



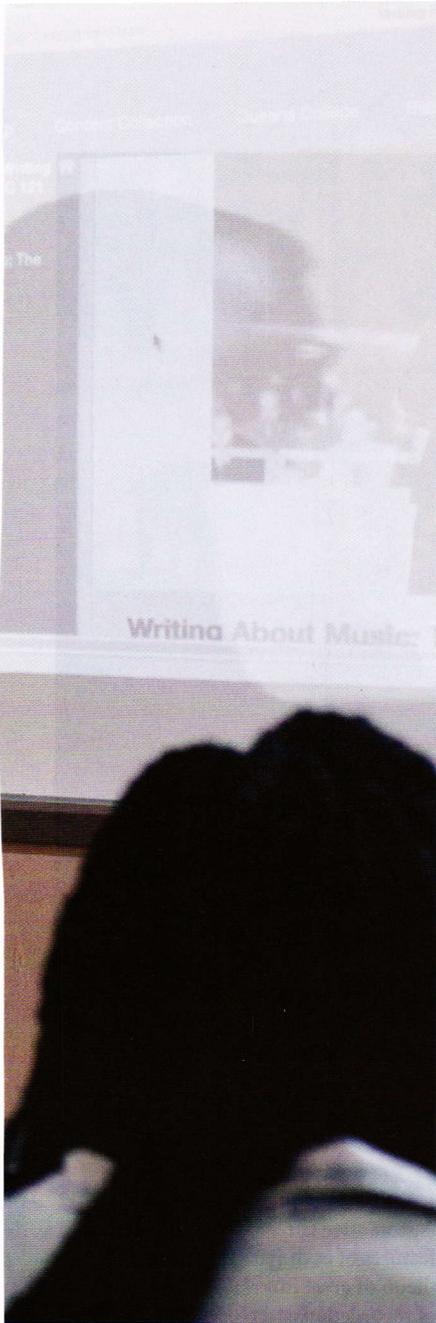
► At Queens College's Aaron Copland School of Music, *JT* contributor David R. Adler teaches an undergrad course called "Writing About Music: The History of Jazz"

**T**eaching jazz history can be overwhelming at first, and this article doesn't pretend to offer the definitive approach. It is simply my perspective, with input from others, focusing on nuts-and-bolts tasks as well as overarching goals and ideas. Assume that college freshmen or high school seniors are the intended audience.

The main challenge is that jazz history isn't a topic—it's a thousand topics. It is nothing less than the history of

American popular music. To teach it, one must be versed in a range of complex and often charged subjects, such as slavery and its aftermath, through the civil-rights era to the present; blackface minstrelsy and the origins of American musical theatre; the history of social dancing; the history of the recording industry and American broadcast media and film; the history and sociology of New Orleans; the impact of both World Wars, Prohibition, the Great Depression, the Cold War, the New Left and the counterculture; and the list goes on.

ALAN NAHIGIAN



# LEARNING TO LISTEN, LISTENING TO LEARN

A guide to crafting an effective  
jazz-history survey course

By David R. Adler

with groups of students who don't know jazz and aren't musically educated (with some likely exceptions).

On one level, you have to be ready to represent and advocate this misunderstood art form and examine—without rose-colored glasses—its role in American culture, then and now. Through you, students have a chance to discover the aesthetic marvel and historical and political import of jazz. It's a big deal. At the same time, you can't put jazz on such a pedestal that you isolate it from the wider world of music, closing off ways for students to draw connections.

In my classes I've had fans of metal, hip-hop and every kind of pop, and I'd be a fool not to help them see the jazz nexus in all of it. Don't belittle your students' musical tastes; you'll drive them away. Instead, meet them where they are and bring them in.

"What people don't get is that teaching isn't only about teaching," says Lewis Porter, pianist, author and longtime professor at Rutgers University–Newark. "You are in front of people who are strangers to each other and to you. And if you can't get their good will at the beginning, or if you generate ill will, you're

dead. You will have no success the whole semester. If you generate good will and get them talking to each other, soon you'll have students who say, 'You know, I don't feel like such a stranger in here anymore, and I can raise my hand.'"

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## WHEN FACED WITH THE GLUT OF INFORMATION

that is jazz history, it's essential to narrow it down. I erred in the other direction when I taught my first graduate survey course at Queens College's Aaron Copland School of Music (ACSM) in Flushing, N.Y. I had roughly 15 students, all performance or composition majors, fairly well versed in modern mainstream jazz but lacking in their knowledge of early jazz as well as the avant-garde. My job was to fill the gaps, but in my zeal I covered too much, and too quickly.

Soon I taught two larger freshman classes (up to 58 students). These were jazz history surveys as well, but much more introductory. Along with a diverse American contingent I had students from Egypt, Guyana, Iran and other countries. (Queens County, where the college is located, is often cited as the

Of course you've also got to know the music, but you can't just play it in class and expect students to gape in awe at its brilliance. Be prepared for the disheartening experience of sharing cherished works of art and getting a range of lukewarm or even hostile responses. To some students, the hippest Blue Note record will sound "like background music in a cigar lounge"—a direct quote from a recent undergrad class. But get past it, or better yet, use it and bounce off of it. Because you're not just teaching jazz, you're teaching listening. You'll need ingenuity to find a human connection

► At Rutgers back in 1998, Dr. Lewis Porter teaches students in the M.A. Program in Jazz History and Research



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— Lewis Porter, Rutgers

most ethnically diverse county in the U.S.) I still covered too much, but was better equipped to get students to connect to what they heard, and far more successful engaging the class in issues-based discussion. Some students zoned out; others gave feedback that I’ll never forget.

Currently at ACSM, I’m back to teaching my graduate survey course in addition to a new undergraduate course called “Writing About Music: The History of Jazz.” The latter has elements of basic jazz

appreciation plus a heavy writing component that demands a more thematic focus. There are four required essays, so I’ve created four units: the blues; improvisation; modernism and the avant-garde; and jazz and civil rights. These allow us to jump around in the chronology, touching on the importance of Armstrong and Ellington through Parker and Coltrane and more, but with a set of larger conceptual and writing goals in mind. My ideal survey course, always a work in progress, would combine aspects of these two approaches, chronological and thematic.

Whatever route one takes, I recommend “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” the influential 1991 essay by historian, author and pianist Scott DeVeaux (collected in Robert O’Meally’s anthology *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*). Exploring the origins of what DeVeaux calls “an official history of jazz,” the essay sheds light on how there came to be

“substantive agreement on the defining features of each [jazz] style, the pantheon of great innovators, and the canon of recorded masterpieces.” It’s a stark reminder that the official history, while useful in many respects, is manmade and open to revision. Keep that in mind as you plan.

“Jazz history, like any history, is written from a particular perspective,” says Alexander Gelfand, a freelance writer who studied ethnomusicology and has taught jazz and other music courses at St. John’s University, Skidmore College and Grinnell College. “Sometimes things appear to be written in stone and certain narratives take root, but they can be questionable. Even presenting jazz as a succession of styles that implicitly represents some kind of progress in terms of sophistication can be problematic when you go back and listen to the early stuff. A teleological approach to jazz history

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— Alexander Gelfand,  
freelance writer and educator

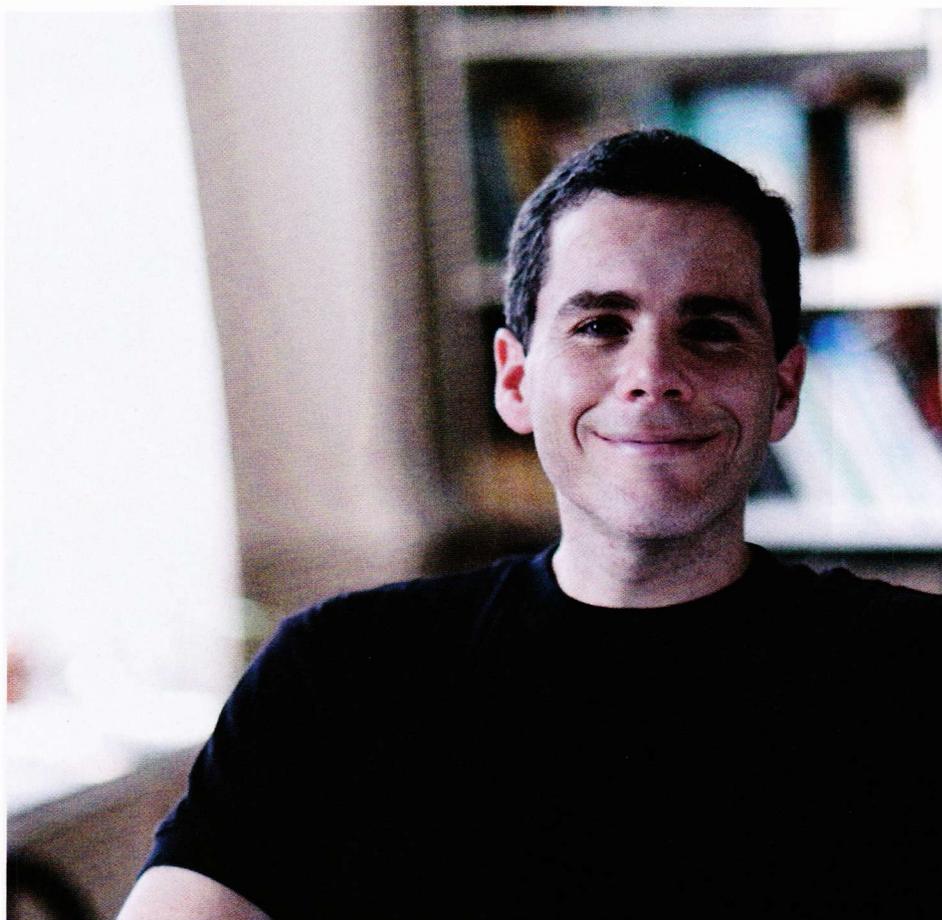
was written into a lot of jazz texts, and it’s something you can seriously dispute. It’s good to ask students, ‘Do you think this presentation of the way in which the music progressed or evolved is fair, or does it make sense given what you just heard?’ I think students respond to that. They like to question things.”

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#### IN KEEPING TIME, ROBERT WALSER’S ANTHOLOGY

of jazz readings, one can find the syllabus for Marshall Stearns’ 1950 course “Perspectives in Jazz” at New York University, a breakthrough attempt at codifying jazz history. Stearns wasn’t necessarily the first, as Walser notes: Jazz-history pedagogy in some form stretches back to the late 1930s, if not earlier, so the idea of jazz’s arrival as a “legitimate” subject of study only recently is not fully accurate.

Today, a number of textbooks parse the “official history” in different ways. One of the newest is *Jazz* by Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins, first published by Norton in 2009. It’s the book I’ve used the most, in both its full-length and abridged versions. The prose is clearly a cut above and the musical choices are strong, though I substitute my own audio just as often and usually depart from the textbook altogether during class time. It’s there for background and a general narrative framework and can be drawn from as needed. I’ve assigned short written responses to different sections in the book to generate discussion and ensure the reading’s being done. (For my undergrad writing class, I assign specific readings from *Keeping Time*.)



*Jazz* opens with two chapters on music terminology, instrumentation and form; I recommend them to students but don’t discuss them. I’ve found a quicker way to introduce the elements of the jazz ensemble, by projecting onscreen the cover of *Meet the Jazztet* by Art Farmer and Benny Golson. In the photo I identify the frontline and the rhythm section, naming each player and adding brief background on the band even if that’s not the main point.

Another introductory exercise I’ve used is the century-wide span. I play an early Kid Ory track back-to-back with a new Steve Coleman track, for instance, and ask students for a quick comparative analysis. The goal is to illustrate the changes that jazz has undergone in a relatively short time, and to prompt discussion of what makes all of it “jazz.”

From there it’s on to basic vocabulary. I like to use Herbie Hancock’s “One

Finger Snap” from *Emyrean Isles*, one of the most immediately gripping performances I know. I show them the chart for the tune and explain the terms “form,” “bars,” “chorus,” “changes,” “time” and so on. I point out the walking bassline, the ride cymbal pattern, the comping of the piano. After this they are ready to comprehend such things as the 12-bar blues.

Counting bars and such might be too technical for a few students, but most will grasp it on the level of a listening experience and understand why it matters. “I see my primary objective these days as teaching students how to listen, period,” says trombonist and Hunter College professor Ryan Keberle. To students who’ve argued that technical matters “take the fun out of listening,” Keberle responds, “Man, you could not be more wrong. The deeper you start to understand and really *feel* this stuff—these are physical sensations, especially



**“PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED WHEN THEY SEE MY SURVEY COURSES—I LEAVE OUT ALMOST EVERYBODY. THAT’S THE ONLY SOLUTION.”**

— Phil Schaap, Jazz at Lincoln Center

when you’re talking about rhythm and resonances of harmony—you’re talking about levels of enjoyment in listening that you haven’t experienced. You have no idea how much more there is, and this is how you get there.”

That is why in my classes we begin the chronology—from plantation music to blues, ragtime and onward—only after the essential listening tools are in hand. But how does one fit decades of stylistic and cultural change into a one-semester class? “You have to take everything out,” says Phil Schaap, preeminent jazz historian and broadcaster and the head of Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Swing University.

“People are surprised when they see my survey courses—I leave out almost everybody. That’s the only solution.” Currently at work on his own definitive textbook, Schaap narrates his in-class approach over the phone as if he’s playing a jazz solo, and it all stems from this insight: “[You] don’t have to have many names, and you could eliminate all of them.”

Schaap is not suggesting the names are unimportant. Of course the great figures, the Armstrongs and Ellingtons, will appear one way or another as elements in a story that students can follow. “You could just say that the real secret of jazz studies is that it’s one of many African-Western

European hybrids in the New World, a musical one,” Schaap continues, laying out a quick and elegant précis from New Orleans style to orchestral, from swing to bebop, from free jazz to fusion, tracing the economic peaks and valleys as he goes. “Then you point out what the storyline is of today’s scene and you’re done,” he declares. “It can be done in a semester. I’ve been doing it for 40 years.”

But for Schaap, as for Keberle, “the real assignment is listening.” All the stylistic description and sociopolitical context “will have less meaning as a jazz course if it’s not supplemented with the music that travels along with the storyline,” Schaap insists. And central to listening, for Schaap, is song form, which he calls “the linchpin for the layperson. ... Within a couple of classes, if they understand song form then all of a sudden listening to jazz makes sense.”

#### ALONG WITH THE CANONICAL MUSIC WE

cover in my writing class, I make a point of sharing jazz that is happening right now. It’s essential for students to see that young people—ethnically diverse, male and female, with wide-ranging influences—are doing great things with this music. When I play video of bands like Kendrick Scott’s Oracle, Linda Oh’s Sun Pictures or Melissa Aldana’s Crash Trio for writing exercises, the response is palpably enthusiastic. I also require students to attend jazz concerts (easily done in New York), and I make the art of the performance review a key focus.

There’s been much discussion lately

about antagonism between students and professors over trigger warnings, political correctness and the like. Those issues are real, and I have my opinions, but my classes have been pretty smooth on that score. I'm a liberal Jewish professor teaching what is essentially a branch of African-American studies, and I've found that being myself, using common sense and establishing trust is all that's needed. I don't self-censor: I show racist and anti-Semitic images onscreen; I quote foul language; I talk gender, sexuality and drug addiction. I haven't run into problems.

When it came time last semester to discuss "Strange Fruit," "Fables of Faubus" and other jazz protest songs, the Walter Scott video had just been released and Baltimore was about to erupt over the Freddie Gray case. The #BlackLivesMatter campaign was gaining ground, and we naturally found ourselves examining current events through the prism of Mingus, Max

Roach and others. When the massacre in Charleston occurred just weeks after the end of class, I couldn't stop thinking of my students and the way they'd connected with "Alabama," John Coltrane's ode to victims of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963. The police-related deaths we were discussing seemed bad enough; we didn't know how much worse it would get.

Queens College, part of the CUNY system, is a public commuter school right off the Long Island Expressway, a 15-minute bus ride from the last stop on the 7 train. The students aren't rich kids; they have jobs, they help support their families. Some will drive you crazy, but given the pressures, many put in a good effort. It's critical to know your student population on that level and find an approach that will challenge them but not needlessly overtax them.

I always note that Queens is the resting place of Louis Armstrong, Scott Joplin, James P. Johnson and more. Bix

Beiderbecke died here; Cecil Taylor was raised here. The Louis Armstrong Archives, run by archivist and super-hero-blogger Ricky Riccardi, are right on campus, and the Louis Armstrong House Museum is a few exits away in Corona. I've lost count of how many extraordinary Armstrong guest lectures Ricky has done in my classes. We've never missed a semester, and now he's launching his own Armstrong course at ACSM this fall. I've been fortunate enough to lure many other guests, in person or via Skype, including musicians Ethan Iverson, Michael Blake, Dan Tepfer, Ben Waltzer, Brian Carpenter, Matt Munisteri, Alexis Cuadrado and Todd Marcus; writers Nate Chinen, Ashley Kahn, Marc Myers and Lara Pellegrinelli; and conductor/scholars Randall Keith Horton and Maurice Peress. The range of perspectives and the sheer commitment to music they have displayed is an inspiration to students, and I can't be thankful enough. **JT**

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