see?
NK: That's a really good question. I guess everything is sort of happening the way I would like it to. I wouldn't really mess with the way things are going, because I think they're on a very natural course right now. I think if they die out, then we're partially to blame. [laughs] If they progress, then I think we're also partially to blame. There are a lot of things I could answer to that. I could say that I'd love for them to get bigger or smaller, or go on tour more, or go on tour less, or be employed more, and those things would all be valid, but ultimately I guess my answer would be that I would always like there to be attention to it because I feel it's an important part of our past. I think it's a great thing for young writers to learn to write for, because it's simple, but has a lot of potential for complexity. I think it's a great vehicle for young players to learn a lot of important lessons in playing so that when they do grow up [laughs] and get out of school and play in rock bands, really progressive ensembles, and those types of things they're that much better of a player for having that experience. I guess I would like it to continue how it is. I would like for people to continue shining a light on it, however they do, whether it means playing in it, whether it means writing for it, whether it means directing it, teaching it, whatever that means I would just like the light to never die.
Tom Kubis
Email Interview
July 8, 2015

Tom Kubis is a Los Angeles based jazz saxophonist, flutist, and composer. Kubis works in film and television as both a composer/arranger and a studio musician, in addition to leading his own big band.

JS: What sparked your interest in writing for big band?

TK: It was funny. I found that whatever I had available in front of me, I would write for. So when I started writing, I was writing for this little Dixieland band I was playing with – my dad was actually playing drums – and it was kind of fun to be able to write for the 3 horns. Then, when I was at Huntington Beach High School, they had a band there, and I just wanted to write something. A few of the things were pretty horrible, some funny things happened for sure as far as voicings, but I was learning. No matter what, I enjoyed writing for whatever. I think one thing that really was a big spark was an arrangement on the Terry Gibbs Big Band called “Sweet Georgia Brown” that Manny Albam did, and that particular chart started me getting really thrilled about what a big band could do. It’s a really remarkable chart in a lot of ways. I’ve talked to people who know about that arrangement and some of the things that went down on it, and I felt that it was really a landmark chart for what a big band could do, and that really sparked my interest. Thad Jones also changed my life, and changed everybody’s life. We could use bigger chords now.
[laughs] That was another thing in kind of changing the way I wrote, you know, out
of the old Basie style.

JS: The education and development of jazz musicians has often involved the practice
of apprenticeship. The big band has frequently been the site of this apprenticeship,
with younger players learning styles and techniques organically through
interactions with their older counterparts. Now that there are fewer working bands,
big bands are most prevalent in the university system. Is the same sort of
apprenticeship still possible within the academic setting?

TK: Yes and no. One of the things that I’ve noticed is that the hiring practices of
universities now seems to be more about theorists rather than actual players. That’s
just the way they’re gearing the hiring system. So because of that, you will definitely
lose the great musicians having a chance to work with the younger players, because
they’re not hiring those people. They’re hiring with a different mindset, and it seems
to be pretty prevalent wherever they go. I wish hiring great players was more
prevalent in the university system. It would be great, but it’s hard to get the younger
players and the older players together. I do it with my big band upon occasion. I
have a high school soloist come in and play with my band and get a chance to work
with those people. Disneyland has a very good kind of thing where they have kind of
a clinic program out here in Anaheim, but it’s a tough one. It’s harder and harder for
musicians to get together. We have a lot of big bands that are working in the LA
area, and so there is a little bit of that. There’s a nice transition now of younger
players coming in. I’m the old guy now. [laughs] But that seems to be helping as well – a lot of guys with questions, so it’s kind of like more lesson-ish than anything else.

JS: What effects do you think the university has had on the music?

TK: I think as long as there’s some music going, it’s really great, if the teacher is positive. It’s all up to how good the instructor is and how positive. In all the arts, no matter what level you’re at, you’re putting your heart and soul into it. You need support, and sometimes not everybody gives you that. You need the support, and you need to find that great teacher. I was surrounded by them – Dr. Charles Rutherford at Orange Coast College, and John Prince at Long Beach State were such a positive influence on just wanting to make music, and that was the big thing – not putting down music or making it too hard. They saw what you could do and let you do it. They were the best thing for me.

JS: What responsibility do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts?

TK: A little bit. Now you can hear everything on YouTube, so you can go back and hear the old Lunceford charts, or the early Count Basie, or early Duke Ellington. You can hear those things and listen to them, so that is fine. As far as playing them, I don’t know. I think playing new stuff is really good. As far as being in a studio, you have to have the ability to play all of these arrangements at one time, so if someone
says, “We’re going to do this in an Ellington-ish kind of fashion,” or “We’re going to do this in a Sammy Nestico fashion,” or Count Basie or whatever, you need to know that so that you can do that in the studio. So that’s really part of your responsibility as a studio player – to know all the different sounds. Billy May had a certain way of writing for saxophones. You better know what that is if you’re going into a studio. So there are those kinds of things. There are different ways of playing trumpet, trumpet sounds, how they played in the 40’s. It’s stuff you need to research before you start performing. Studio situations now could be contemporary music, could be old-fashioned music that movies use, period music, so you really need to know everything.

JS: Are preservation and innovation necessarily at odds with one another?

TK: That’s a great question. Probably. They shouldn’t be, but probably. I notice a contemporary style of big band, which is kind of an all encompassing way of going about it, with a lot of incredibly new techniques mixed in with the classic styles – Gordon Goodwin is a good example. I see and hear a lot of that with contemporary writers. Gordon, of course, knows all the different styles because he’s played all the different styles. He came up the way we all did back in the 70’s, and so he’s played the classic styles, he knows that. I always worry, as everybody does, about the people who are starting today not recognizing the old styles and not doing the research on them, and just trying to reinvent the wheel with new stuff without going back and finding the way chord changes actually work, or how they started, or the
way melodies work, to understand melodies like the way Louis Armstrong played, how he created a melody or how he built a solo. Those kinds of things tend to get lost unless there’s some research done on it. But progress is progress, and it’s always interesting to see where it all goes.

JS: You have embraced new technologies for distribution, specifically in offering your charts through your website. Do you think that new media technologies offer more opportunities for aspiring big band composers?

TK: The answer is an obvious yes, because you can get to people who have your same likes. It was so difficult before. I used to have to send out flyers and hope that it got to the people who were interested. Now, people who are interested can come to the website and get what they need, and those people who are interested can hear what the new stuff is, so the whole web thing is great. And even stuff through iTunes, getting stuff to people – I know there are different discussions on this – but even the ability to get your music out, where you couldn’t do that before when I was coming up, is hilariously wonderful.

JS: What do you see in the future for big band?

TK: Heartache. [laughs] No money, but of course it’s always been that way. I’d love to see it keep going. I think musicians need to see how I do my band, how Gordon does his band. I come from a guy named Bob Cassens, who had a band, and I learned
so much from doing that. I really dedicate my performances to how he led his band when we would perform. You really have to see how it's in the charge of the leader, or those people who help the leader. I have so much help in my big band. I have sound guys. I have guys who book soloists, or keep the venue going. Then I'm in charge of the music, library work, and I'm the MC in my band. But you need to see how that works. Jazz bands are for fun, so it's going to be for entertainment, and it has to be something that people can understand. You need to be able to talk to the people and communicate and get the students involved and coming to see performances. That's what I see for the future. I'd love to see more big bands, or just more bands with horns, and that's always exciting unto itself. Sometimes it's impossible to get everybody in one place at one time, but I want to just see more music out there. And I think it's happening, I really do. I look at YouTube and I see all these marvelous players, and I hope for the best. Some of them are really young, and you just hope that their life is full of music and they don't get discouraged and just keep on playing. I blindly do this. I just keep going at it every day, and I love it. It seems to have paid off. I have a great time doing it, made a good living at it, and that's really all that matters. [laughs]
John La Barbera

Email Interview

July 15, 2015

*John La Barbera is a jazz trumpeter and composer/arranger. La Barbera is known for his compositions and arrangements for many big band leaders, most notably Buddy Rich. La Barbera is currently professor of jazz and music industry at the University of Louisville.*

JS: What sparked your interest in writing for big band?

JLB: Of the three brothers (Pat, John & Joe) I was the one who usually copied the combo arrangements from the LPs. I had an ear for it and eventually discovered big bands like Woody Herman, Count Basie, etc. and often heard them live. The sheer power of the ensembles made me want to know how they worked and how arrangements were made. I remembering getting an issue of Down Beat and seeing Jimmy Heath’s arrangement of "Big P" and being so excited to see an actual score. I mentioned that to him a few years ago and I guess I wasn’t the only one.

JS: The education and development of jazz musicians has often involved the practice of apprenticeship. The big band has frequently been the site of this apprenticeship, with younger players learning styles and techniques organically through interactions with their older counterparts. Now that there are fewer working bands, big bands are most prevalent in the university system. Is the same sort of
apprenticeship still possible within the academic setting? And what effects do you think the university has had on the music?

JLB: Yes it was an apprenticeship and I find myself wishing those bands were still around so my students could learn from elders schooled by the road. I think as fewer educators now have ever actually experienced being in a section and learning balance, pacing, etc., I believe the big band is evolving into a collegium that has a sort of homogenized feel and sound. I am not saying that is a bad thing but it's a different feel and presentation.

JS: What responsibility do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts? How would you balance the continued performance of these tunes with fostering new approaches to the genre and the individual creativity of the players? Are preservation and innovation necessarily at odds with one another?

JLB: Just as our symphony orchestras continue to program the classics but also try to introduce new music, so must the big bands, commercial or otherwise.

JS: How was your experience working with Buddy Rich? There are certainly a lot of stories that circulate about Buddy that don't necessarily put him in the best light, but all the people I’ve spoken with who actually played with him portray him as a complex individual who cared deeply about the music.
JLB: Yes he was a complex person. I personally believe because he had no formal schooling, he hid a lot of his weaknesses through bravado. I remembering going to his room one time when we were getting ready to record and he was reading a psychology book while eating breakfast. If you were a pro he would give you your lead but if you didn’t give full focus or effort, he’d be all over you. I learned a lot about audiences and timing and programming charts. He would cut things from my charts sometimes because of this or that and he was always right. He was very serious about the music and had a voracious appetite for new charts. I was the beneficiary of that because it made me write a lot more than I would have. And because he had no style like Basie, or Stan, or Woody, I could write anything I wanted and did.

[La Barbera also included this response to the infamous Buddy Rich scream tape]

BUDDY RICH REMEMBERED By John La Barbera

At the risk of further popularizing a certain piece of underground trash, I would like to address the notorious Buddy Rich "scream tape" that has become "gospel" in the history of the "World's Greatest Drummer."

First of all let me say that having worked with just about every version of Buddy's band (as a trumpet player, arranger, confidant, or producer) including the one on the tape, these kids got off easy, to say the least.
Yes indeed that's Buddy spewing putdowns and obscenities at a few of his band members and yes, on its own, the tape paints the fearless leader as a foul-mouth bully. And yes, in today's politically correct world, Buddy certainly wouldn't win any "manager of the month" awards, but keep in mind that we're talking about the music business, specifically the big band jazz world and Deming's management techniques don't wash in this world. Every band Buddy ever had was subject to his brand of leadership and, just like the real world, one either learned from these experiences and got stronger or washed out.

I joined Buddy Rich's band as a trumpet player in January of 1968 and still look back at that period as one of the highlights of my career. For a trumpet player freshly groomed at Berklee School of Music, Buddy's band represented the pinnacle of success and it was the beginning of a musical education that I could never have acquired within the confines of academia. Some lessons sink in right away and others take some time. Here's a sample of one of my more memorable lessons.

After a month at the Sands in Las Vegas and a whirlwind schedule of record dates in L.A., gigs with Sergio Mendes, and others, we embarked on a European tour with Tony Bennett. That in itself could be a mini-series but I'll concentrate on Buddy.

Because Buddy's previous tour with just the band (1967) wasn't well received (according to the bookers), it was decided by the agents that Buddy's new band could be best introduced to the British audiences by coupling him with a known quantity, Tony. The band opened the shows for the first set and Bennett would do the closer. It was a
phenomenal combination and Buddy's reputation (as a bandleader) blossomed. Every night being sold out added to the excitement of the crowd and the band.

The band had the highest respect for Tony (rare for a singer) and the quality of the performance. When he sang Robert Farnon's Country Girl with just the accompaniment of John Bunch's piano, the house was absolutely silent and we literally held our breath during this segment of the show.

In the middle of our tour we hit Birmingham (then quite the working class town) and Buddy pulled out all the stops to win over this tough audience. I can't remember all the charts he called but I know he ended with the West Side Story medley and it was a smash with the crowd.

As an encore he called Love For Sale and if you aren't familiar with the chart, suffice it to say that there is a drum break before a modulation that has become somewhat of a signature for Buddy. His lightning speed roll in this break has been copied (or should I say attempted) by just about every big band drummer I know.

That night he blew the break. Totally blew it and stopped the band. We were in shock. Having never experienced this before, we just looked around at each other. The audience was dead silent. Buddy yelled to Pat (my brother acted as musical director at times because Buddy couldn't read music) "pick it up before the break."
Pat yelled out the appropriate rehearsal number and we were off again. As you can well imagine, this time he nailed it and the audience went nuts. I wouldn't have wanted to be Tony trying to follow that. But this isn't the end of the story.

Years later Buddy and I were hanging out in his Lincoln Plaza apartment one night after a gig trying to find something edible in his refrigerator. Not as Spartan as Mel's (Torme) but still few choices so we did the usual, ordered take out from Patsy's (Buddy & Sinatra's favorite eatery since the late 40's).

While we waited for the delivery I reminded him of that night in Birmingham and casually asked, "Buddy, did you blow that fill on purpose for the show business value or did you really blow it?" What came next was probably the most intense "lecture" I've ever received from him.

After he cooled off he told me never in his professional career did he ever give less than 100% and the idea of shortchanging the music for a cheap shot would be akin to artistic murder. We talked about his early days and the necessity for professionalism in all aspects of playing (and writing). I wish I had a tape recording of that talk.

The more I thought about this, the easier it was for me to understand many of his "moods" and "tantrums" when players didn't give their all. I'm sure that was the case with those on the receiving end on that tape.
So if someone brings up the infamous Buddy Rich "scream tape" to you, be aware that those particular band members got off easy. I learned a lot from Buddy, I just hope *they* learned something.

JS: This last question is one I've been asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big band? Or what would you like to see?

JLB: As I mentioned earlier about collegiums, I believe the big band, like the concert band, orchestra, and sundry classic ensembles will evolve within the confines of schools and other organizations. They must if they are to survive.
Ralph Lalama

Personal Interview

April 23, 2014

*Ralph Lalama is a New York based jazz saxophonist who leads his own jazz trio.*

*Lalama is also known for his work in several big bands, including the Woody Herman band, Buddy Rich band, and the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, which subsequently became the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, an ensemble of which he is still a member.*

JS: So you come from a musical family?

RL: Oh yeah, my mother was a singer. My father was a drummer. My grandfather gave me my first clarinet when I was 9. He played clarinet and alto. He was a state auditor too. My brother's a piano player, and my wife's a singer too. She sings in a couple of big bands too. She goes once a month up to Hartford to sing with the Hartford Jazz Orchestra. The leader of that is Donn Trenner, who used to be the cat with Steve Allen, and he loves her – you can see a couple of pictures of her around here. This is my ego room – big bands, small groups, festival tags, all kinds of shit. So anyway, I'm on an ego trip. Not really. [laughs] You should see Lovano's room if you think this is something. [laughs]

JS: Tell me about your history with the ensemble.
RL: I think at first I played with my high school jazz band. That’s such an early memory that I don’t remember too much about it. Then I went to college, and I was a clarinet major. At Youngstown State University they didn’t have saxophone majors, or even a big band, but there was this guy who was going to school there, older than myself, who was an ex bass player with the Woody Herman Band. His name was Tony Leonardi, and he started a big band because he had charts. The first year I didn’t know about it, but the second year someone encouraged me to audition for it and I did, and I got into the band. Tony was a very heavy influence on me, because one of his friends was Sal Nistico, who was a great tenor player for the Woody Herman band. He brought Sal in a couple of times, and I got to meet him and hear him play. I sat right next to him, and I said, “whoa.” One thing about Tony is that the repertoire we were playing was great, it wasn’t like – I don’t want to say that new stuff – but it was heavy hitting great Woody stuff, Buddy Rich band, Mel, Stan Kenton, Don Ellis, Basie. So it wasn’t just the new guys writing a funk chart. It was deep. So at the end of my tenure at Youngstown State getting my bachelors degree in Education as a clarinet major, he invited Thad Jones, and Thad spent 3 days with us. I got to play with Thad when he did clinics – which was a total education – and in the small group, and I was featured a little bit in the big band even though Thad was out front. We were playing his charts, and he was the guest soloist, but I would play some too. What an experience, right? So I asked Thad, “What school do think I should go to?” He said, “If you want to play, you want to further your playing, you should move to New York.” So that was June 1975. By September 7, I had an apartment in Queens. I called Thad, and I didn’t play in the big band, but I did a gig
with him in William Patterson, him and Mel. They were teaching at William
Patterson at that time. So I played a 3-night engagement with Thad and Mel playing
quintet, I had a big afro – it was 1975. I did sub once or twice on a big band, because
it was Gregory Herbert and Frank Foster. So I subbed, and it was unbelievable, and
I’m playing little weddings here in New York, and then I got a call from Woody
Herman’s crew, and I got in that band. That only lasted about 6-7 months, because I
was married at the time – I got married right after college. I did my stint with them
and came back, so I got that experience of playing with Woody. That’s where I met
Lovano and Danny D’Imperio, both of whom I ended up playing many records with
later, and we’ve been brothers for years. Allen Vizzutti was playing lead trumpet,
Frank Tiberi of course. So I came back to New York and I’m on the scene again, and
then I go with Buddy Rich – this is 1980-81. I remember Andy Fusco was the lead
alto, Steve Marcus, Buddy, and all the crew there. Simo Salminen played lead
trombone. Beltran played bass trombone. So I did about a year and a half with them,
and then around 1982-83 I was subbing a lot with Mel – now Thad’s off the scene,
and it’s just Mel. I was either taking Lovano’s place, or Gary Prebeck. I would sub
both chairs, so I played a lot of nights at the Vanguard and a lot of nights on the road.
So I’m doing that, but it’s not my gig, I’m just a sub. Then Buddy calls again, and I
was going to go out for about 3 months, but that turned into 5 weeks because Buddy
had a quadruple bypass. But before I went out with Buddy, Mel calls and says,
“Prebeck is going to quit and I want you to join.” I said, “Mel, I just told Buddy I’d go
out with him, but I’ll be done in March” and he said, “Okay, I’ll save it for you.” So
everybody knew that Buddy had a heart attack, so I called Mel and told him I was
back and he said, “Come on. Let’s go.” But then ironically my first gig as a permanent member was at Fat Tuesdays, it wasn’t even at the Vanguard. For some reason, the band had 5 nights at Fat Tuesdays. The rest of that is history – I’m still there, Mel was gone, Thad was gone, and it became the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. I also played with the Westchester Jazz Orchestra, which is now defunct, but I did about 10 years with them, with Mike Holober being the leader. Then I did the Carnegie Hall band with Faddis, about 8 years in that band. It is a great experience, even now, because as a saxophone player, you learn the craft of playing in a big band, but also you have to learn how to play with people, not only just getting along with them personally, but getting along with them musically – blending, rhythm, intonation. So it’s a great craft to learn for anybody, and I think that’s a little bit missing these days. You’ll play with guys and they play great, they have great technique, and they’ll play fast and all that stuff, and you try to hold a note with them, and it doesn’t work. It’s that experience of playing, blending, and getting along that you learn in a big band. So I spent about 8 years with Jon [Faddis] and the Carnegie Hall band, and I played a little bit with Louie Bellson’s band, and there’s probably some guys I’m forgetting. So does that answer your question, Jason? [laughs]

JS: Yes. [laughs] So you mention the experience playing with other people. Do you think the big band is a good tool for preparing someone for even small group playing, learning styles?
RL: Oh, sure. It's a craft. I'm just a believer in general that you have to learn the craft before you can get into the art. Craft I think comes first. The big band is a craft in itself, but also the tributaries of that is learning how to play your instrument better, playing in time, having to play in the section, and preparing very difficult music. When you're soloing, you might play easier things for you to play, but sometimes in the part – for saxophones especially, there are a lot solis, you have to double, in my case flute and clarinet. But to answer your question, yes, it's a great experience for anybody, even if you never want to play in a big band again. A lot of people will say, “I don't need big band, I'm a soloist.” That's true – I've been lucky in the Vanguard band, when you start blowing, it turns into a quartet. Again, the discipline of just having to play 32 bars, 16 bars, that's a discipline too. To say something in those bars, you can't play your entire repertoire. You have to create music that means something in 16 bars. There's no down side, other than hanging out with Lovano. [laughs]

JS: I'll be sure to quote you on that one. [laughs]

RL: You can put that at the top of your dissertation. [laughs]

JS: What do you think about how the style has evolved? I feel like there was a major style change around the late 50s, early 60s. Do you think that's the case?
RL: Well in the 60s, you had Maynard’s band playing “Birdland,” Woody was still going, and Thad and Mel started up. It changed, but it was either like the Glenn Miller society kind of stuff, or it was like bebop. And then Stan Kenton had a more brassy kind of sound. Now it’s more modal, there’s the rock influence, and of course the Latin influence has always been there I guess – Dizzy did that too, and that was even before the 60s. I can’t pinpoint it like that – I can’t say that there was a drastic change in the 60s. There was new blood – like I said, Maynard’s thing, Stan Kenton, and even lesser known bands, like Gil Evans was getting almost impressionistic in a way. So there are always different personalities within the style changes too. And Woody kept on with the bebop thing – in the 70s, we were still playing “Four Brothers.” Thad – that’s another story. To me, he was like the Beethoven of big band – not that his style was like Beethoven, but he had a big sound, and it was swinging. Like I learned in music history class, Beethoven had the demonic sound – it was just big and in your face, and that’s the way Thad was. And that was Basie, too. It was a little more forward thinking in the voicings, in the chords, but it was still Basie type swing. And Thad was thicker, but coming from Basie rather than Duke Ellington I thought. But then he had some of that harmony in there too, so I can’t really answer specifically. But music was changing, jazz was changing. You had Coltrane in the 60s getting more modal, so that had an effect. And Basie, with Frank Foster and Frank West, that was a killing band. As far as education, too, it seems like that’s the experience people are getting, unlike myself – I experienced it at school, but I went on the road. For me, Woody Herman was like high school, Buddy Rich was like college, and Thad and Mel and Carnegie was like a living. I don’t mean that Woody’s
band was less challenging, but that’s the way it went for me. It’s funny, one time Mel Lewis was on Buddy Rich’s band because Buddy had a disc problem, and Buddy hired Mel. Mel didn’t play a beat, but he was on the bus for a week with us just in case Buddy couldn’t play – it was amazing because he couldn’t even get dressed, he was hurting, but he would play. Mel said the same thing: “Woody was like high school, Buddy’s like college, and my band was like real life.” As far as education, I’ve been teaching a long time, and these young guys come to sub, and they can play, they can read, but there is that experience missing. And they have to get that experience, and I’m not putting them down by any means, but it’s just a little sad that you can’t go on a band and live on a bus for 8 months, 3 years, 10 years, or whatever and then move on. That’s not really happening that much. I think Basie still has a ghost band, probably Duke does, and Maria Schneider, but they don’t work as much – we at least have a Monday night gig. I think that’s an important point, and I hear the difference. Maybe some older guys will sub too, and they played in all these bands, and it’s not that they can read better, it’s just how they interpret and how they blend. I’ll tell you one thing, though, there are bands throughout the country that have a Monday night gig. I don’t think they make any money, but they’re all over the world, actually. I remember I was in Germany and I had a feature there with Unterfahrt in Munich, and they have a Monday night gig. So it’s still happening, but it’s not what I’m talking about – getting on the bus with the same guys. You learn a lot by doing it, socially, personally, musically, business.

JS: What do you see or what would you like to see in the future of the ensemble?
RL: I would like to see a lot of these writers be influenced a little more by Thad, rather than... I don’t want to say that guys who are influenced by Brookmeyer, or Gil, that it’s a bad thing, because it isn’t. You have to have different sounds. I play a lot of new music, and it’s mainly influenced by Europe, classical music, or Gil and Brookmeyer. It’s not a bad thing, but it’s like they don’t want to get into the meat of it sometimes. I remember hearing an interview with Igor Stravinsky, and the guy was like, “Igor, you’re one of the most prolific composers of modern classical music. Where do you get your ideas?” and he said, “Well, I was influenced by Beethoven, Wagner, Bartok, and Mahler, and I just know how to disguise it.” That was his answer. My point is that the new guys are influenced by something, and that’s a great thing, but I don’t understand why more people don’t follow Thad. I’m not sure if they don’t like it, or they think it’s old, or what. But it’s swinging – that’s another thing that’s missing from a lot of newer stuff. That’s just my opinion, of course. I’m digging some of the harmony – it’s getting more modern, and there are more layers in the sound – but it’s more about orchestration rather than swing. And that’s not a bad thing either. I’d just like more of a balance, because that’s where I’m coming from. I’m coming from Pittsburgh and organ trios and the blues. I like harmony that’s challenging and freedom – I’m into that too, believe me – but still, the undercurrent isn’t swinging. I think that’s what jazz is – it’s about swing. That’s the difference. If it’s not swinging, then you’re putting another word in front of it, like rock jazz, latin jazz, and there’s nothing wrong with any of that, but the word jazz means something too. That’s just my opinion.
Now where it’s going... I don’t know. My only thing is if there isn’t some stronger influence from the past, it’s not going to be that good. If you listen to any great jazz arranging, they’re influenced by the past. It gives the music a core that you can add to. A tree has a trunk; a house has a foundation. You don't hang your house on a tree limb, you dig into the ground and build it up. It’s the same in music. So if the future is just going to have the top layer, it’s going to be a little weak as far as I’m concerned. But if it has a foundation with extensions, you can go wherever you want to go with it.

JS: It’s interesting to me that you compared Thad to Beethoven. When you talk to people, everyone loves Thad, so it makes you wonder why more people aren’t directly influenced by him. It may be similar to the anxiety of influence that followed Beethoven, where composers avoided sounding like him at all, and even avoided working in some of the genres he was most famous for – especially the symphony. It seems like there might be a similar thing going on with Thad – no one is going to do it better, so everyone goes in the other direction.

RL: Well, that’s the thing. You can be influenced by someone, but you don’t have to do better. For instance, McNeely has a little Thad in him, and he has a little Brookmeyer in him, he has Gil in him, but he’s McNeely. That’s what I’m talking about. He’s a generation later, so his feeling with the beat is different. He’s not writing Basie-ish, he’s writing McNeely-ish, but he still has the foundation there. And there are other guys, too. My brother, Dave Lalama, is good. And I’m not putting
down other people. I’m just talking about the future, and the future comes from the present and the past. That’s why we study music history. That’s why lawyers study past cases.

JS: Is there anything you would like to add?

RL: Actually, I’d like to say something about soloing. What I’d like to hear more of, especially in big bands, is that a soloist should be influenced by the chart they’re playing. Not to say that if you’re playing Basie you have to play the oldest licks in the world, but just be influenced by the beat. Play off the background, and if you have a lot of open space, you can go wherever you want to go. Sometimes the soloist can keep the arrangement rising, and then when the climax comes, it makes perfect musical sense. I hear some guys just want to get into what they have to say, which is part of it, but it’s a craft. You have to think of the craft, and it’ll lead you to the art. That’s general, but I think people should think more about studying the music you’re playing, not just the chord changes, but what’s happening. Some people say, “Oh, I hate backgrounds,” and I say, “Okay, well I’ll take the solo.” [laughs] Sometimes they get in your way, but they shouldn’t though, unless they’re overwritten. That’s another thing. Some of these guys do overwrite things. I’ll give you a couple of examples. Say the arranger’s a piano player, and he’s writing a sax soli, and there’s nowhere to take a breath. Piano players don’t have to take a breath, but saxophone players do. So it’s physically impossible to play this line and get the intensity you want to get as a section, unless everyone learns how to circular breathe. That’s one
thing about Woody. The arranger would bring in a tune, and he would say, “Okay, that’s good, but throw out letter B, move this background there, and in that section don’t play until letter D.” He would do that all the time. Faddis would do that too. That’s one thing about the great arrangers, too. They write for the band, for the personnel. When I get a part from McNeely, it has my name on it. Thad did that too, and Duke Ellington did the same thing. He wrote for the guys in his band. Thad was amazing – he’d put everyone in the range that was the strong part of the horn. It’s amazing how he did it. Guys have no clue what that’s about. That’s what I mean – forget about the voicings and the rhythm, they don’t get that either about Thad. You get a piano player writing open Gs on the clarinet for 30 years – not that you can’t play an open G, and there are ways of making it happen, but the point is there are all kinds of subtleties. It’s deep.

JS: Absolutely. One of the things I’ve been trying to convince composition teachers to do is rather than having them read orchestration books, have them do like the education majors and learn how to play all the instruments. That’s how you learn how to write for them.

RL: Yeah, and I don’t mean to sound like I’m down on all the kids now. I’m trying to educate them too. Even directors, sometimes the music they pick for the bands isn’t that great. There’s much hipper music out there – no wonder some of the kids hate jazz. And it doesn’t have to be hard, it just needs to be something that sounds good and they have fun with. Even if you’re not interested, it might ring a bell. We need
fans too. It might be something that makes the kids feel better than some rock stars. I don’t know their names, but you know what I mean.

JS: I think the good thing is that the stuff that lasts is usually good.

RL: Oh yeah, there’s no doubt about it. People are still talking about the Beatles. People are still talking about Mozart, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Thad Jones. We’re still talking about them. We’re not talking about Grand Funk Railroad, Uriah Heap, you know what I mean? I haven’t heard about Uriah Heap since I was your age, but I’ve heard about Beethoven many times. I remember one time I was in Italy walking down the streets. It was a great place, a lot of hills, old Italy, and St. Francis – it was an old church oriented city. And I’m hearing something, and I went in the church. You went down, and it was almost like the catacombs, and it was a chamber group playing the Mozart clarinet concerto. I sat down, and it sounded great because the walls were like stone. I heard most of it, and it was great. It was done, and I left and got dinner. Here you hear a boombox. I was walking through Italy and I was hearing Mozart being performed live. I rest my case, Jason. [laughs]

JS: Fair enough. [laughs]
Stephen Norfleet

Email Interview

August 5, 2015

Stephen Norfleet is a saxophonist based in Richmond, VA. Norfleet is the founder and leader of the Devil’s Workshop Big Band, an ensemble known for its use of non-traditional styles, including hip hop, funk, and free jazz. The band is also notable for its group compositions that evolve over time, and is the only current big band creating music in this way.

JS: Why did you decide to start a big band?

SN: First off, I have played in big bands my whole musical life and loved every minute of it. So when I was in my early-to-mid twenties, I wanted to start my career as a performer. I wanted to create my own business, so to speak. Something that would provide income as well as musical freedom. I had obviously been playing sideman gigs and things like that, but I felt that the time had come to lead my own band. I also believe that music can be used as a force of good. It uplifts people all the time. That notion was also very much a part of my philosophy and I wanted to do that. Uplift people. Audience and band members alike. All of that said, the thing that made the most sense to me at that time was to start a 17-piece improvisational big band that was more like a jam band or a rock band than a swing band. It allowed me to mash-up my love for playing in a big band setting with my desire to be a rock star and GTFD.
JS: Devil’s Workshop Big Band was known for utilizing more free improvisation and collective composition than is usually heard in a big band setting. Was this the idea from the start?

SN: This was the idea from the start. Initially, the band played Thad Jones, Charles Mingus, and Duke Ellington arrangements because that’s all that I had. My concept has always been to stretch out on the vamps that often occur at the beginnings and endings of songs. I like to see where things go. I simply applied this idea to the charts we were playing. If you stretch out a vamp for a long period of time, it begins to become its own song. Once that starts happening, it’s the musicians responsibility to take it somewhere. For us, that means improvising as a collective. Also, we are paying homage to the territory big bands from the 1930’s and 40’s. The Basie band used to make stuff up all the time. Ask any musician out there and I’ll bet every one of them has had to create their own parts at least once on a gig. It’s the same skill set, just applied differently.

JS: And how do you think this contributed to the unique sound of the band?

SN: The thing that’s unique about us is originally we didn’t have any of our music arranged. We weren’t reading charts or anything. We were performing from memory the songs we had created in rehearsal or during a performance. Like I said before, I wanted this to be as much a jam band and a rock band as a big band. I
constantly strive for that balance, and when the band is aligned and everyone’s on the same page, things take on a life of their own.

JS: What responsibility do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts?

SN: Personally, I don’t think current big bands have a responsibility to preserve classic big band charts. I think the United States of America has a responsibility to preserve its culture, though. Unfortunately, that’s not near the top of the priority list these days.

JS: How would you balance the continued performance of these tunes with fostering new approaches to the genre and the individual creativity of the players?

SN: Outside of the cultural institutions already performing them, I would have to say that classic big band charts should be taught in elementary, middle, and high schools (I know, real original, right?). There are content prerequisites for other courses such as English, Science, Math, etc., so why not for music? Outside of learning major scales and things like this, I mean. The problem is, most music educators don’t have a clue as to how to perform that music, so how are they supposed to pass the torch and keep things moving forward? Regarding new approaches and individual creativity, that fire will burn forever as long as there are people listening to and playing music.
JS: The Devil’s Workshop Big Band was also known for incorporating musical styles from non-jazz genres (e.g. pop music, rock, hip-hop, etc.). Do you think incorporating newer styles is essential to maintaining the vitality of the ensemble?

SN: Most likely. It’s the only way to continue moving forward.

JS: Do you have any plans to start another big band in the future?

SN: Well, for me, DWBB never broke up. Everyone just sort of walked away at one point and began following different paths. I ended up moving to New York and then to San Francisco to pursue performance opportunities before landing back home in Richmond, Va. this past December. It’s been over 10 years, but we have a show coming up here in Richmond on August 30th. I’m looking forward to seeing what the future holds.

JS: This last question is one I’ve been asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big band? Or what would you like to see?

SN: I won’t speculate on the future of big bands, but speaking for myself I’d like to see DWBB back to where I think it should be, which is to say performing regularly, releasing albums, and touring on a high level. Economics make that an uphill battle, but for me this band has always been a labor of love so why not, right?
Bruce Paulson
Telephone Interview
September 28, 2015

Bruce Paulson is a trombonist and retired Professor of Jazz Studies from the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Paulson was the lead trombonist for several big bands, including those of Buddy Rich and Toshiko Akiyoshi. He was also the lead trombonist on Doc Severinsen’s Tonight Show Band for several decades.

JS: Tell me about how you got into playing in big bands and how that evolved, because I know your degrees are in anthropology, is that right?

BP: I started playing when I was 11, and my high school band director got me involved in a little dance band, so I did that all through school. I went to the University of Minnesota and didn’t major in music, and there was no jazz program there, but I always played in bands around Minneapolis and St. Paul, and there was a really good big band that played a couple of nights a week during the summers at a resort called The Downbeat Club on Lake Minnetonka. I got some experience playing in those kinds of bands plus a number of other bands around town, so I was familiar with how to do that. After I graduated I went through a year of graduate school in music, and then the draft took me out of graduate school, and right before I was to go into the Army to Vietnam I got a job teaching high school band for a couple of years. Then the lottery took over, and at that point I got a high lottery number, so left teaching and the first job I was on was with the Chris Fiorito Italian Show Band,
which played in Mafia clubs in New York and Boston. I did that for a number of months in strictly Mafia clubs, and finally a friend and I decided that it was getting a little too close to the bone and we gave it up. I went back to Minnesota, and at that point ran into a friend who had been on the Glenn Miller band with Buddy DiFranco as the leader, and he just asked me casually, “Would you ever want to go out on the road?” And I said, “Yeah, that’s definitely what I’m trying to do,” and a couple months later I got a call from the manager of the Glenn Miller band, and this was the Miller band that the Glenn Miller estate still owns to this day – in fact they’re coming back to New Zealand in a little while. And Buddy called me on a Monday or Tuesday and said, “Can you be in Reading, Pennsylvania on Thursday and play lead trombone on the Miller band?” And I said, “Yes, I’ll do that.” And I got my life in order in two days and went out there and joined the Miller band. I stayed with them for 6 months, and it wasn’t a real jazz band, although Buddy DiFranco was one of the great jazz players. So I did that for 6 months, and there are lots of stories about that experience, but at that point the first trombone position opened up on the Buddy Rich band, and that had been my goal for years, to play on that band. I called them, and Pat LaBarbera was the guy who did the hiring, and they hired me. If I had been the third trombone on the Miller band, I probably wouldn’t have had the same credibility, but the first trombone… once you get on one band, you get asked to play on all the other ones. So I went to the Buddy Rich band and did that for a year and a half, and at that point Doc Severinsen called me and said, “The Tonight Show is moving to California and I’m forming a new band there. Would you want to be on the band?” And I said, “Well, let me think about that.” I enjoyed the Buddy Rich band,
but everybody told me that this is a great opportunity. So at that point I left the Rich band and went out to California and joined Severinsen's band, and then got involved in lots of big bands around town, doing recordings and this and that. I played with the Bill Holman band and the Bob Florence band, and I also then got called to join the Maynard Ferguson band and the Stan Kenton band. But by that time, I was on the Tonight Show band and turned those positions down. That's kind of a brief synopsis of how I got involved.

JS: When jazz musicians have been learning their craft, it's always been an apprenticeship situation, and the big band has been a big part of that. A lot of the young guys sit in and learn style and how to shape a solo. Since there aren't that many working bands anymore, a lot of that has gone into the university system. Is that sort of apprenticeship still possible within the university system, since you've got all students in the band, rather than some experienced guys with a couple of young guys here and there. Also, what effects to you think the university has had on the scene?

BP: I think it definitely has changed the face of the music. Like you said, we were all taught by listening and rubbing shoulders with more mature players, so each person evolved their own style – in the past I think players were much more individual because there was no pedagogy, no curriculum. I think the one thing that has happened with the university bands is that even though many players are probably more adroit – they're technically better and have more musical knowledge – they
tend to sound the same in certain senses. So I think that old system where we were all self taught – I didn’t have any jazz education per se, I learned it all sitting in bands with other guys – I think it created a more personal approach, and I think one of the biggest compliments that I ever got was that a guy said he heard a recording on the radio and he knew it was me. Somebody could identify your style. So I think that that thing is kind of lost. I mean, there are plenty of great players, and lots of personality, but overall jazz education has kind of violated the original premise of jazz, which is that people don’t tell you how to play, you find out yourself. If they don’t like the way you play, they just don’t use you. So I think it’s changed it a lot, and there aren’t those kinds of bands, but I think the best experience that a player can get… that’s probably why I quit teaching. When I couldn’t play anymore, I couldn’t sit in the band with the guys and show them how it was done, you know I got that focal dystonia in my embouchure, and so it became much more frustrating to try to teach, because I couldn’t say, “Listen, it’s supposed to kind of go like this.” And guys used to say when you sat in the band how different it felt to play with a real mature player when they were still evolving. So I think that’s a big change. It keeps the whole thing going, but I do think outside of a few players, it tends to homogenize the style, and that has good and bad aspects. [laughs] But yeah, you don’t just start by playing in a town where there’s a professional band. Used to be there were clubs and places you could play all the time, and now you practice at home and you maybe get one night a month, so the whole jazz world has dramatically changed. I can’t say whether it’s good or bad, but it’s certainly different.
JS: There seem to be a growing number of local big bands doing the Monday night gigs and that sort of thing, and I've played on plenty of those myself, but everyone in the band is a mature musician. We don't bring the high school kids in – it's all professionals. And if you're going to a reading gig like that it's nice that everyone can fit together a little easier, but at the same time, at least in my opinion, that should be a place for getting young players in and sitting them in the band. They're going to make mistakes, but it's a good way for them to learn.

BP: Yeah. The young players supply a lot of energy too. Buddy Rich, of course, was older – I mean, he was a lot younger than I am now – but all these guys generally had younger players in their bands. Art Blakey had younger guys, Horace Silver had younger guys, and they supplied a lot of energy, and then they got the benefit of working with a more mature musician in addition. So that was the way it worked in those days, and now everybody's cut from the same stone in a way. So it's different, but I would say that the players are probably more technically and harmonically advanced than they probably were in the old days – outside of the big guys. I mean, when you hear Dizzy Gillespie play in his youth, or Freddie Hubbard or somebody, it's still pretty unbelievable. So that's my sense of that.

JS: You mention a lot of students being harmonically advanced. I think there's a general feeling among some that big band music is becoming very harmonically complex, but maybe has lost the swing aspect. And not necessarily just the swung
eighth notes, but the feel of it, the attitude, and that the music is heading more in that direction. Do you have any thoughts on this?

BP: With a lot of bands, the charts get more and more advanced harmonically, and even during the soloing, instead of having the chord changes maybe simplify a bit for the soloist so he has a little more room to do things there, they're all over the place and he has to execute everything perfectly, but there’s not as much room for that soulful thing. I think there’s less of that. You know, when you go back to the early Basie stuff and that kind of thing, it just seems to me that it swings harder. That’s a personal opinion, but the new grooves and the new fusion thing tend to be a little more restrictive in your time feel. It’s a development, it’s an evolution, and it’s great in some ways, but it’s not as melodic maybe, and it’s lost a lot of its audience. A lot of people crave that simpler and more songlike style, and I think that it’s a natural evolution. Lots of great players did that too – you know how Coltrane and Bird and all those guys got much more advanced, but at the same time they kind of... the audience kind of disappeared. [laughs] So that’s a classic jazz evolution story, but I do think there’s a lot of stuff that tends to be technical and virtuosic but maybe doesn’t give room to the soloists and even to the players in the ensemble to put their own little sense of style on the stuff. Maybe there’s too much writing – it’s too restrictive. And certainly in the soloing, too – chord changes that go by in syncopation rather than a simple basis for the solo.
JS: I was in a band once that was reading some new charts, and I was already a little irritated because the charts were arranged from combo tunes, and most of the trombone parts were in high unison. When I turned the page, he had written in a bass trombone solo in f# minor, and it was full of weird chord changes and repeats every couple of bars, and I survived, but it wasn’t the best experience. [laughs]

BP: Tom Garvin – I think you’ve played some of his charts – he has since passed away, but he wrote beautiful and very involved harmonic things, but often when it came to the soloing he would simplify things. He would cut out a lot of the syncopation in the comping, and it allowed the soloist more room to express himself. When the changes are coming syncopated, with backgrounds and kicks coming in at you and everything, you’re pretty restricted in what you can do, so I think that’s an evolution that I don’t enjoy. [laughs]

JS: I agree. I think what makes the big band work well is that there’s a combination of written out parts in the heads, etc., that gives you the precision, but then during the solo section you’ve got the individual expression if you give the soloist room to do that. It’s really cool when a tune does both well, but if the solo sections are overwritten or overly complex, it can really affect what a soloist can do.

BP: Well, even in the ensemble – I know, having played a lot of arrangements by some that were very complicated, and then others that were… Tommy Newsome, and a guy named Jimmy Jones, they wrote very simply, and it allowed the lead
players and the ensemble to put their mark on it instead of everything being strictly annotated, with all the longs and shorts and everything else. It was a looser format, and boy, you get those great lead trumpet players – Snooky Young and those guys – they can put all that stuff on it without being told by the writer. I think that is a wonderful thing to encounter in an ensemble, where you get a chance to put some of your own interpretation on it rather than everything being dictated by the writing, which tends to occur a lot in new writers, it seems to me.

JS: I think that’s something that may have come over from classical music, because once you start moving into the late 19th and early 20th century, the markings get so specific. It’s funny, because in Mozart’s day, composers didn’t provide a whole lot of markings because it was up to the performer to interpret the music and make those decisions.

BP: Yeah, not only the notations, but the cadenzas were the performer’s responsibility. I remember on Buddy Rich’s band I was playing lead, and a player came out, and finally we had to have some words. I said, “Listen, play with me. You’re not playing with me.” And he said, “Well, I heard the record so I know how it’s supposed to go.” And I said, “Well, no. How I’m playing it is how it’s supposed to go. I’ve changed some of the stuff, so phrase with me.” And he did, but it’s like as you come into a band as a new player, you kind of take your time, but then you start to add your own stuff to it, and a band can evolve that way, and that’s what performers
need to do. If they’re not allowed to do that, it’s not nearly as rewarding, and I don’t think it comes across as well, either.

JS: Yeah, I don’t think the audience feels it as much, and I also feel that if you’ve heard the album and then you go to a live performance and everything is exactly as it was on the album, then there’s not really any point to the live performance.

BP: Yeah, you could just play the album. That’s more like pop music, where they rehearse and rehearse and rehearse until it’s exactly the same, but in a jazz setting, it’s supposed to be different. It’s supposed to evolve, and it’s supposed to change over time as new players come and go, and that’s part of the jazz ethic – to put your own personal mark on it – and that’s something I think that’s not as strong as it used to be. Duke Ellington wrote his charts – Toshiko Akiyoshi did that too – she put your own name on the part. It was never for second trombone. It was “Charlie Loper,” “Bruce Paulson,” “Bill Reichenbach.” It was names because she was thinking of you when she wrote it. And that’s of course what Duke Ellington did to great advantage. So that’s an interesting evolution that I don’t think exists as much, but that’s so all kinds of people can play your charts. But different bands will play the same chart differently, I would hope.

JS: Do you think current big bands have a responsibility in preserving some of the classic big band charts, doing performances, and what balance would you strike between playing classic charts versus playing new stuff?
BP: Well, of course that’s an individual choice that guys will make, just like symphony orchestras. You have to play a few Beethoven things before you play Webern, or whoever it might be. I guess in a perfect world you would hope there would be that variety, but that’s certainly an individual choice, and some guys go way back and play lots of early stuff. Joe LaBarbera and I were listening to Chick Corea, Gary Burton, and Jack DeJohnette, and they were doing a rehash of the Benny Goodman style, and I thought they were brilliant. This was the quartet. It sounded brilliant, but then Joe said, “Now let’s listen to the original.” And it was Gene Krupa, Benny Goodman, and Eddie Daniels. So we listened to that, and it was just a whole extra level of brilliance and beauty, because it was their music. It was the real guys doing it, and these other guys were maybe better instrumentalists even, but it just didn’t ring the same way. So you can do all that old stuff, but in some senses it’s better to let the old guys do it – you know, just listen to the originals and have your own personality. That’s of course the difference in big band. In some, the leader has written all the music, so everything that’s played is by the leader, and other bands have all kinds of charts by different guys, and in some ways that’s more interesting for the players at least. Some bands start to sound the same on every tune if it’s the same writer. I think it’s great to keep the tradition going with some of the older stuff, but that’s a personal choice that leaders make.

JS: So I’ll ask one last question that I’ve been asking everyone: either what do you see for the future of big band, or what would you like to see?
BP: Well, the economics of it have changed everything so dramatically, and the fact that there aren’t really clubs for bands – it’s all either a concert hall or maybe a dance or something. The technology and the economics have made that whole kind of band disappear, particularly the ones that play together every night. Even the Tonight Show band, as good as that was, when we had a couple of weeks off and came back, the audience couldn’t tell the difference, but we could feel that we were a little bit off our form. So those bands, like Woody, Maynard, and Duke, they played together every single night. And the same with the small groups – Cannonball, Horace Silver, and all those guys – they played for years together. And so there’s a part of the music that’s missing now: that unity, that incredible feeling that guys know what the other guy is going to do. So that part of the music is kind of lost. Even the really good bands don’t play together as much as they used to, and so that’s just a difference. But I think the universities will keep the thing going, and a few civic bands – certain cities kind of sponsor things. But I think it’s kind of relegated to the universities. They’re the only ones to really have a place to rehearse and a place to keep it going, and as far as the regular bands that play out on the scene, it’s much more limited. And that’s the same with all live music. People stay at home and watch videos and play video games, and they can’t go out because you can’t drink and drive anymore and you can’t pick up chicks. There used to be an audience there. You could go into a club at midnight and the place was full of people. Now, by 10 o’clock most towns are kind of shut down. So it’s an era that’s not going to come back. A lot of people say, “Oh, the big bands will return.” No they won’t. [laughs] Only the subsidized ones by the universities and things, and it’s a great tradition, but I think it
will remain captive in the universities, for good and for bad, but it's a different scene. I was lucky enough to get in on the tail end of it when it was still happening.
Dave Pietro

Personal Interview

October 8, 2014

*Dave Pietro is a New York based saxophonist who has played in many contemporary big bands, including those of Darcy James Argue, Maria Schneider, and Toshiko Akiyoshi. Pietro is also an Assistant Professor of Jazz Studies at New York University.*

JS: What got you started in big band?

DP: Well, I grew up listening to a fair amount of big band. My dad had a lot of albums of Les and Larry Elgart, Glenn Miller, Al Martino – some of the more popular big bands from the 40s and 50s. I was born in the 60s, so we were still using the big hi-fi’s, and I remember putting those records on and listening to them as a kid. So I kind of grew up with that sound in my ear and in my head. Then when I joined the school band I was lucky enough that my elementary and junior high school band director was a graduate of Berklee School of Music, and he actually wrote his own big band arrangements. So when I had only been playing the saxophone for two months or so I was already playing some features with a big band. [laughs] I just took it for granted at the time. The high school I went to in Massachusetts, Algonquin Regional High School, had one of the top jazz bands in the state, so I was lucky enough even before I went off to college to have had some really good experiences playing in big bands. I went to the University of New Hampshire for two years, and then I transferred and ultimately got my degree in Music Education.
from the University of North Texas, which is one of the top jazz schools in the country. I was there in the mid 80s, and there were nine big bands. I played in the One O’Clock for two years and recorded four albums with that band. We would meet four times a week and just read charts every day. We would just read read, read, read. My sight reading was never as good as when I was 21-22 years old. I moved to New York in 1987, and in 1988 I went on the road with the Woody Herman band for a year. In 1989, I went out with Lionel Hampton for a year, and in 1990 I went out with Maynard Ferguson’s band for a year. I then started subbing on Toshiko Akiyoshi’s band for Jim Snidero and some other people, and when Jerry Dodgion left in 1993 or 94, I joined the band full time. I’ve played lead alto with Toshiko for the last twenty years. Around that same time, when I first moved to New York, I also started subbing with Maria Schneider’s band. I’ve been playing with that band for over 20 years, and have been an official member of the band for the last 2 years or so. Also, I’ve done a few big band albums with my friends Pete McGuinness, Anita Brown and Mike Holober who are all great writers. And I’ve done a lot of other large ensembles like the Gil Evans Project. I’ve written a number of my own charts, and I bring them when I do guest artist appearances at schools. Most times I’ll send my charts ahead of time so the band can rehearse them. In fact I just came back from the University of North Carolina. So big band is a large part of my life, for better or for worse. [laughs] You know, it’s funny, when I did the Thelonious Monk competition – well, I did 2 of them, one in 1992 and one in 1996 --my resume in the programs and other publicity referred to me as "a big band saxophonist". I was like,
“I’m already getting a reputation, playing in so many big bands.” [laughs] But it’s been a great experience. I’ve enjoyed it.

JS: Do you have any thoughts on jazz moving into the university?

DP: I could spend the next 24 hours talking about this!! I love teaching – actually, I was a music ed major in college – and I’ve always known that teaching would be a big part of my life. However, I’ve always considered myself a player first. If I had to make a choice between the two, I would certainly quit teaching and just play for a living. I enjoy teaching but it’s a separate, completely different discipline than playing. Regarding Jazz moving into the universities I have to admit that I struggle with this because I don’t know that it’s a good fit, to be honest with you. The learning curve for music and the way that it’s learned, I don’t know that it’s easily graded in one semester or one test. It’s this whole thing about people starting to teach to the test because that’s what you have to do, and that’s not really how we learn in life. So I struggle with this all the time. I have a real dilemma about it. When I first moved to New York – you know I was talking about playing with Toshiko Akiyoshi – the 2 people I got to play with in that band when I subbed for Jim was Frank Wess and Jerry Dodgion, and neither of those guys went to school. They were an older generation – Frank just passed, he was in his 90’s, and Jerry is in his 80’s. I never took one lesson with those guys, but I played a number of gigs with them, especially with Jerry. Just sitting next to them on a gig or rehearsal was the greatest of lessons! I feel fortunate that I was perhaps part of the last generation of
musicians to have had that experience, of being on the bandstand with Maynard Ferguson, or Lionel Hampton, or Frank Wess, or any of these people who never went to school, who were old school. They learned on the road, and when I played with them I was learning the way they had learned. In many ways, I feel like I got the best of both worlds – I got a great education in school, but at the same time I received an amazing second education of just playing with some of the jazz greats on the bandstand.

When I first got to New York, I worked at the Rainbow Room for 5-6 nights a week. At first, I couldn’t figure out why they hired me, because I was 24 or 25 and most of the band members were much older than me. But then I figured out that my age was the reason they hired me. They wanted to freshen up or “youngen” up the band. So I was on the bandstand with these guys who were 50-60-70 years old playing old tunes, many of them society standards I didn’t know. They would fake the arrangements and all this kind of stuff. I didn’t know many of the tunes or how to fake an arrangement in New York society band style, but it was a really great experience for me. It was definitely old school in terms of how I learned on the gig. I don’t know that students get these opportunities as much now. The opportunity to be on the bandstand with seasoned veterans who learned on the gig. That’s why I feel like part of my job is to try to recreate that kind of environment as best as possible. I play with my ensembles, with my private students and I try to teach them in the old school way. But as much as you may try, you can’t really create that in an academic environment. What troubles me is that at a lot of schools, the people
who are teaching are people who haven’t had that experience, so they’re going from academic experience to academic experience. It’s getting kind of lost I think, this apprenticeship that we were talking about before. It’s becoming more and more difficult to come by, difficult to see the lineage in that way, which is too bad. But this is life – some things are gained, some things are lost. It’s like with recordings – we have more recordings available to us than at any other time, but there was a value to only having 6 recordings and listening to them so much that you memorized them and had a relationship with them. So something is gained and something is lost. I try to look upon that which is gained and try to adapt in this way. I think with big bands it’s much the same. I do think that the art of lead alto playing that I grew up with is almost gone, for two reasons: the lineage thing we were talking about, but also because people don’t write this way anymore. Not that they should, I’m just saying that languages, cultures come and go and this is part of life. But that school of being able to play in a large ensemble is diminishing. I don’t want to say that it’s going away, but it’s certainly not what it was.

JS: Talking about all the recordings available – I remember a mentor of mine who is Ukrainian said he went back to Ukraine to see a performance, and at the time they didn’t really have access to recordings. He was saying that he thought that we don’t listen as well, because we can listen to something at any time. So just having that option, people tend not to be as involved.
DP: I have many theories about this, one of which is that – we have so much information that we’re jumping around from this to that. On a related note, as I said before I just went to the University of North Carolina and did a concert there. I walked in to a restaurant and there’s a student group, a quartet, playing. Above them the TV is on with a football game. Out in the restaurant they still have the piped in music going, and on top of that everyone sitting in front was on their iPhones. Now to me, that’s a cacophonous situation, because there are 3 different sound sources and for the people listening, 4 different informational sources, and it didn’t seem to bother anybody. So I said, “Can you turn the TV off?” “Oh yeah, sure.” “Can you turn the music off in the restaurant?” The restaurant was closed. They were just switching over to the band. “Oh yeah, sure.” It wasn’t my classroom, so I couldn’t tell people to turn their phones off!! Unfortunately, it’s become the norm now, and it’s really disturbing to me, because it’s not only happening with music – you see it happening with our political situation. You see it happening around the world – people are losing the ability to actually listen to one another. I see it mostly in our political system. I don’t care what side you’re on, people are losing the ability to listen to one another. They just hear what they want to hear when they want to hear it. They just want to hear their own voice. This is what the music largely sounds like to me that a lot of people are creating today, what I call parallel playing, where everybody is kind of doing their own thing simultaneously. I don’t hear a lot of listening and true interaction going on. I talk to my students about this all time. Again, it is what it is. Music is a reflection of the times, and that’s the kind of times we live in right now, a very narcissistic period with a lot of cacophony. I was 2 feet
behind a student the other day trying to get their attention, and they had their earbuds in. I’m yelling his name, and he didn’t respond. I thought, “there’s something wrong with this.” There’s something wrong with being that disconnected with our surroundings, that we all have to constantly be in our own world. Look, I understand that you’re riding a bus, and you’re there for 4 hours, and you need to escape and pass the time. I get it. I do that myself. I have a computer, I have headphones, but I like to hear the sounds around me. I like to hear the sounds of the streets. I like to hear the sounds of people walking. I like to hear the sounds of people’s conversations coming and going. You hear some funny things in New York, right? People walk by and you want to write the stuff down. You’re like, “I can’t believe what I just heard.” This is music to me. This is how music is created, but I think that’s being lost in a way. This is where I love the large ensemble. You say big band, but everyone’s calling them jazz orchestras now. The term big band has kind of gone out. In fact, Maria Schneider doesn’t even call it a jazz orchestra anymore, just the Maria Schneider Orchestra. It’s all terminology, but in any large ensemble it’s crucial to listen to one another and to interact. This is why I think it’s critical to keep music in schools. It’s science. It’s social science. It’s not about entertainment. The argument in a lot of schools – I’m getting off on another thing, but this is an important statement to make - the argument in schools is that music is entertainment, and that’s how it’s treated by the administrations. But to me, music is social science, and especially in the school systems, because music (and team sports falls into this category) teaches you many things. In a large ensemble, in any one piece of music, your part may require you to take the lead, to support someone else,
to blend with someone else, to solo, and it's constantly moving. You have to be listening all the time and know what your role is at that moment – are you supporting someone, are you leading the saxophone section, are you following the trumpet player, are you playing a duet with the trombone player, what's going on? Your ears are moving around and you're constantly aware of the social network that is happening. This awareness to me is like a society. A big band is like a small little society that makes beautiful sounds. Maybe this is why Darcy Argue calls his band the Secret Society! I don’t think it’s for no reason that we say people live together in harmony. This is the relationship. So I like to take this social aspect of the ensemble and develop it when I do clinics with school bands. Especially when I’m talking to younger groups, where most of them are not going to be music majors. We can address all these things. I think they're very important lessons. This is one aspect of the music that I've always liked. A big band is large enough that you can get many of these great sounds that you can get in an orchestra, but small enough that there’s a certain amount of freedom for the soloists and for everybody. It's not like a huge orchestra, where you have to have a concerto to feature one person. So I love this combination of the individual and the society all in one.

JS: I try to tell as many people as I can that whether or not they want to be a musician for a career, they should play with people, because that whole social thing is...

DP: It's fun!
JS: Exactly.

DP: It's really fun to make great sounds with other people. We do it from when we're very young. There's just something very primal about it really, and that's satisfying to us. I just hope that as a society we don't lose sight of the importance of listening to one another, of interacting with one another, of being harmonious with one another. Music can be a powerful tool to help us remember these things and to show us how it's done, while at the same time providing us with beautiful sounds and a wonderful means of artistic expression.
Monika Roscher
Email Interview
July 22, 2015

"Monika Roscher is a guitarist and composer residing in Munich, Germany. Roscher assembled a big band to play her compositions for her graduation recital at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München. Since that time, her band has recorded and released two albums, “Failure in Wonderland” and “Of Monsters and Birds.”

JS: How did you get started in music?

MR: We had a piano, a double bass and some guitars at home, because my parents both played these instruments and always sang to and with us, so I wanted to learn to play the guitar as well. My mom taught me the chords and how to read music, and I had a great time learning and playing by myself or with my mother and my brother. Next step was that I played in school bands and then we wrote our own music with our own bands. I went to all concerts around, no matter what musical styles they were, from Classical to Metal, from Hiphop to Free-Jazz. Thats when I knew I had to be a musician. I just like music, and I don't care about the categories.

JS: Your website says that your first big band chart was written for a composition class. Were you required to write for a big band specifically, or did you just want to try out the ensemble? And what was it about that experience that made you want to continue composing for big band?
MR: We had a class on how to write for Bigband, so I joined it because I wanted to write for all the instruments, it was more about just trying it out. And it really hit me that this is what I wanted to do, because you have so many possible sound combinations, and you can do anything, it's like a huge playground, the possibilities are gigantic, and there are still so many things to try out. And also because my friends at the music conservatory were all really into my pieces, they all were like: write more! So that's what I did for my diploma-concert. And on the evening of my final concert at the college, there was a guy, he said if you ever want to record that, give me a call! ...so I started thinking, should I really try a bigband for real, and play concerts and make a record? So I thought about that for 2 months, and then I called the whole band, and they were all totally in, and loved the idea of forming a band. So I called the recording guy from the concert evening, Philipp Winter, and we started talking about a record, and we organized everything and did our first album. That's what happened.

JS: Who are some of your musical influences?

MR: I feel like this is changing all the time. I have no influence that is my main thing, because I like a lot of musical styles, orchestral music, free jazz, electronic music, but also if there is a singer songwriter who can only play three chords, but has a great message in his singing, then I also love it. It doesn't necessarily have to be the most virtuoso style, but I also like that as well. Right now I like Gorecki’s Symphony 2 and Symphony 4 (I went to the world premiere in London 2014), I like the Mars Volta,
Mahavishnu Orchestra, Jeff Beck, Beatles, Zappa, Carla Bley, Queens of the Stone Age, Aphex Twin, Foals, Chris McGregor's Brotherhood, ZS, Feist, Gil Evans, Hermeto Pascoal, Imogen Heap, Zorn,...I could go on like this:)

JS: Tell me about your creative process. There are often several ideas at play in your music, and I am curious to know how you determine the overall structure of a tune. Do you have an overall form in mind at the start? Or do you develop ideas individually up to a point, and then determine how everything will fit together?

MR: I once tried to have a rough form in the beginning, but it never worked out, I always end up somewhere else I didn't expect and haven't planned. So now, I don't even think about where I am going to end. For me it is a process, I go into the music, and I will see what will happen, sometimes it unfolds itself and I can totally get into it and write along and fly along, sometimes it is more like a fight, I throw things away and try new things, but nothing is fitting...yeah, I kind of try to let things flow,...if that makes any sense.

JS: How has your experience leading a big band been in terms of getting funding, finding musicians, rehearsing, recording, and booking tour dates?

MR: Well this is the part you just have to do, if you want to keep a bigband alive. I spend a lot of time doing these things, and I sometimes think, is this ever going to
end? I need a booker, I really do. But we are just recording our new album, so I still have hopes that with our new album we will find a great booker for us. And yes it just is a lot of work, but I don’t really think a lot about it that much, because you just have to do that, I want to play concerts, so I need to have good musicians, rehearsals, and funds. Its like it you want to cook, you have to buy food, there is no way around.

JS: This last question is one I’ve been asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big band? Or what would you like to see?

MR: I see in the future a lot of young bigbands that like to experiment with all kinds of influences and styles. I would love to see these bigbands! I also love traditional bigbands, but I also want to feel the music that is now appearing. What are musicians today writing for bigband, what is different from those from the past, what do we see now, that people before us have not seen? We shouldn't copy too much, because every person kind of looks the same, but we are totally different people, it's the same with music. A bigband looks traditional, but when it opens its mouth, it says something exciting about our times, in which we live.

JS: Is there anything else you would like to add?
MR: I would like to find bigbands all over the world, and would like to trade places, that would be very interesting. What are people writing for bigbands in the US, or in Egypt? Or in India? We should meet and have big bigband exchanges, that would be a blast! :)

And of course: Always keep experimenting!
Rich Shemaria

Personal Interview

April 18, 2014

*Rich Shemaria is a New York based pianist and composer/arranger. In addition to leading his own big band, Shemaria is on the composition faculty at both New York University and The New School, and formerly was the director of the UMO Jazz Orchestra in Helsinki, Finland.*

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**Pre-Interview**

JS: [regarding the division of styles] It does seem that things are not quite as parsed out elsewhere. Some of what I was finding in the European big bands demonstrated an attitude toward what’s available for them to arrange that shows a lot of freedom. It’s very playful.

RS: It’s great. Those bands come with their own set of problems, too. I was the director for the UMO big band. We have an album coming out June 10, as a matter of fact. They’re doing it with a U.S. record company – it’s the first time they’ve ever done that. It’s Lenny Pickett and his music, and I got to do all the orchestrations. We’re both really happy with the whole thing and looking forward to the release. But, just what you were talking about – that never would have come off if it hadn’t been for that kind of attitude. In fact, we got these commissions in that we’re getting grants for a concert next year, where there will be five of us international composers...
doing a tribute to Sibelius for the UMO big band. Where else are you going to find that? It’s just not going to happen.

JS: I particularly liked the Vienna Art Orchestra’s Strauss albums, which was funny since they are essentially descended from Strauss’ dance orchestra of the 19th century.

RS: Even here – it’s not that well known – William Schuman had his own dance band here in New York, and actually wrote songs at the same time with Ira Gershwin. They wrote, in fact, a lot of songs, and he said, “I was well known for writing the most songs with Ira Gershwin that were never heard.” [laughs] But they were both kids; they were young and it was pretty wild. And regarding the Sibelius tribute, it’s not about taking his pieces and writing jazz arrangements, it’s your impression of what he was like and how his music sounds. You can use motifs, but I’m not going to do the jazz version of the Second Symphony.

Official Start

JS: I suppose we can start with you giving me your basic background in music and with the ensemble, how you came to it, who you listened to, and how that shaped your view of it.
RS: Well, I grew up in Long Beach, California, and in the 60s and 70s Southern California had a really nice jazz scene, cultural scene, music scene, art scene, everything. I really remember it being very diverse and very rich. There was a lot of stuff going on. At the same time I was listening to classical music, jazz music later on (when I was about 12 or 13), pop music, rock music, surf music, the Beatles came over – it was a wild time. I loved going to art museums, science museums, musicals, and plays, so it was great – you had everything. I’ve played different instruments – electric bass, trombone, and didn’t start playing the piano until later. I didn’t start playing in organized bands until I was in high school. I played in a summer big band that just had stock arrangements, and I think back on it and I can’t even imagine what that was like. I was playing bass, and I was like, “Hey, this is pretty cool. I can do this, this is fun.” Then when I got into high school, there was a jazz band, so I played in that, and that’s when things started rolling. I had small groups at the time, and I had ventured out writing around the time I was 14-15 – really small things. I had a band that had a tenor saxophone and a trombone in it, because at that time (1971-72) a very popular group was the Jazz Crusaders, which was Wilton Felder and Wayne Henderson, and they had that unison sound, and it really got to everybody. So I wrote something for that combination, and I heard it for the first time, and I thought that was just the greatest thing that I had ever heard in the world. [laughs] Basically it was just my first experience hearing my own orchestrations back, and I went, “Wow, you can combine instruments and they will produce this third sound. What a fantastic discovery.” Growing up in Long Beach, I was right down the street from Disneyland in Anaheim, and they had a summer big
band series that ran for quite a while at this little stage called the Carnation Plaza, and throughout the summer they would bring in these big name big bands. They would stay there for a week or two, so I would hear Buddy Rich, Woody Herman, Don Ellis, Stan Kenton – at the time they were filling their bands with young players, they were hiring writers who were writing pop songs on the radio, and they had a huge following (of which I was one). Don Ellis lived in L.A., and his band was extremely popular. I heard him many times, and they played all over the place. But that series was where I heard Count Basie for the first time, and Duke Ellington, Harry James, Charlie Barnet, the line up was a who's who of big bands. A lot of these guys were in the twilight of their careers, and we were all relating to Woody Herman and Buddy and all that, and you didn’t quite relate to Harry James and the dance bands. I was glad I got a chance to hear them, though. It was a really good experience, and it kind of sticks in my mind. It was just the overall sound – I would dig the sound. And a lot of these bands I heard live before I heard a recording of them, so that was also an extra plus.

Out of high school, I had an opportunity to move to Florida. I lived in Orlando, Florida for 10 years, and that’s when I started writing. There were a lot of performers around who were flocking to that area to play in the theme parks, and I took advantage of all the musicians. My first attempts at writing for large ensembles were for a 10 piece group, a 12 piece group, and it just kind of morphed into bigger groups by some musician coming up to me and saying, “Hey man, I love the band and I’d really love to play in it.” And I’d say, “Okay, I’ve got to add another guy.” And
so my band would get bigger. I think by the time I left there the book I had was about 14-15 pieces. I would take some odd jobs and here or there I’d write for a small orchestra, and I think I actually tried my first standard big band ensemble somewhere there before I left, but those pieces are lost.

So when I came to New York, I still had my 15-piece book, and I began writing for that and playing around town. I played at some small clubs in the Village, an old place up on 3rd Avenue and 35th Street called Zanzibar, and was just lucky enough to be able to work at that time with some great players in the city. I felt very fortunate that they seemed to like what I was doing and I got to work with some incredible musicians, some of whom have gone on to become internationally famous. I can remember guys coming in – sometimes they’d make a gig, sometimes they’d just be in a rehearsal – like Joe Lovano, Chris Potter, Chris Bodie, Tim Hagans, Marvin Stamm, Jim Pugh, Dave Taylor, it goes on. There are too many people to name, but it was always a really good musical experience every time I played. That just inspired me to write more and keep going. Then I began teaching – I started teaching at Mannes College, then the New School, and I’ve been at NYU for quite a while, ten years now I think. The opportunity here at NYU really opened a lot of things up for me, because I began writing for a lot of the faculty members here – Lenny Pickett, Brian Lynch, Wayne Krantz, Chris Potter, Joe Lovano, Randy Brecker (even though he was not on faculty, he was part of this series we got going presenting concerts). And Dave Schroeder, of course, was really a tremendous help in getting this all together and helping me plan a lot of it out. Many of those projects became
professional projects – we were taking them abroad, we played in Italy, South America, over in Nordic countries. And as I said earlier, one of them was with Lenny and the UMO Jazz Orchestra, and is about to become an international CD to be released here in a couple of months. So, that’s basically it in a nutshell.

JS: What are your thoughts about the role of jazz education and what effects it’s had on jazz in general?

RS: Well, the music started out like any other type of music, which is basically a grassroots type of thing, or organic, or whatever you want to call it. It had to start from the soul. It comes from the heart; it had a lot of different influences. If you want to trace jazz back to where it came from, it came from all over the place. But like any other music, as it begins to grow and begins to morph into a more sophisticated level, then change is inevitable. I think jazz in the schools is definitely a part of that change. There are so many different sides. Well, actually there are two sides: there’s the “hate it” and the “for it” side. But just like anything else, it has its ups and downs. I think that when it works, it’s great. There are a lot of terrific musicians out there making it in the world and offering their music that have been products of jazz education. When it doesn’t work, it can be confining. In my experience, I’ve seen a lot of misinformation out there as well. I have students who come to me and say, “somebody told me I can’t do this.” And I go, “Are you kidding? You’re the composer. You’re the writer.” So that I think is the most hurtful, when students are getting some kind of influence that confines their creativity or doesn’t allow them to fully explore their own potential. That’s the worst part. When the opposite of that
happens, and they get with some teacher who knows how to teach – and I don’t mean just technique, I mean how to influence people and allow them to open up and reach their own creativity and become who they can become – that’s when it really works. I wish it were all that way, but you have both.

JS: Absolutely. I guess even outside of formal education, people always learn music from other people and work together, and it can be positive and negative.

RS: I will say one thing. I love the master and apprentice approach to learning things that the world has used for hundreds and hundreds of years. That’s one thing I like here at NYU, is that, as you know, we basically have that kind of thing happening here in the jazz department. There’s a real close affinity between the students and the teachers, and they get to play with us, they get to write alongside us. There are one or two other places in the world that I know of that have this kind of thing, and that whole process is time tested, and it still stands up.

JS: When you were learning to write, were there any big band writers you particularly looked up to, or was it a matter of the band growing and getting ideas as you go along?

RS: You can’t help but be influenced by what’s going on out there. You need some kind of ideal to live up to. I can tell you that my early influences – even before I was writing – the first 3 guys that really captured my attention growing up in Southern
California, in no particular order, was Quincy Jones, Thad Jones, and Oliver Nelson. I was exposed to those guys when I was a teenager, and they just knocked me out with everything that was going on. Bob Brookmeyer, in particular, was a great influence on me, and of course Gil Evans. Just off the top of my head, those would be the first guys I’d think of. My influences for orchestration, form, and all the trappings of writing came not just from jazz musicians, but everything I was exposed to, from orchestras, small groups, pop groups. I loved the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin, and got as much out of them as I could from other influences.

JS: I should say that your first three influences were also kind of a trinity for me.

RS: Yeah, they’re tremendous. And we’re not just talking about their orchestration or the way they write for big band, but their soul, their music, was just dynamite.

JS: What kinds of things do you see in the future of the ensemble? Or what are some things you’d like to see?

RS: Just like anything else, I’d like to see that it continues to grow, that things don’t stagnate, that they don’t become part of this stagnation of creativity that’s prevalent throughout the world at the moment. I’m not just talking about music, but other art forms as well, and it even reaches out into the business world, the political world, and all kinds of things. I would hope that not just jazz music, but all of us could grow. As far as this genre is concerned, there are certainly a lot of problems with keeping
large ensembles going, one of which is just simply being able to promote yourself by touring and going around the country. At the same time while I’m saying that, I’m looking around and I’m seeing all kinds of large ensembles going around and touring still, so there’s still a healthy demand for what’s happening. What I would like to see is that continue, along with the music still being creative, and still growing, and still morphing into whatever it’s going to morph into. Probably more than anything, I think what I’d like to see is a natural continuation of the process from one generation of different styles of writers into the next, meaning the future writers will still get their influence from what occurred in the past, and be able to sort that out for themselves and bring their own style into it.
Julian Tanaka
Email Interview
August 1, 2015

Julian Tanaka is a saxophonist and clarinetist residing in Las Vegas, Nevada. Tanaka has written music for jazz combo, big band, and wind orchestra, and studied jazz writing at the Eastman School of Music.

JS: When did you get started in music?

JT: I got started in music the summer before I started middle school. My grandmother gave me her rosewood clarinet.

JS: What sparked your interest in big band? And tell me about your experiences writing for the ensemble.

JT: In high school, I was initially not interested in anything related to big bands. Compared to the freedoms one has interacting with a small group, playing in big band seemed like a chore. Plus, most of the music for big band is unmemorable and/or is complete garbage. Nevertheless, I had heard some incredible recordings of Don Ellis Orchestra (Live at Monterey), Duke Ellington (Black, Brown, and Beige, Three Suites), and Gil Evans (Sketches of Spain, Svengali, Plays the Music of Jimi Hendrix) which really peaked my interest in the writing aspect.
I spent the entire summer before senior year writing my first big band chart (with some encouragement from my theory/piano teacher, Bob Hughes) by hand. I immediately brought the finished score and parts to my high school big band director, Pat Bowen, the first week of school. I was so fucking excited. We started to read through the chart at a rehearsal, but he bailed on it by the 2 or 3 minute mark. The handwritten parts stayed in our folders for the remainder of the year, but we never once took a look at it again. I didn't even get all of my parts back at the end. (Ironically, I have completed several commissions now from Pat for the LVA big band.)

Looking back at my score a little bit, I see that there are many, many, many flaws. I also don't think it helped that the title, "NEMSBUR", was an anagram for both "NUMBERS" (intended) and "RUBSMEN" (unintended). Yet, I am still incredibly proud of this accomplishment. I realized two things: 1. I love writing for big band; 2. Writing for big band is tedious.

I halted any more attempts at big band writing for a good few years. Then, I needed some arranging credit to fulfill my requirements as a jazz performance at UNLV. I didn't want to take the 8am class for reasons obvious to music majors, so I asked Joe Lano if I could take the class as an independent study course. He was more than willing to help me out. Studying with Joe was so exciting for me that I decided to take big band writing seriously again.
What I truly love about Joe is that he is the shit but doesn’t give a fuck if anyone else knows or cares about it. If they want to know, all they have to is listen to him play or hear his compositions. He was and still is so underrated as a true artist, especially at UNLV. I’m convinced people mainly knew him as the leader of the guitar ensemble. I was fortunate enough to be able to study arranging with him for a few years. He taught me the fundamentals of harmony and instrumentation in big band writing. He left the style and personality of the chart up to me. There was something about how it felt going through a short lesson without having any work to show for the previous week and then being offered coffee and a cookie that just made you feel like absolute shit. However, if I did my work, it was a delightfully long and satisfying experience.

My current writing teacher at Eastman, Bill Dobbins, is similar to Joe in that I only get what I put into it. However, Bill is way more hands on in some ways. He will tell me exactly what he doesn't like and why it isn’t "convincing". He is meticulous, often taking up a whole hour lesson editing a few pages of a score. But that is exactly why I love studying with him. No bullshit. He tells me what works and what doesn’t work. I’m not there to write cool music, I’m there to write music.

I also gain a shit load from just sharing scores and ideas with fellow composers like Nate Kimball.
(Sorry I am writing so much about my experiences with my teachers. I find that the process of writing tends to make as much of an impact to me as the performance. Speaking of which, the sound that happens in my head as I write never matches the sound that comes out of other people. Hahahaha.)

What it comes down to for me is I want to write something that sounds good. I don't care much about the extramusical elements. The audience can and will take care of that.

JS: The education and development of jazz musicians has often involved the practice of apprenticeship. The big band has frequently been the site of this apprenticeship, with younger players learning styles and techniques organically through interactions with their older counterparts. Now that there are fewer working bands, big bands are most prevalent in the university system. Is the same sort of apprenticeship still possible within the academic setting? And what effects do you think the university has had on the music?

JT: No, there will never be anything in the university system that will take the place of a real music apprenticeship. One can find a mentor within the university system; however, the real lessons on life and playing music can only be learned outside the limitations of academia. I was lucky enough to have had Joe as a mentor at UNLV. My lessons were at his house. Barely felt like school. Also, playing in kicks bands at Jim Hemming's house was a sort of internship. I got my feet wet in playing charts by
great writers like Billy Byers, Bill Holman, Bob Florence, etc. Plus, those old motherfuckers swing differently. People get caught up in the fact that they drag. Well, fuck you if you would rather play these charts with the young, academic musicians than the older cats who actually played in the bands that performed these charts on the road (the true meaning of the term is way out of the reach of anybody in school right now, including myself).

One of the major negative effects university has had on big band music is that the pragmatism of the music is lost. Ellington's music has that radiance and natural vibration because he wrote shit that was playable. It seems that a fair a lot of academic writers don't think about that too much. It is up to the player to make the composition sparkle. That's not to say that hard music is bad. It's just that there aren't tremendous consequences for writing bad music in college. Back in the day, you wrote a shitty chart and you were fired or the players in your band could find some other band to play in. Today, you get a college degree in jazz composition.

Also, The university system makes jazz far less accessible as a career choice to certain people. It is near impossible to make a living just playing jazz these days. Attending a university as a jazz major not only provides students with a possibility of graduating with a degree, thus increasing the potential for getting a teaching gig; it also is a place where one will make connections with other musicians. I am not qualified to analyze how and why a lot of people get shafted the opportunity to
attend college (especially the "conservatories"). All I know is that almost all jazz majors I have ever met have been well-to-do white people.

That being said, I think that university is still a good place to learn fundamentals and flesh out creative ideas. I loved how Bruce Paulson would bring in those Tonight Show, Buddy Rich, and Rob McConnell charts to the big band rehearsals at UNLV. At the same time, you can rehearse and read original arrangements and compositions without having to pay the musicians for their focused attention and effort.

JS: What responsibility do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts? How would you balance the continued performance of these tunes with fostering new approaches to the genre and the individual creativity of the players? Are preservation and innovation necessarily at odds with one another?

JT: I am always up for a good mix. I absolutely love Gil Evans. He was able to do his own thing while still paying homage to his predecessors. His arrangements of "King Porter Stomp" are smoking. Duke took this a step further. He created his own standards and kept refreshing them throughout his lifetime. I just heard the 1950 recording of "Mood Indigo" from Masterpieces by Ellington. Holy. Fucking. Shit... Brookmeyer is also in that category of a true artist with roots. With these cats, the music is never bogged down with innovation nor preservation. It’s just good music. Their music reflects the past, present, and future without the pretense of holding the key to “keeping the music alive”.
I do think, however, that university is a prime place for compartmentalization. Focused rehearsal and study in Basie-centric music and new works, a couple of semesters a piece, are great. The problem with a lot of universities, though, is that they are lopsided. There is not enough of a balance within the faculty of new and old. Not to mention, there are plenty of people teaching jazz that have no idea what the fuck they are talking about and don't make an effort to surround themselves with people that do.

JS: What are your thoughts on the expanded instrumentation and musical styles often employed by contemporary big bands? Are there some instruments (such as distorted electric guitar and electronic instruments/effects) that you feel should not be included? Or does the addition of these new elements serve to expand the appeal of the ensemble?

JT: Expanded instrumentation is wonderful. It’s funny how standard big band instrumentation came about, considering that big bands back in the day had such varied instrumentation. Some had vibes, some had 3 trombones, one had trombones, french horns, and mellophones. Don Ellis used pocket trumpet, organ, and three basses for fuck sake. Musical styles ranged from boogie-woogie to Kansas City swing to bebop to fusion and beyond (preferred order and stopping point for a majority of jazz history textbooks. Haha.)
It does not really matter to me how unique or standard the instrumentation or style is. I am more interested in how it sounds. Is it well written (for the instruments)? Are the performers listening to each other? Do I like the character of the ensemble? Does the ensemble even have character? That being said, there is tremendous potential in expanded instrumentation and musical styles within big band writing.

JS: This last question is one I've been asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big band? Or what would you like to see?

JT: I see big band as remaining where it is for a while. Primarily, performed in secondary and higher educational institutions; secondarily, featured in media to provide nostalgia; lastly, as an art form. I hope that things will change and schools will take the focus off of playing perfect jazz. (That can be said about classical music too.) The media situation has been fucked for a while. Don’t think that's going to change anytime soon. The good thing is that nothing is going to kill jazz and music as a whole, for that matter. Music is way stronger than the human race and the destruction we cause.
Frank Vaganée

Email Interview

July 16, 2015

Frank Vaganée is a Belgian composer and saxophonist. He is one of the founders and current leader of the Brussels Jazz Orchestra, the house orchestra of Brussels since 1999.

JS: What made you decide to start a big band? And how has the experience been in terms of funding, finding players, scheduling performances, etc.?

FV: We started the [Brussels Jazz Orchestra] in 1993. At that time there were no professional big bands around in Belgium. Our generation wanted to have the opportunity to play in a good big band so we founded one ourselves. It wasn’t a problem finding the right and interested musicians to form the orchestra. During the first two, three years we played every month and later on every two weeks at a jazz club in Brussels, “the Sounds”. You could see it as public rehearsals. After a few years we could play our first concerts outside the club, mainly in cultural houses and small theaters. To fund these concerts we applied for the first time for subsidies from the Flemish government. From 1999 on, we got subsidies to work in a structural way. That money could help us to professionalize not only on the artistic level but also business wise. Since that time the amount of projects and concerts is growing. Since more than a decade, the BJO has an average of 35 to 40 concerts a year besides CD recordings and all kinds of pedagogical projects. Besides the
musicians, most of the time 16, sometimes depending on the program more, we have three people working at the office of the BJO.

JS: Many of your big band compositions incorporate both complex harmonies and a strong swing feeling. There appears to be a trend in contemporary big band music to focus on increasingly complex harmonies and textures while neglecting the swing feeling, both in terms of the eighth note interpretation and the sense of rhythmic vitality. Do you think this rhythmic energy is an essential ingredient in large ensemble jazz?

FV: I only can speak for myself. There are lots of ideas about what’s important in music in general. Because of the typical orchestral set up of a jazz orchestra, a composer/arranger has a lot of possibilities in order to orchestrate. Lots of instruments, doublings in the reed section, acoustic or electric rhythm section, etc… But for the BJO one of the most important aspects of playing our music is the rhythmic aspect. Even with complex harmonies, putting these notes in a correct rhythmic pulse gives the music energy and most of the time a forward motion. When there is a lack of some kind of pulse, the result will be blurry, dragging, not very inspiring for a soloist to play on top of it.

JS: What responsibility do current big bands have in terms of preserving classic big band charts? Should performances of older music be limited to university and school bands?
FV: No, certainly not. Anyone who wants to play these classic charts needs to do that. And certainly in schools, where students by playing these charts, get to know and understand how to act in a big band. If they can, it will help them to play contemporary big band music in a good way.

JS: What are your thoughts on expanded instrumentation? Are there some instruments (such as distorted electric guitar and electronic instruments/effects) that you feel should not be included? Or does the addition of these new elements serve to expand the appeal of the ensemble?

FV: I think in contemporary jazz music, every kind of creativity in expanding instrumentation can be valuable. As long as the creativity serves the musical value.

JS: This last question is one I've been asking everyone. What do you see in the future for big band? Or what would you like to see?

FV: I'm convinced big bands will survive through the years.

The thing that we experience is the fact that whenever you want to play more than a few concerts each year, you have to look for an original approach to bring jazz music to a wider audience. Combinations with other art forms is one of the tools we use to reach a broader public.
And we try to get connected with our public by organizing different projects:

We have our "International Composition Contest" – The BJO International Composition Contest is one of the few international competitions for jazz composition, and more specifically compositions for a big band formation. The Brussels Jazz Orchestra feels it is important to discover and encourage young talent. The BJO keeps up with the winners through their careers and can commission them to write new works for the orchestra. The winner is elected by an international jury and takes home the Duvel Jazz Award worth 3000 euros.

We have the "Brussels Youth Jazz Orchestra" – Every three years, following auditions, 17 promising young jazz musicians are selected to form an exclusive jazz orchestra. The BYJO builds an extensive repertoire over three years under the artistic direction of BJO. Twice a year an intensive week-long project will be led by a guest conductor.

Furthermore, the BJO organizes workshops, where amateur musicians can enjoy a few hours of big band lessons in a professional context. The BJO opens the doors of its rehearsal studio for art schools and their jazz departments: students can take a look behind the scenes and experience how the creative process and the preparations for an artistic project evolve.