



# HIGHER

BY STEPHANIE STEIN CREASE

# ED, COMMUNITY STYLE

The Jazzschool—a music center popular with kids and adults in California’s East Bay—has added a four-year degree program for advanced students.

**R**uthie Dineen could be called a poster child for the Jazzschool Institute in Berkeley, California—except that she’s 30 years old. But as one of the first four graduates of the school’s new degree program, Dineen is just the kind of student that the institute was created to serve. She had a lot of musical training, is working in the performing arts field, and had long wanted to further her own jazz education. She was thrilled to find a comprehensive, four-year jazz studies program close to home.

Dineen studied classical piano as a child and discovered jazz on her own. At the University of California at Berkeley, she majored in history and minored in music, and went on to get a master’s in social work. She liked the courses she took in classical music, composition, and ethnomusicology but was disappointed to discover that the university’s jazz ensemble program was “extracurricular.” Today, Dineen is deputy program director of Richmond’s East Bay Center for Performing Arts, which serves hundreds of public school students and young adults. Her work there includes teaching and performing, and it rekindled her interest in her own jazz education. So she signed up for an ensemble class at the Jazz School Community Music School and loved what she found—a jazz-focused hub for lessons, classes, and ensembles for all ages and skill levels.

A year later, Dineen’s ensemble director told her a degree program in jazz studies was in the works, and introduced her to Susan Muscarella, the Jazzschool’s founder and executive director. In fall of 2009, Dineen and 33 other students enrolled in the Jazzschool Institute’s first class. Even in its infancy, the degree program was “a dream come true,” Dineen said. She found the kind of music education and mentorship she had sought for years.

Muscarella, a jazz pianist, composer, and former longtime director of UC Berkeley’s jazz ensemble program, founded the Jazzschool in 1997, squeezing it into two rooms above a restaurant in downtown Berkeley. It quickly outgrew the space, and in 2002 moved into its present location in the basement of the historic Kress 5 & 10 cent store. The school took out a huge loan, now mostly repaid, to gut and transform the

**Jazzschool founder  
Susan Muscarella**

**Anthony Brown formulated the institute's jazz history curriculum**



was worth it—I couldn't bear to compromise the integrity of the curriculum we'd designed, in which everything works together."

Muscarella is a music locavore. Her success with the community school was due largely to knowing the Bay Area community and her dead-on instinct to "just build it and they will come." San Francisco and the East Bay have a vibrant jazz culture, with numerous clubs—such as the legendary Yoshi's—and SFJazz, the 30-year-old organization that earlier this year opened its new \$64-million performance center, with its own education department. Muscarella knew that there had to be people out there interested in a four-year degree program. Gifted, motivated high school jazz players were coming out of the Jazzschool's combos and big bands, as well as from SFJazz and the rare public school band programs. And though the Bay Area is dotted with colleges and universities with jazz studies programs, none of them had what Muscarella set out to create—a small, high-caliber program, staffed by top-notch local jazz musicians who are also teaching artists.

So far, so good. This past December, the Jazzschool Institute graduated its first three students; the fourth graduated in June. Muscarella runs the school like a family business. Staggered graduation rates are possible because the administration bends over backward to accommodate students' jobs, gigs or other obligations. Muscarella and Josh Birch, the director of administration, see to every detail.

Flexibility and personal attention—in scheduling classes and allowing some students to attend part time—benefit a diverse student body, whose average age is in the late-20s, early-30s range. According to Birch, "About 25 percent of our students are right out of high school. About 45 percent went to college somewhere else, or were enrolled in a degree program that was not jazz-centric enough. Some of them are working professionally and want to advance their jazz training, but need to keep working. A smaller subset are people, some significantly older, who might have had a professional career, put it aside to have kids or make a career change, and now want to come back to jazz. We have a big spread of experience and skills."

Birch has been working at the Jazzschool since 2006. He has participated in the entire process of helping the Institute go from "being a cozy community school to a more professional institution that was ready for opening a college. We have developed an incredible faculty, and now have seen students move through the whole program."

Institute enrollment now stands at 60 students, and the plan is to expand to no more than 120. "We want to be

space into 12 rehearsal rooms, 14 classrooms, a small concert hall, and a cafe. Located in Berkeley's arts district, close to a Bay Area Rapid Transit station, the Jazzschool now has an average enrollment of five hundred students per quarter; it runs more than a hundred classes and ensembles, and it generates award-winning high school combos and big bands. About one-fifth of its students are enrolled in the vocal program, whose workshops and clinics have become a huge draw in themselves, thanks to singer/educator Laurie Antonioli, chair of the vocal departments for the community division and the institute.

The community school's success allowed Muscarella to realize her long-held dream of creating a jazz studies degree program. Some of its offerings were already tailored to advanced students; but most of the adults who enrolled took courses on an à la carte basis. Muscarella had her heart set on a full program of study. "I knew our community school students were not going to take—say—three consecutive semesters of jazz ear-training. So I began looking for a partner institution that either did not have a music department or did not have a jazz component. This did not pan out, so I bit the bullet and decided to do it myself." She figured out how to set up the infrastructure and deal with necessary administrative requirements. "It

able to know every single student, and to maintain the kind of flexibility we have now,” says Birch.

The curriculum for the institute’s two tracks, instrumental and vocal performance, is similar to that of other jazz studies degree programs in colleges and conservatories. There are core classes in jazz theory, ear training, and improvisation; required ensemble, private lessons, and performance; a required jazz history sequence and Western music history sequence; general studies requirements and electives such as Philosophy of Jazz, Physics and Psychoacoustics of Music, and a course about the Beatles.

The Institute is still so small that curriculum decisions can be made easily. Says Muscarella, “People can come to me with an idea, and I say either yes or no—there is no bureaucracy! Students can design a four-credit independent-study project, but have to show it to me for approval. One of them came up with a project called Blakey’s Beat. He wanted to transcribe some of the music of Art Blakey’s

Jazz Messengers and put together an ensemble to perform it in concert. So he did that, and we incorporated it into our ensemble program—it’s been a real hit!”

Percussionist, composer, and bandleader Anthony Brown formulated the institute’s jazz history curriculum. Brown—who holds a PhD in ethnomusicology from UC Berkeley and has served as curator of American Musical Culture and director of the jazz oral history program at the Smithsonian Institution—has created an unusual course that includes Africana and other pre-jazz elements, and that incorporates a performance aspect. He might, for instance, ask students to transcribe a piece from a 1920s recording by Jelly Roll Morton’s Red Hot Peppers and then to perform it.

Last year Muscarella hired Mary Ann Koory, a Renaissance scholar on the faculty of San Francisco State

**“You don’t have to search for a mentor... They’re all right there!”**



**End-of-season performance at the Jazzschool Girl’s Jazz and Blues Camp**

University, to chair the Jazz School Institute’s General Studies department and help build a portfolio of classes. Koory now teaches a Shakespeare course and will offer

English composition next fall because, she says, “musicians of today need to write about what they are doing. They need to have the force and art of rhetoric at their disposal, and be able to analyze art in general and music specifically.”

The institute faculty also includes an array of prominent Bay Area jazz artists, such as bassist Peter Barshay, percussionist John Santos, pianist Marcos Silva (a Brazilian music specialist), and violinists Mads Tolling, Evan Price, and Jeremy Cohen (all former members of the jazz/ crossover Turtle Island String Quartet).

The institute also aims to help prepare students for the challenges facing anyone who wants to make a living in the arts. Business of Music, accounting and music technology classes are required. A pedagogy component is also required, and faculty members often relay to their students that teaching is a crucial part of developing a sustainable career as a musician.

Most institute classes, with few exceptions, have five to seven students. They really appreciate the intimacy, especially if they came from much larger schools. “You don’t have to search for a mentor,” says Ruthie Dineen. “They’re all right there! You have lots of time with faculty, and you can really work through problems.” The institute fosters mutual support. One student was invited to tour with the acclaimed Brazilian



**Alonzo Henderson,  
a student at the  
Jazzschool Summer  
Youth Program**

guitarist Chico Pinheiro for a month, and was permitted to take a professional leave. He kept up with assignments via e-mail and Skype. “When the band came back and played a concert,” Dineen says, “almost the whole school showed up!”

There are, of course, some disadvantages to being small. Students don’t get the benefit of cross-pollination that comes with being under the same roof with, say,

students working on a Bartók String Quartet or an opera. A related problem might be the “bubble syndrome” that can set in at any small, specialized program —visual arts, writing, engineering, etc.—possibly creating an insular mind set.

That doesn’t bother students like Dillon Vado, a drummer and vibraphonist who runs his own full-time teaching studio at his home in San Jose. He had attended a nearby community college and wanted to transfer to a more intensive jazz studies program to get his degree. He visited or talked to people in almost every jazz studies department in the Bay Area. Muscarella allowed him to “try out” the institute by enrolling in a single ensemble course for a year and quickly discovered the Jazzschool Institute was the right place for him. “It proved to be so much better in almost every category. I am not able financially to go to the East Coast and go to Berklee, or The New School, or the big-name places where it’s hard to get full scholarships. But I think the Jazzschool might be on par with them in coming years. It’s the only jazz program you can take seriously in the Bay Area.”

The Jazzschool Institute is not on the national radar yet, but thus far it is filling a very important niche, as the experience of students such as Dineen and Vado clearly attests. Rebeca Mauleón, education director for SFJazz, believes that Muscarella’s program is uniquely valuable. “There is nothing like it in northern California. Susan was really instrumental—no pun intended—in helping to provide the curriculum for what is otherwise a kind of void here. A lot of jazz musicians have resisted the walls of academia because they felt it wasn’t customizable and creative enough. And that is the key—finding people that are a

little more complex and diverse in their goals—it is not a cookie-cutter education.”

Muscarella’s entrepreneurship and creative practicality are infectious. Says Koory: “Teaching here is an exhilarating experience. Susan has been nursing her vision for a long time, but the spirit here is that everything is new—we are all part of a great experiment.”

*Stephanie Stein Crease is author of Gil Evans: Out of the Cool and Duke Ellington: His Life in Jazz. She coordinates the Jazz Arts Program at the Manhattan School of Music.*

**Faculty member John Santos**

