



Jamey Aebersold (center) with veteran jazz educators who have taught at his camp, including JB Dyas (left), David Baker, Rufus Reid and Dan Haerle.

AEBERSOLD: A JAZZ ICON'S JOURNEY

By JB Dyas, Ph.D.

Jamey Aebersold is an enigma. A jazz musician and educator of the first order—having produced 133 play-along recordings while overseeing the preeminent summer jazz camp for decades—he still runs havoc on the basketball court. He is also a staunch political activist, especially regarding the issues of smoking and gun control. And he's funny, in *The Far Side* kind of way.

Moreover, Aebersold is a true philanthropist, having donated myriad jazz education materials to needy schools around the world. He has sponsored scholarships for deserving music students, and made a sizable contribution to the University of Louisville, home to the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program.

Over the past 50 years, this passionate jazz education icon has reached hundreds of thou-

sands of students of all ages worldwide, transforming the way America's indigenous art form is taught and learned. His highly respected and widely imitated Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops (SJW) originally grew out of the Stan Kenton Band Clinics—under the auspices of the National Stage Band Camp—of the 1960s and '70s. Fully appreciating that the Kenton camps were mainly focused on big band ensemble playing with only a few students improvising, Aebersold began his *combo* camps in the early 1970s, in which *all* students learned to improvise. Since then his world-renowned mantra, "Anyone Can Improvise," has been the bedrock of his teaching philosophy.

Aebersold is also one of jazz's most underrated *players*. He is a superlative alto saxophonist with a beautiful sound, virtuosic technique,

creative and fluent ideas, and his own unique voice. He knows his way around piano, bass and tenor banjo as well.

This year's Summer Jazz Workshops will be held at the University of Louisville July 3–8 and July 10–15, with separate bass, drums and guitar primers July 2–3 and July 9–10. Aebersold also will present his annual two-day seminar, *Anyone Can Improvise*, July 2–3.

We caught up with Aebersold to find out what makes this multitalented musician, educator and NEA Jazz Master tick.

What is it about basketball that stirs such a passion in you? Even in your mid-70s, you are still able to hit 53 consecutive free throws and 26 three-pointers in a row.

It's similar to playing jazz in that there's that challenge every time you shoot the ball and every time you play your instrument. You want it to resonate and fill the expectation you have in your mind. A missed note or articulation can equal a missed basket. A poor solo can equal a bad basketball game in general.

How did your life in jazz education get its start?

While in college [at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana], I was quick to tell anyone who would listen that I wasn't going to be an

educator. My reasoning was: In order to teach, you had to be a really good player, and many of the [music] education majors that I heard practicing in East Hall didn't sound very good to me. But one spring day in the music school parking lot, Gene Montooth, who played tenor [saxophone] and oboe, approached me with the proposition of my teaching private students in Seymour, Indiana, at Johnny Ottee's music store on Saturdays. He had landed a school job and could no longer teach privately.

I stood there in the parking lot thinking about how many times I had told others that "I'll never teach" and wondered if giving private lessons was really teaching. I decided it wasn't and took the offer. Every Saturday I'd drive to Seymour and give 30-minute lessons on flute, clarinet and saxophone. I made about \$2 per lesson and a good day would net \$20. This was 1961.

While teaching a promising flute student, I asked her to improvise over a D minor scale while I accompanied her on piano. She began playing and I instantly could hear she was playing what she heard in her mind. No guessing. Her phrasing was normal and her note choices were the result of what she was hearing in her head. I was amazed. I thought you had to have a big stack of records, drink coffee and be grumpy in order to play jazz. So, that was the beginning of my thinking that maybe everyone could improvise if they were encouraged and given some advance information such as what scale to play and for how long. That was the beginning of "Anyone Can Improvise," which has been my motto since that day in Seymour.

After graduating from IU with a master's in saxophone, I moved back to New Albany with my wife, Sara, and we moved into an apartment across the street from my family's Aebersold Florist. I worked at the florist from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., when I would begin giving private lessons in the apartment basement. I worked jobs on sax and bass in the evenings and eventually landed a six-night-a-week job playing bass at Stouffer's Hotel in Louisville with piano, then piano and drums.

In my basement I gave lessons on clarinet, flute and sax and eventually began helping anyone who was interested in jazz with jazz lessons. This gradually moved into my having jazz combos meet after school and on Saturdays. I was on my way learning how to teach jazz to all the instruments. This led to my publishing the Volume 1 book-and-LP of *A New Approach to Jazz Improvisation* in 1967. My students used it, and I could hear them progressing and learning the jazz language. At the time, I also loaned many jazz LPs to these students to listen to at home, which helped them *hear* the music of the pros. I quickly found their listening at home during the week was extremely important to their jazz foundation.

How did you get the idea for the Summer Jazz Workshops?

In the early '60s, I had gotten a scholarship to attend the weeklong National Stage Band Camp held at IU. It changed my life. I got to hang with the pros, and in 1965 I was asked to join the faculty, teaching four hours a day rehearsing sax sectionals. I did this for about six years in the summer, traveling around the country with the camps.

This was a lot different than teaching in my basement, where I'd see the students once a week, all year. The camps were only for five days and I had to distill my ideas each day in order to help them progress in such a short period of time.

I quickly realized that students were basically playing by ear and many hadn't spent much time listening to jazz on recordings. I started a listening class after dinner once or twice a week and introduced many jazz masters to these students. I also started a combo after dinner made up of the stronger students.

In 1972 I encouraged Ken Morris, who ran the National Stage Band Camps, to try a summer *combo* camp. It was so successful that after several years, he decided to do only combo camps. This was something that hadn't been done before. Everything had been big band-oriented, and there was very little emphasis on individual soloing. With the advent of the combo camps in the early '70s, the need to emphasize scales, chords, listening and methodical practicing was introduced to the world of jazz education. We did them [under the auspices of the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops] all through the '80s and into the '90s. Ken retired in 1992 when I took over [running] the combo camps.

Myself, David Baker, Dan Haerle and Jerry

Coker were at the forefront of these new combo jazz camps. Their popularity grew and grew, and we added faculty to where we had 70 teachers and 15 staff. I just completed my 50th year of doing jazz camps this past summer. In addition to the U.S., we have presented them in Canada, Germany, Scotland, New Zealand, England, Australia and Denmark.

Our jazz camps have always welcomed young and old, playing all instruments. We've had everything from harp to tuba to harmonica enroll. We've had people come 25 years *in a row*, which is really a testament to the kind of camp we run.

Describe some of your teaching methods.

I was one of the first to give combo students transposed parts and pass out sheets with scales, patterns, exercises, etc., including perhaps the first comprehensive jazz scale syllabus. When running a combo, I was always walking around the group correcting chords being played on guitar or piano, putting people back on track when they would get lost, offering various suggestions *while* they were playing.

I encourage combo instructors to do that at my jazz camps, too. Some faculty can be hesitant about offering criticism while the students are actually playing, but I have found it's the only way to make the band tighter and sound more professional and to impart information that can help their solos. When the tune ends, they probably can't recall what they played, so making suggestions *at the time* is valuable.

At my camps I love to have several extra faculty who will float from combo to combo, helping the groups sound better. Sometimes there

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may be three faculty members in a combo room all helping different students while they play a song. They may stay for 20 minutes or for the entire combo rehearsal.

I always suggest combo faculty assign a song or two for the next rehearsal. It helps to be able to look at a new tune before playing it. Even silently fingering through the melody and chord/scales can be helpful.

Also, at the beginning of the week, you may limit the number of choruses per person or the song could go on forever. After the first several rehearsals I encourage lengthening each person's solo and remind them they are taking the listeners' ears on a musical journey. So, be in control of your solos and don't just let your fingers go flying and not be connected to your mind.

The SJW is mostly focused on bebop language and swinging in the improvisation classes and combos. Why is this?

If you can play bebop well, you'll most likely be able to play in various jazz environments. Bebop is the foundation. In the more advanced combos at my camps, they may work on more contemporary songs and arrangements. Overall, our goal is getting students to swing, play the changes, keep their place and play what they hear in their head. And have fun in a group experience.

You are also well known for publishing jazz play-along books/recordings. How did that begin?

I found that the basis for jazz is scales and chords. Those two elements are the foundation to music and to the music we sing in our mind. We add articulation, rhythms, dynamics, phrasing and more, but it becomes individualized as we express ourselves musically. My "Play-a-Long" series of books and CDs offer the opportunity to practice the fundamentals and to learn to improvise at home with a professional rhythm section.

I published my first jazz play-along in 1967, and the [accompanying] booklet included concert [key] chords for each track. Subsequent printings added transposed chord symbols [for B-flat and E-flat instruments] and, eventually, I added the needed transposed scales and chords for each track. This was part of the evolution of jazz education—coupling the eye with the ear. Some felt this wasn't the way to do it. They felt I was giving the student *too much* and was too eye-oriented instead of letting the student use their ear. I got tired of hearing so many poor solos where the students were searching with their ear to find right notes and phrases. By my giving them the needed scales, they could see the sound that was being played in the rhythm section on the CD or in their combo. Using eyes

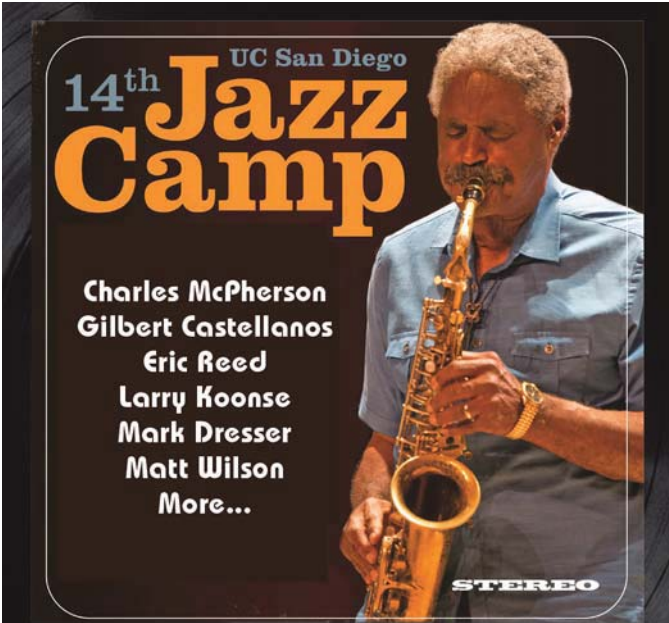
and ears proved to be a big stepping-stone for jazz education. I also began printing out pages and pages of basic information and giving it to the students at the camps. This eventually ended up being my red *Jazz Handbook*, which is used all over the world.

At my Summer Jazz Workshop [evening faculty concerts], I instituted putting the songs on an overhead projector with the screen on the side of the stage so the students in the audience could see the melody and harmony to the songs that the faculty was playing. We still do this.

Some artists criticize jazz education, saying that jazz cannot be taught. What is your response to that?

My first thought is they just haven't been teaching jazz and don't understand human potential. The teacher is the guide. They take what's there and try to mold it into something original, on the spot, that hasn't been played before. And the "on the spotness" can be at a very elemental level. We don't all move at the same speed. Who dares to say someone isn't talented when they can't see 20 years down the student's row? DB

Dr. JB Dyas has been a member of the bass faculty of the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops for the past three decades. He currently serves as Vice President for Education and Curriculum Development at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.



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