

William Paterson University

40 Years of Trailblazing Jazz Education

In late 1979, the last thing on Rufus Reid's mind was teaching. The bassist, who had just joined up with tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, was dedicated to furthering himself as a musician. But Reid, who eventually became the artistic director of William Paterson University's jazz studies program for 20 years, saw extraordinary connections developing in the small state college in Wayne, N.J. A 20-minute drive from New York City, tucked away near a 1,200-acre nature preserve, this was a place where musicians came to study closely with working professionals.

Reid first learned about the little-known offshoot of the music department from Thad Jones, the program's inaugural artistic director. Jones helped usher the jazz studies concentration into existence in 1972, serving for seven years as the face of William Paterson jazz. Reid, who had then been the bassist in the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, would occasionally take the short drive to New Jersey to play in a small group for the students. One day in the fall of 1979, while freshmen were still getting acquainted with unfamiliar surroundings, Martin Krivin, who ran the jazz courses in tandem with Jones, phoned Reid with a different request. Jones had vanished, and it didn't look like he was coming back.

"Thad went to Europe and didn't tell anybody," says Reid, who remembers being skeptical when Krivin asked him to come out to New Jersey. "I was a little reticent, but I did go out, and he was quite persuasive in his own mild-mannered way."

Reid helped Krivin establish a proper curriculum and institute performance standards. The two began hiring more professional musicians as teachers and turned William Paterson's jazz courses into some of the most recognizable educational opportunities in jazz. Within five years, Reid says, William Paterson had become a known commodity in the jazz world.

"Marty was really trying to get this to work," Reid recalls, adding that Krivin was really the driving force of William Paterson jazz. "He had visions. He said, 'I want this program to be a direct conduit to the marketplace.' And he said, 'I want it to be different than any of the other schools because we're right here in New York.'"

Krivin, who handed over the reins to current coordinator David Demsey in 1992, died last fall. Pianist Mulgrew Miller, the current artistic director, has been at the school since 2005.

This year marks the 40th school year of William Paterson's jazz offerings, which started out as a simple track to a bachelor of arts degree and have evolved into a full-fledged bachelor of music major pursued by an average of 60 undergraduates. Twenty graduate students make up the rest of William Paterson's typical class. The jazz studies offerings have become so popular that every year they turn 100 applicants away, Reid says.

The curriculum is based on 24 small groups ranging from trios to septets, an effort to contrast offerings of the typical big-band-driven jazz program. Professors do, however, organize an 18-piece jazz orchestra and a 24-member Latin jazz band. Everything from the ensemble classes to the year-end playing tests—unlike typical jury situations, students perform tests as leaders of small, faculty-populated combos—is designed to prepare students for real-world situations. Students can pursue jazz studies degrees in performance, music management, sound engineering, music education and classical performance. And, of course, the music of New York City is just a short drive away.

"For a lot of students, it's a way to get their feet wet in New York without living right in Midtown Manhattan or Brooklyn," Demsey says. "It's a good way for them to make that transition."

The department also boasts the Living Jazz Archives, which includes the manuscripts and papers of Jones, Clark Terry and former direc-

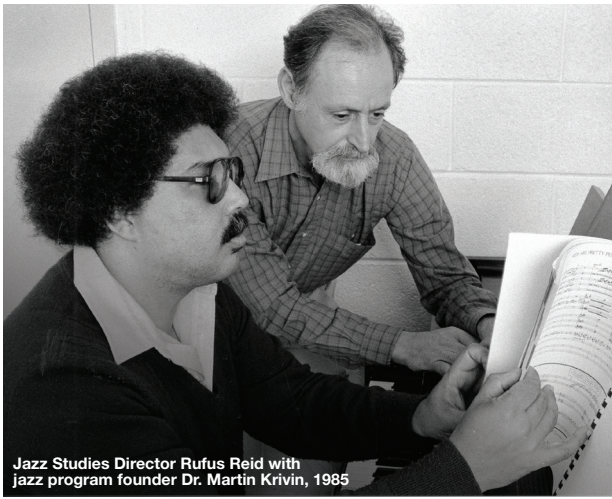
tor James Williams. Terry has become a centerpiece of the jazz studies concentration, and when the trumpeter donated his materials to the school in 2004, officials announced a \$15 million fundraising campaign for the Clark Terry Recital Hall. Though the hall hasn't yet come to fruition, it's still in the cards.

In the early 1970s, tapping a professional musician like Jones to spearhead an academic offering was a big risk, Demsey says. Nobody had done it before, but it was this close association with artists working in the field that gave students a new approach to their studies.

"When you're in touch with people like Clark and Mulgrew, they're speaking in the present tense. For Clark, Monk just stepped around the corner," he says. "Not that we're trying to teach students to live in the '50s, but having a foundation in that music is so important to making music new and fresh in 2012."

All the current professors are still active in their fields, and while playing gigs in New York City at night is relatively easy, teachers must occasionally find substitutes if they'll be out on long tours. Harold Mabern, who has been teaching piano at the school for 30 years, even started a musical relationship with a former student, anchoring saxophonist Eric Alexander's quintet. By still maintaining a performance schedule, Miller says that teachers at William Paterson are providing a missing link in jazz education. There are no longer any bandleaders to give musicians on-the-job training, so universities must serve as the new training ground.

Even though Miller and other professors keep a busy performance schedule, he is still responsible for a full teaching load of classes



Jazz Studies Director Rufus Reid with jazz program founder Dr. Martin Krivin, 1985



Paterson State College Jazz Ensemble, late 1960s



Adjunct Professor Clark Terry with the William Paterson Jazz Orchestra, 2005



Former Jazz Studies Program Director James Williams (left) with Pat Metheny



William Paterson student septet performing as opening group on the Jazz Room Series

and is very much a presence on campus. None of the professors teach by proxy, and they all try to strike a healthy balance between teaching and performing.

In the years since its establishment, the William Paterson ideal has spread to other schools through its graduates. Carl Allen, artistic director of jazz studies at The Juilliard School, graduated from William Paterson in 1982 after transferring in for his final two years. He says he looked to his experiences at the school as a model of how to run a jazz degree offering.

“My approach to that and my vision of the program [at Juilliard], a lot of that was rooted in the things I witnessed there at William Paterson with Rufus and Martin,” Allen says.

The William Paterson strategy is still somewhat untouched, however. Allen says that while traveling around the country, he sees professors still teaching students in a historical manner. The instructors have become full-time teachers and aren’t out there in the thick of club gigs. In addition to not being a true part of the scene, Allen says this approach makes the teachers not as relatable to their students.

“Quite often, at that age, [students] are not able to appreciate one’s experience. They tend to gravitate only toward the people who are currently out there,” he says. “At William Paterson, they have people who are still out there playing.”

Drummer Joseph Farnsworth, who graduated from William Paterson in 1990, saw the college as a perfect place to dedicate himself to playing jazz. When he first got to the university, practice rooms were open 24–7; soon, due to the competitive nature of the music school, students started practicing all day, sleeping in the rooms and getting up to practice in the morning. The soporific nightlife in suburban New Jersey lent itself to constant practicing, as did the level of musicianship at the college, he remembers.

“There were no distractions,” he says. “There was just nothing to do but practice.” When school officials started closing the practice rooms at night, Farnsworth says, students would pile into cars and head for the Village Vanguard and other clubs in New York City, soaking up the music until early in the morning.

Farnsworth first heard about William Paterson University’s jazz offerings from an interview saxophonist Bill Evans gave to *DownBeat* in 1985. In fact, the testimony of former students is how a lot of people started learning about the program. Allen used to get emails from students who wanted to know about his education. Reid says word about the school quickly spread after the university’s small groups started winning competitions.

As the prestige of the jazz studies concentration increased, so did the level of musician-

ship. Vincent Herring has been teaching saxophone at the school for half a dozen years. Like many of the other professors, he wasn’t looking to move into the pedagogical side of jazz, but when Miller called him and asked if he was interested in teaching, Herring decided to give it a try. To his surprise, he enjoyed learning from the students even as they learned from him. A number of his students, he says, even came to him with so much polish that they could be sent in as subs on gigs.

“I started almost feeling like that was the norm,” Herring says, “and as I’ve done clinics and workshops around the country, I’ve realized it is not.”

Getting students to that top level of professionalism is important. For a young Herring, saxophonist Phil Woods helped him realize what needed to be done to truly make it as a musician. So Herring teaches his students all the normal things learned in music school, but he also imparts to them what it takes to really make it in jazz.

“Since I’ve come on board, the number of musicians that potentially are going to be amazing players is high, but at the same time, I also helped people realize that this is not what they were going to be doing for a living and to find their way into other things,” he says. “And I think that’s just as important.” —*Jon Ross*