

What Now?

To go (to school) or not to go, that is the question...

by J.B. Dyas



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You have been teaching a very talented young person(s) for several years. The parents want the student to go to a university school of music to earn a bachelor's degree. The student, however, wants to study privately with a well-known teacher, begin entering competitions, go on the road with a band, or attempt to launch a concert career. Or perhaps the student does want to go to college but for any number of reasons simply is not "ready." Sound familiar? This time of year (around graduation), high school band directors, college professors, and private lesson teachers are often faced with the proverbial "what do I do now" question.

Music education is a life long pursuit, a career in itself. Music school, although important and felicitous, is only one of many didactic settings the serious music student needs to experience to be a well-rounded, thoroughly literate musician. Formal music education is certainly not merely a means to an end, but rather part of a greater whole. Indeed, the study of music

takes place in many different arenas--the classroom, private lesson studio, ensemble rehearsal hall, as well as the competition stage, concert hall, recording studio, night club, "road," and especially one's own practice and listening room. Generally speaking, young performers are ready (technically, musically, intellectually, and emotionally) to encounter these various environments at different times, depending on the individual.

As a music professor at Miami Dade Community College and Director of Jazz Studies at New World School of the Arts (Miami's award winning performing and visual arts high school), I am faced with the "what do I do now" question annually by our graduating class. In most cases, a select university school of music is the answer, but not always. Several points should be considered, primarily the particular student's abilities, discipline, personal desires, and other opportunities.

Any student entering a university school of music should possess the technical facility to be successful. The last thing a new student needs is to have to play "catch up" from the first day. If his/her technical proficiency is not intact, a year of intense practice and listening (without the hectic schedule of high school life) may be the best recommendation. In addition, enrollment part time at the local community college in such support courses as ensembles, theory and ear training, jazz improvisation, piano class, and computers, can be ideal for a one (or two) year interim between high school and university. Not having the burden of a full time class schedule, coupled with living at home another year, leaves a healthy portion of time available for formidable technical and musical growth.

The student who is technically ready for music school, even an uncommonly talented performer, may not have the maturity, discipline, nor sense of responsibility to be efficacious with a university school of music, full time course load. This student, too, should consider community college

for a stint to improve study, practice, and attendance habits.

Other students may not be well-suited for more formal education upon high school graduation even though they might, in fact, possess all the necessary technical and academic skills to be successful. Their *desire* for higher education may be lacking. The best advice for these students may be to work for awhile between high school and college. Several alternatives exist for the talented (albeit not yet formally educated) young musician. One could play in a band (locally, on the road, or on a cruise ship) or local pops orchestra, join a U.S. service band, perform solo at a restaurant (ideal for Pianists), or teach at a music store. Often, in these types of settings, the player, having gained some life experience as well as education that cannot be realized in school, will develop a desire for a more formal, more complete and comprehensive education found at the university. Sometimes an individual needs to mature and "experience life," before embarking on a collegiate career.

Two students of mine, I'll call them "Luis" and "Matthew", who played lead alto saxophone and lead trumpet respectively in the jazz band (as well as first chair in all the classical ensembles), were two of the best young performers at New World School of the Arts a couple of years ago. Offered full scholarships to several top university music programs, these two students, although remarkably talented, were neither academically sound (C-average) nor responsible (tardy, truant). My advice to both of them (and their parents) was to work and/or attend the community college for a year. Luis took my advice, Matthew did not. Luis just recently completed his freshman year, performed in the *Down Beat* Student Award winning band, and received a 4.0 GPA at the University of North Texas, one of the country's foremost jazz schools. Matthew, succumbing to his parents' wishes for him to begin college right away when it was

obvious that he had neither the desire nor the maturity, started a year earlier and flunked out, receiving all F's.

And then there is the student who is not only a precocious talent, but equally adept in academic and social skills. On the surface, it may appear that a prestigious university or conservatory is the best proposition. However, other existing options should also be closely examined. If the particular student is exceptionally gifted and currently has the opportunity to study privately with a renowned artist, is capable of winning competitions and securing concert engagements, is offered steady work with an accomplished jazz musician or a recording contract with a major label, etc., then the student should be advised that school will still be there in the future whereas, these other opportunities may not.

Explaining this to parents, who for the past eighteen years have planned on their son or daughter attending college, can be a delicate situation. Weighing all the options with parents and student should be handled privately. Examples of how notable performers, teachers, and composer/arrangers launched their careers as well as

the missed opportunities or failures of students (anonymously, of course) who began college too early should be discussed. Many parents express their concern with the possibility of their children never attending college if they do not matriculate directly after high school. At this point, I use myself as an example. Upon graduation, I never wanted to see another classroom. Rather than attending college right away, I went on the road with a band, performed nightly, saw the country, earned and saved money, matured, and most importantly developed a desire for further schooling.

I have since felt that music school should be part of a career, not merely a means to one. Musicians do many things -- perform, teach, write, practice, listen, transcribe, record -- all of which are educational. Attending music school should be *among* them. But the best time(s) to experience the formal aspects of music education is not written in stone. It is different for different personalities, abilities, and circumstances.

At the "ripe ol' (young) age" of thirty eight, a tenured professor in the midst of my career, I am back in school, attending classes, taking lessons, and pursuing a

degree. The acquisition of knowledge and musical skills is a life long process not to be rushed nor taken lightly. Indeed, each musical situation and environment should be savored. If this point can be made to the perplexed student and parents, they will make the right decision.

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