

Report on Jazz Conversations, 2007

Hosted by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Chamber Music America

Report by Georgianna Pickett

The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Chamber Music America convened two jazz think tanks on June 20-21, 2007 in New York City and October 30-31, 2007 in Seattle as part of an evaluation of their funding strategies in jazz. Fifty-four artists, presenters, managers, agents, educators and media representatives were convened to offer their reflections on the field of jazz today. The participants were chosen because of their expertise, as well as to create a wide representation of age, gender, ethnicity, region, occupation and genre of music.

John Steinmetz facilitated both meetings, while staff representatives of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Chamber Music America observed. Alan Brown of WolfBrown Consulting presented recent research on jazz audiences to both groups. Georgiana Pickett documented the sessions.

The goals of the meeting were to take a snapshot of the field, distill and prioritize issues, and to brainstorm ways to address issues. Participants were advised that their views would be anonymous and that consensus was not expected. Accordingly, while these notes attempt to capture major themes, there was disagreement and diverse opinion within the groups. This document is meant to summarize the general perceptions of the participants. While these are the perceptions of those deeply committed to the field, they were articulated during spontaneous and open discussion and are not summarized here as statements of absolute fact. While the two meetings emphasized different themes, consistent priority issues overlapped.

The priority issues in summary were:

- Audiences
- Marketing
- Technology
- Quality of Life for the Jazz Practitioner
- Making and Performing the Music
- Networking and Communication
- Emerging Leadership
- Education

There is full acknowledgement that jazz is under-capitalized and that work in the field occurs under extremely stressful conditions. Conversely, there is also agreement that the music and artistry continue to thrive. New forms are emerging and excellent musicians continue to arrive on the scene. The music flourishes, and while there is some dissension on what constitutes "jazz," the passion for the genre and the hopes for its well-being among the participants are unmistakable. Jazz and its artists continue to be hip, innovative, improvisational, interconnected, collaborative, strong, dedicated, rigorous, inspirational and soulful. Jazz is America's treasured national art form, and it should be supported robustly now and as it moves into the future.

Audiences

Audiences for live presentations of jazz music have declined radically over the past decades. Jazz is becoming a rarified form and audiences unfamiliar with jazz often assume that a level of expertise is needed in order to appreciate the music. Even more experienced audiences often feel as though they do not know enough about the music and are uncomfortable talking about the form. Happily, core jazz audiences are extremely dedicated and attend shows voraciously.

While relatively little research has been done on jazz audiences and what they value, Wolf Brown partner Alan Brown was able to provide participants with some preliminary findings on a limited sample of jazz audiences in New York. In addition to Mr. Brown's report, which is not summarized here, participants expressed that they had noticed these things about their own audiences:

- The jazz listener is aging.
- Fewer African American people are interested in jazz.
- The jazz listener has diverse musical tastes.
- Jazz audiences value a larger social experience (not merely passive concert formats) when attending arts events.
- Audiences crave an intimate experience.
- Fewer people will take the risk to see something they are unfamiliar with.
- More listening is happening privately in music sharing groups where collections are explored.
- Audiences are making last minute decisions to attend shows and subscription buyers have declined drastically.
- Audiences have shorter attention spans.

While some notice that there is a greater diversity in jazz audiences, many believe that a diminishing percentage of African Americans are interested in jazz. Research also needs to be conducted on those who do not attend and what the obstacles to participation are.

"It is disheartening to me when I look into an audience where I am performing and I see how few African Americans are in the audience. How are the people that are NOT there researched?"

Marketing

There is much uncertainty around how best to market jazz and jazz events. In our densely saturated market, it is very difficult to catch anyone's attention in the absence of massive marketing budgets. While a large-scale, heavily funded marketing effort to promote jazz as a musical form would be ideal, little at present exists to promote jazz appreciation. Artists frequently must promote their own events and recordings, and presenters must promote their individual events and seasons in a market where it is difficult to make impact.

"We have ignored a few generations of effective marketing and we are paying for it."

"I feel like as an artist too much responsibility is placed on me to do my own marketing and to make inroads into the community where I am touring. Sometimes I blame myself when there is not a good audience. I spend way too much time doing self-promotion."

These challenges are compounded by shifts in media coverage: fewer media outlets include jazz in their programming today. Writers for the press frequently do not give credibility to the art form nor do they have the expertise necessary to write well-informed advances or reviews.

“There has been a change in attitude around broadcasting. It used to be the way people promoted shows. The radio has become hostile or unfriendly to jazz. Younger or new musicians are not getting any airplay.”

That said, personalized technology is changing the ways in which people listen to music. Individualized listening and astonishingly easy internet access to any music from anywhere in the world may be lessening the importance of traditional radio. Listening devices such as iPods and exceptional home sound systems have completely changed the culture of listening and music sharing. Listening clubs are emerging as many have sound systems at home that rival those in professional music venues.

Because definitions of jazz are broad, there is no shared language that has meaning to audiences. The nuances of subdivisions within the form can really only be defined by those with deep knowledge. *“The genre is so broad it doesn’t mean anything to anyone anymore.”* Many individuals that are exposed to one type of jazz such as “smooth” jazz and dislike it may be turned off to attending other jazz concerts because they are not clear that many types of very diverse music exist under the jazz pantheon. Unfortunately, some of the very tenets of the medium are alienating to the uninformed.

“When introducing jazz to audiences, avoid words that turn people off such as instrumental and improvisation. These words can have negative connotations because people don’t really know what they mean.”

Moreover, the technological ability of a listener to create play lists and individualized “curated” listening programs allows an individual to put music into categories and contexts that he or she defines. While possible yielding advantages for the future, this blurring of traditional category definitions further complicates larger public understanding of the jazz form.

Artists and presenters are finding that pairing jazz with more mainstream music forms to introduce audiences to jazz can be successful. Benefits include exposing unsuspecting audiences to jazz artists that they may like.

“We need to learn more about the natural crossover with other music and audiences. We need to get included in new venues and festivals that are not jazz centered.”

Nevertheless, linking jazz to a mainstream event with the purpose of drawing in new audiences can be dangerous. It encourages reliance on the commercial and does not provide a model for presenters to take risks or that values jazz in its own right.

Technology

There are disparate experiences related to technology. On one hand, there is excitement around new uses of technology for the advancement of the field and many are embracing these advancements and feel in control of their use of it; the technology that can be used for recording, distributing, marketing, listening and managing is developing and changing rapidly. Those with

technical acumen are embarking on exciting new ways to create, market and distribute music. Some of these practiced and/or or desired strategies include:

- Blogging and texting to reach individuals.
- Remote broadcasting.
- Digital archiving.
- MySpace/FaceBook used as self-promotion.
- Creating new venues with virtual concert halls.
- Websites where jazz practitioners can share ideas about existing and future models.
- Providing free downloads to audience members who purchase tickets.
- Providing immediate access (download access or emailed files) to recordings of concerts for audiences after the show.
- Linked simultaneous live performances.
- Recorded performance paired with live performance.

At the same time, many fear that jazz practitioners are behind in understanding and using such technology. There are few services available that provide practitioners access, training or financial support to acquire this technology.

Many technological strategies require that artists give away their music or that artists and presenters allow space for concerts to be experienced for free. This contributes to a culture of undervaluing artist's work and art in general.

"The landscape has changed so much in the past 15 years. Formats are moving way too fast and I can't keep up with them. I do not know how to create commerce around my work – you can't make money from selling your work unless you are "uber-famous."

Some participants believe that we have to push ourselves to let go of our previous systems of how artists and venues are compensated to accommodate these advancements. Those participants urged their colleagues to overcome their suspicion and embrace technology in order to thrive in the future.

Quality of Life as a Practitioner

A practitioner here is considered anyone coming from the field at large: musicians, composers, managers, agents, presenters and educators. While creativity, optimism and inspiration continue to drive people to commit to careers in jazz, the stress felt by practitioners is palpable and clear. Basic uncertainty about the future of the form and key jazz institutions is common. Professional longevity and stability for artists and administrators is dubious. Feelings of being overwhelmed, discouraged, stressed, tired and isolated are common. Practitioners are underpaid, and most lack basic provisions of health insurance and retirement plans. Sources of economic support are inadequate. When grants and subsidies are available there is no centralized method to communicate to the field about how to access these opportunities. The work continues to be made because artists cannot imagine life without their craft and therefore continue to work in substandard conditions: the work is not a choice, it is an imperative.

"Some people will just make the facilitation of getting the music out happen – it's the passion, but there should be some support. We learn by trial by fire."

Making and Performing the Music

Consistent opportunities for jazz artists to perform are scarce. In addition to the general decline in jazz listeners, shifts in global dynamics and the economy are also to blame. The costs of touring and presenting have risen dramatically. Significant increases in travel, housing and airfare costs make it more challenging for presenters to program unknown artists in their seasons: only a handful of the largest and most recognized names in jazz can provide significant/necessary box office revenue with any certainty. These increased costs are being passed onto audiences and result in higher ticket prices, creating more obstacles to access. And while artists in another era would take the risk of self-producing tours and would assume the costs of travel and housing themselves in exchange for a split of box office receipts, there is now a lack of confidence that local clubs or presenters will deliver an audience of significant size at all, making artists more reluctant to self-produce tours.

Compounding these challenges is a breakdown in communication between regional networks. "Block booking" (securing multiple tour sites within a compressed geographic area) is increasingly complicated and difficult to achieve. Artists and managers have expressed exasperation about trying to locate jazz-friendly tour sites in nearby cities. Participants advocated the creation of a centralized database of jazz-friendly sites. And while some small, regional networks do exist and are used by artists (notably the Pacific Northwest, Central – Southern California and New York State regions where tour building is easier), pathways to access these networks are organic and are not readily apparent for many in the field.

Artists once relied on European gigs to supplement erratic US opportunities. As Europe has cultivated its own jazz scene, and many high level jazz artists and ensembles are emerging in Europe, US artists are being invited less to perform.

"Europe has its own thing going now and it has nothing to do with American jazz. It has a distinct presence. Festivals that 25 years ago were 80% American musicians are today 30%. European artists are populating their own festivals, and then of course there are artists from other parts of the world that are being invited, like Asia and South America."

For artists who prefer a home base and want to stay in one location, conditions are increasingly difficult. There is also a decline of local venues and "gigs." Where once some musicians found it easy to get consistent work in hotels and bars, now these venues are promoting live music less frequently. This makes it more challenging for lesser-known artists to play publicly and build a following.

"Gigs that helped us progress as musicians have dried up, good paying gigs are not jazz gigs. Students can't afford the national gigs- but there aren't any local gigs to send them to. I used to play club, restaurants and hotels, all of that is gone."

In addition to lack of touring opportunities, support for the creation of work is also scarce. A strong misperception of how jazz music is created often excludes it from some grants for composers. Because improvisation is an intrinsic element of jazz, some would contend that the music is not "composed." In addition, many musicians have little experience in applying for support or seeking out grant opportunities. Greater focus needs to be placed on amplifying resources for the field and teaching artists how to access them.

"More presenters should attach commissioning money to their shows."

“Consortiums of commissioners should be formed so that combined money can make real impact.”

With limited chances to perform and minimal support for creation, artists are left wondering how they will support themselves. The distribution of recordings is imperative, but such distribution rarely brings significant financial return. The costs of recording and packaging are high and artists are now facing the reality that *“when one person buys my cd, I know it will be burned 10 times and passed around for free.”* Additionally, there is also a sense that venues have decreased capacity to record live shows.

Networking and Communication

The pressures of many of the issues mentioned above can be addressed by more communication. More frequent and intensive networking sessions are imperative. There is still confusion even within the field about the various roles artists, presenters and agents play and little understanding about the specific challenges associated with each of those professions. Artists question the costs of presentation and marketing, while presenters question how artist fees are determined. There is a need for clear information to promote larger intra-field understanding.

At the same time, professionals would like more opportunity to share ideas and to find possible collaborators. Meetings with substantive content and adequate time for quality discussion can also help to alleviate emotional isolation and anxiety. For example, the New York participants were asked to provide feedback on what the most and least valuable components of the meeting were to them. Out of 16 respondents, 11 stated that the networking opportunity was the most valuable:

“The most interesting part for me was having all major 'jazz stakeholder roles' represented in one room. I appreciated having such a thoughtful, comprehensive discussion and being able to look at the big picture of jazz music from another angle than just that of an artist.”

“Having the opportunity to network and strengthen relationships with significant industry jazz colleagues in a focused setting”

“The most valuable thing about the meeting for me was hearing concerns of presenters and agents. It really helps me as an artist to better understand the difficult job they have promoting groups like mine. I walked away with more of an appreciation for what it is my agent does to help presenters understand what we are trying to do.”

Emerging Leadership

On the administrative side there is a high level of “burn-out” coupled with a fear that the next generation of leaders has not been identified. Some established leaders feel that the next generation is unwilling to work for the same low standards of pay and support that they have accepted, even while many young potential leaders feel that their talents are not being recognized or utilized. These younger leaders feel ready to assume more curatorial opportunities and influence field-wide issues, even as they are aware of the sacrifices made by their predecessors and are often willing to make those same sacrifices. In lieu of being embraced by

older organizations, many of these young people are forming their own organizations on a small level to ensure that they can be authors of their programmatic visions.

The phrase “*flying by the seat of our pants*” was used repeatedly to describe how practitioners get their work done. At the same time, many are frustrated that there are not more opportunities to learn skills in a more formal codified way. There is doubt about the value of their knowledge and concern about knowing how to pass the information to their successors.

“Wondering about artists that might want to move from artistry to administration - how do they get educated to do the work? They are often brought into the field through friends and family; this does not provide real training.”

“Arts management - some books some sources - isn’t really any formal approach to artist management or booking - there is a lack of organization in the industry in general. The industry has been developed by the seat of its pants. A standardized approach needs to be developed. What should an artist hope to get? What constitutes an agent? What constitutes a manager?”

“There is not enough juice in the system to make it worthwhile for the field to invest in this standardization. The passion for the management often comes from the family - girlfriends, wives, parents, siblings.”

Education

- K-12

Grave concern was expressed about the poor quality of or frequent absence of music education in the US public K-12 system. Public school music programs are limited or have been eliminated entirely leaving little opportunity for student exposure to jazz—a trend many linked to the phenomenon of the dwindling jazz audience. Schools lucky enough to maintain music programs often have limited instruments available, and many must work with equipment of poor quality. Obvious discrepancies exist between urban, suburban and rural schools as well as between schools with different economic demographics.

Artists are responding to this lack of music education through grass-roots efforts. Many artists are taking responsibility to rectify this problem by creating residencies and workshops in community centers, libraries, and schools. Unfortunately, infrastructure support for self-fashioned residencies is lacking and participating artists are frequently uncompensated. Even so, many public schools are so overburdened with social problems, aggressive testing schedules and inflexible curricula that they cannot take advantage of such residencies or performances, even when they are offered for free. Access is difficult. This is discouraging to artists attempting to share their passion and knowledge of the form on a volunteer level.

“We need a list of resources that are doing hip work such as schools that are very selective and use a workshop model, as opposed to a classroom model, and that emphasize creativity. We also need a national standard; schools should be required to bring in a certain amount of workshops or exposure.”

“We need to more actively create community hubs. There needs to be an emphasis on interaction between young and old. We need to give more support to artists that are also committed to their communities and are good educators.”

Presenters and jazz specific education organizations in some communities are building rich programs to replace a lack of music in the schools – exposing students to working musicians, legendary artists, jazz history and musicianship. Nevertheless, these programs do not begin to approach the level of work needed to consistently expose all young people in the country to jazz. Unfortunately, even professional and paid programs in youth education are described as uneven. While presenters are making efforts to include residencies and education work in their presentations of jazz artists, not all are well prepared to make successful residency work happen. Schools or youth are frequently unprepared for what the artists will be doing, and there is fatigue experienced by artists when too much education work is crammed into a hectic touring schedule. Not enough space is given to community engagement, and therefore not enough time is allowed to let artists engage deeply. While there are some luminary programs that have fine-tuned and practiced their education work some professionals still need guidance.

“Presenters have developed long term residency programs. This is very beneficial to their communities and to jazz musicians. We need to have a real plan around educational activities. When there is an opportunity to do more than just an hour lecture/demonstration we need to seize that opportunity. But I feel that I need to educate the presenters on how to best do that work.”

Some presenters describe that it is an absolute necessity to include education work in their presentations, because funding is often connected to community engagement. While funding is tied to this critical work, it is often the least developed and underpaid. Opportunities for greater interaction between young people and local jazz musicians are needed.

“Artists should be paid for the additional work they do while on tour as educators. There is too much assumption that artists can do deep education community work while on tour. It is really typical for a presenter to assume that we can do education work on the same day as our gig. This is exhausting, but it’s expected.”

“Artists hate to do things that are ineffective so there should be more clarity on what the expectations are within workshop/education approaches. Most often not thought through by host.”

A deeper connection and network between jazz artists and educators is desired. There is only one national organization that serves jazz education with the most public program being its annual conference. However, it was noted repeatedly that with this particular conference becoming as large as it has, it is difficult for educators to have meaningful interactions with colleagues.

- College/Professional Education

Some of the preeminent conservatories within this country have highly respected jazz programs, involving many of our most revered jazz artists. Student exposure to a high level of artists and composers at these programs is expected, and many excellent musicians have been trained at these institutions. However, there is a need for additional training for young musicians to complete their education, particularly with regards to business.

“In conservatory training there is no preparation for the world; graduates can’t present their music, and they don’t know how to engage or put themselves forward.”

“More responsibility is being placed on the artist to involve themselves in the commerce and business of music. This is dangerous because artists are often not good at this. They don’t know where to learn it, and it takes away from their time making art.”

There is a need for education and mentoring for professionals and adults in the areas of personal economics, band management, accessing presenter and touring networks, and finding work as a sideman. Training and accessible hands-on knowledge in the areas of accounting, debt, insurance, taxes and investing is necessary. This applies to managing a band and its functions as well as personal finance. Internship opportunities where artists can be paid or earn credit to learn about the business of music should be more common. These issues are particularly pressing as most students graduate with significant debt that can take a lifetime to repay.

“Economics are a key issue for young musicians and there are not enough training programs around personal economics. Most musicians have an utter lack of understanding about money.”

Deep and fulfilling mentorship opportunities are proving more difficult to find. A generation of great artists, who made it a standard part of their professions to bring young musicians under their wing, has been lost. The field is now less cohesive and definitions of jazz have become broader making direct lines between mentor and mentee more opaque. Mentoring is critical for professional development as the practices of touring, professional advancement and networking are not standardized. The relationship with the older more seasoned artist is critical for this information to be distributed. The expertise of seasoned professionals should be captured and centralized.

“I know that I know how to do my job. But I don’t know if I could pass on the knowledge in a workshop setting. It’s showing or teaching by example - letting someone shadow you over a long period.”

“I don’t know if I could teach what I do, but it would be great if someone else could write it down.”

Hopes for the Future

Despite the focus on the grim struggles of the jazz practitioner, the field remains committed to a healthy and vibrant future. Aspirations and goals include shared core values that some do feel when they have triumphs: producing a sold-out show, turning a young person onto a living jazz artist, conducting a successful tour, receiving a commissioning grant, getting a radio interview, or composing a new work. That these successes continue to occur are a testament to the vibrancy of the form and the tenacity of the field. These occurrences would take place more frequently in a world where the following vision was the norm:

- Artists have health insurance and a retirement plan and are well paid and valued for what they do. The jazz artist can say: “I own my own home; I have health insurance; I am paid well and receive all of the royalties that I deserve.”
- Jazz venues are more numerous and events in these venues are highly attended and jazz venues are ideal listening environments.

- The public is interested in the form and can find information about events, artists and community engagement easily in the media and through community networks.
- There is plenty of money for education, development of new work, touring, presenting, marketing, professional development and distribution. Accessing these resources is transparent and easy.
- The form continues to evolve and new genres are incorporated openly into the idiom.
- Experimentation and innovation are rewarded and valued.
- The field is interconnected, information is shared openly and resources are shared.
- Conferences and meeting opportunities are abundant and valuable.
- All young players and composers have mentor relationships that connect them to the history of the music and provide them with guidance on how to succeed.
- Emerging leaders' voices are valued and encouraged, their participation is expected.
- Jazz is a standard part of all public school education, and young people listen frequently to historical jazz legends and living artists.
- Jazz artists have an expected and valued role in all schools.

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