GVSU Faculty Jazz Trio

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GVSU Faculty Jazz Trio
Fall Jazz Concert, 2001

Jazz studies has a long history at Grand Valley, dating back over twenty years. When I was hired to head the program, our vision was to develop a place in the curriculum that would give music majors an opportunity to perform in small and large jazz ensembles, to take private lessons, and to pursue jazz-related course offerings. Eventually, I hoped we could establish a jazz degree of some kind. The possibilities seem even larger now than ever before. Our small ensembles have performed all over West Michigan at university and non-university events. Along with our many on-campus performances, our big band has performed at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, the Aquinas Jazz Festival, and The BOB (live broadcasts on WGVU). We also play at local high schools and have been the featured guest band at high school festivals.

Kurt Ellenberger is an assistant professor in the Department of Music and Director of Jazz Studies.
Our students have won many awards including: Best Trombone Section, Best Trombone Soloist in a Big Band, Best Trombone in a combo, Best Piano Accompanist, Best Piano Soloist, and Best Lead Trumpet.

The establishment of a GVSU Faculty Jazz Trio (now a quartet) has been a goal of mine since I arrived in 1999. A strong faculty rhythm section is the core of any serious jazz program. It must be formed with care and over a period of years so that a coherent musical direction can be established and nurtured.

I first met Dave Spring in October of 1999 when we performed a duo recital together at Central Michigan University. I had an immediate musical and personal rapport with Dave. He is one of the only bassists I have played with in a duo setting who makes me forget that we don’t have a drummer—not an easy task! He is a performer of the highest caliber who brings tremendous enthusiasm, musicianship, and integrity to everything he does.

Dave started teaching at GVSU in 2000, and now heads the small ensemble program, which has grown from one to four groups under his leadership.

The next step was to find a drummer, and we were fortunate to have Derico Watson join us in 2001. Derico is one of the most versatile drummers I have ever worked with. His rhythmic sense is “fluid,” always moving forward without speeding up; playing with Derico is like riding the crest of a wave that never spirals into itself.

The “jazz scene” in West Michigan is really very good. In my three years here at GVSU, I’ve seen exciting performances by jazz musicians with international reputations including Joey Calderazzo (in his first US solo concert at GVSU no less), Dave Friesen, Uwe Kropinski, Kenny Wheeler, Don Thompson, TS Monk Jr., Oliver Jones, Fred Hersch, and others. I am proud to say that many of these great musicians have performed as our guests here in the Louis Armstrong Theatre and the Sherman Van Solkema Recital Hall.

These players have done tremendous things for our program. Students do not often have the opportunity to hear their heroes perform live, much less in such intimate settings as are found in our Performing Arts Centre. Contact with players of national and international reputation gives our students an immediate burst of creative energy. They get to see and hear these great musicians, and then they get to meet them and talk to them as well. As an ensemble director, I can hear the difference at our next rehearsal—they have absorbed some of the energy, some of the “vibe,” some of the almost maniacal commitment demonstrated by these players.

Indeed, the special guests on the recording that you’ll find in this issue of the Grand Valley Review did all these things— they performed on campus, at several local high schools, and gave clinics at high schools, universities, and Daniel Jordan even gave a lecture recital to about 200 grade school children on jazz and poetry in Harlem in the ’20s. These events all culminated in the concert recorded live in the Louis Armstrong Theatre.

Daniel Jordan and Bob Fazecash were invited because they are artists of the highest caliber who represent the finest in the art of jazz, as is evidenced on the CD. It is live and unedited (we had to cut one piece due to time constraints); it was recorded direct to DAT on two tracks made from mikes hanging high above the band. Thus, the sound is a bit raw in comparison to studio recordings, but that suits me just fine.

Jazz lives off of the tension between past, present, and immediate future, and another way, in a way that gives the thrill, and to emulate him now, to imitate him today, to imitate him tomorrow, is music made into music, and this music is also rests on a literal foundation.

As guest artists, the trio by bringing new personalities in the musical mix; honest and imaginative, which is what allows time to go and let them play them. Regardless, you have to play as being something else. That’s a not-so-secret at what level you’re playing. Whether you’re a professional, you still have to play a melody and a sense of demands to make one make.

The jazz studies over the last three years, I am sure we have to look forward to.
Jazz lives or dies depending on its sense of urgency and immediacy. If the performer is not "on the edge," then this sense is lost and the music suffers. To say it another way, if the performer "plays it safe," then the music will likely sound uninspired and flat. It's the sense of watching the artist on the "highwire without a net" that gives the music some of its power to move, to thrill, and to enthrall. That's why a recording of Louis Armstrong from fifty years ago still sounds exciting and relevant today, while a recording of someone trying to imitate him made last week sounds stale and boring. It is music made in the moment, which, strangely enough, also rests on a lifetime of study and commitment as its foundation.

As guest artists, Fazecash and Jordan helped to propel the trio by bringing in new pieces, new arrangements, new personalities, all of which had to be accommodated in the musical melting pot. This input helps to keep it honest and immediate (sometimes frighteningly so!), which is what all art needs to tell its story. There is no time to go and learn the pieces on your own before you play them. Regardless of how difficult they may be, you have to play as best you can; as I tell my students: "You can't be something you're not, so don't bother trying." That's a not-so-subtle way of saying that, no matter what level you're at, it's always a work-in-progress. Whether you're a rank amateur, or a seasoned professional, you still have to walk on stage with nothing but a melody and a set of chord changes, and face anew the demands of making music extemporaneously.

The jazz studies program at GVSU has shown remarkable growth in a very short period of time. If the last three years are any indication of the future, then I am sure we have many years of interesting music to look forward to.

—KE

The Players

Derico Watson

Derico Watson is an internationally renowned and exceptionally versatile drummer who performs in a variety of musical settings including jazz, funk, rock, and gospel.

He has performed with James Brown, Spyro Gyra, Nelson Rangell, Earth, Wind and Fire, Victor Wooten, Bela Fleck, as well as local favorites, Hip Pocket. Watson is also a much-sought after studio player who is in great demand nationally and internationally. He just finished recording a CD with Victor, Reggie, and Joseph Wooten entitled W3W which will be released worldwide in 2002.
Dave Spring
Dave Spring has been playing acoustic and electric bass for over 25 years. He recently returned to his hometown of Grand Rapids, after living and working in New Orleans for many years. He has performed in a wide variety of musical settings and has performed with many of the world’s great jazz musicians including Dizzy Gillespie, Arturo Sandoval, Joe Williams, Teddy Wilson, Bill Watrous, Nat Adderley, and Sam Rivers. Before joining the GVSU faculty in 1999, Dave taught in the jazz programs at The Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp and Aquinas College. He is also an adjunct faculty member at the Grand Rapids Community College.

Daniel Jordan
Daniel Jordan (alto, tenor, and soprano saxophones, piccolo, flute, alto flute, and clarinet) studied music at North Texas State and taught music at Rollins College in Winter Park Florida and Valencia Community College in Orlando Florida. He is the creator of the nationally distributed educational video tape “A Journey Through Jazz.” Daniel is now active as teacher and an instrumentalist in the New York metro area. He currently is a featured soloist and principal woodwind with Natalie Cole. He has performed with a wide variety of artists including: Maynard Ferguson, Jimmy Smith, Woody Herman’s Thundering Herd, Sam Rivers, Mel Torme, and Sammy Davis Jr. Daniel can be heard on Maynard Ferguson’s “Storm” and “Live at the Great American Music Hall.” His latest recording “Mosaic of Anatolia” can be heard on Attila Records.

Bob Fazecash
Bob Fazecash is one of Detroit’s most versatile and sought-after trumpet players. He has performed as lead trumpet and/or jazz trumpet with Dizzy Gillespie, Thad Jones, Jon Faddis, Joe Williams, Ernie Wilkins, Earl Klugh and Marcus Belgrave among others. In addition to his jazz and show work, Fazecash has also performed in some of Detroit’s finest classical ensembles including principal trumpet positions with the Michigan Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra Detroit, and the Majestic Brass Quintet.

Kurt Ellenberger
Kurt Ellenberger began composing and performing as a teenager in his hometown of Windsor, Ontario. His first trio CD entitled “Songs From Far West” was received with great acclaim by critics in Canada, Europe, and the United States. They have been unanimous in their praise, calling it a “tour de force” and “an extraordinary CD,” as well as “one of the major surprises of 1999.” He has been hailed as “a gifted pianist who combines the lyricism of Bill Evans with the energy of Keith Jarrett in his playing.” Of his trio, critics have said that it is “as tight and cohesive as any working piano trio out there [including] the infamous Keith Jarrett and his all-star rhythm section.” He has performed with diverse artists such as Kenny Wheeler, Danny Gottlieb, Carl Allen, Dick Lowenthal, and Billy Eckstine, as well as symphony orchestras in Canada and the United States. He has been featured on CBC Radio (Canada) and NPR (USA) as both performer and composer. He is also an ASCAP award winning composer whose contemporary classical works include music for piano, voice, choir, orchestra, brass quintet, trumpet ensemble, brass choir, strings, and two concertos.

New Recordings
Jazz program director Kurt Ellenberger and David Spring (bassist and director of Small Ensembles) recorded a new CD in Orlando with Danny Gottlieb, the seminal drummer from the Pat Metheny Group. The CD also features Tim Froncek the director of jazz studies at Grand Rapids Community College (formerly with Woody Herman) and will be released in 2002. It is comprised largely of original compositions by Dave Spring as well as jazz standards.
Versatile and performed as Zoot Sims, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and others. In 1995, his album "Our West" was released, and it was unanimously in Canada, Europe, and the United States. It was an extraordinary success of 1999."

It also combines with Keith Jarrett and his trio out in the United States.

Bob Fazecash, trumpet
Daniel Jordan, saxophones
live at the
Louis Armstrong Theatre

Short Story
(Kenney Dorham)
More Delights
(Dave Spring)
Mark Time
(Kenny Wheeler)
Wahbnumkee
(Dave Spring)
Chick's Tune
(Chick Corea)
Three Short Trane
(Daniel Jordan)
Summer Night
(Warren Dubin)

Recorded live October 26, 2001
Kurt Ellenberger, piano
Dave Spring, bass
Derico Watson, drums
with special guests
Bob Fazecash, trumpet
Daniel Jordan, saxophones