

“Tomorrow’s Jazz Audience: Where Are They?”

**A report for the
Association of Performing Arts Presenters
on the Jazz Forum, held 12 January 2010**



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Executive Summary

At the end of APAP's 2010 annual conference, about 150 presenters and others attended a two-hour open Jazz Forum. Thirty-some people rose to speak, offering opinions and insights on seven key issues: audience, community, education, business and marketing, generational differences, the presenting context, and perceptions and mindset.

Key recommendations emerging from the Forum

- Research and develop more information about the jazz audience.
- Develop much more cooperation, communication, and information-sharing to overcome "silos" and increase probabilities for success.
- Establish a new national service organization for jazz, a number of people advocated. (Several people expressed support for working through existing organizations and several others a reluctance to join another organization.)
- Better educate jazz presenters, audiences, teachers, and students [i.e., potential/future audience members].
- Focus more on market-based solutions (earned income) and less on contributed income.
- Develop "key talking points" to further the appreciation and understanding of jazz.
- Reframe the presenting context: take jazz out of concert halls, even take it out of traditional night clubs, and take it to the people rather than drawing the people to it.
- Better utilize the Internet and World Wide Web in general, and social media specifically.
- Learn from other musical genres.
- Recognize that the word "jazz" is, for some [young people], an obstacle to attending performances; yet many people find they like jazz, whatever it's called, *if they are exposed to it*. Hence increasing access to jazz is crucial.

More than forty people signed up to serve on one (or more) of three new task forces that will examine education, marketing, and a potential new service organization for jazz.

Next year's APAP conference, CEO Sandra Gibson announced, will again include some degree of focus on jazz.

Background

The closing session of the 2010 APAP annual conference was devoted to the number one challenge facing the U.S. jazz community: providing enough audience to keep the music alive and healthy. The background of the session was: feedback received by APAP that jazz needed to be a larger part of its agenda; the dissolution in 2008 of the 8,000-member International Association for Jazz Educators, which had become kind of a trade association for the entire jazz field; a falloff in the audience turnout for, and the income of, performing-arts organizations due to the economic recession; and an alarming NEA report on U.S. audiences. APAP scheduled a “jazz track” during its annual conference in New York City, held January 8-12, 2010, that offered nine events. The track drew some of the people who used to attend the IAJE conference and were still sorely missing that crucial coming-together.

APAP created the closing “Jazz Forum” in part as a response to a much-publicized report, *Arts Participation*, the fourth survey by the National Endowment for the Arts since 1982, which showed a dramatic shrinkage and aging of the U.S. audience for jazz. The report prompted critic Terry Teachout to proclaim, in his controversial article “Can Jazz Be Saved?” in *The Wall Street Journal*, “The audience for America’s great art form is withering away.” Teachout concluded, “jazz musicians who want to keep their own. . . beautiful music alive and well have got to start thinking hard about how to pitch it to young listeners—not next month, not next week, but right now.”

The NEA report and Teachout’s article sparked heated debate in the jazz blogosphere, with Nate Chinen, writing in *The New York Times*, questioning the survey’s methodology. Since the survey asked how often the respondent had attended a live jazz

performance in the last year, much depended on how the respondent defined jazz—a much trickier task than recognizing opera, film, etc.

In its November/December 2009 issue, APAP's magazine *Inside Arts* headlined a cover story, "Who Hears Jazz? The Survey That Spurred Discussion about a National Treasure," in which critic Larry Blumenfeld discussed *Arts Participation*. Beyond a debate about the survey's methodology, Blumenfeld brought up other issues not directly addressed by the NEA survey. One of them was put forth by pianist Vijay Iyer: "The issue isn't one of accessibility but one of access. . . . My main point was that the nationwide infrastructure for jazz presenting has shrunk over the years, rather than the jazz audience per se." This brings up the classic chicken-and-egg question: which came first?

Blumenfeld called for a "reconsideration of old ideas about jazz presentation and distribution. . . . The business around [jazz] simply needs renovation."

The Jazz Forum

For two hours on January 12, 2010 about one hundred and fifty people filled a meeting room at the Sheraton Hotel for the open forum titled "Tomorrow's Jazz Audience? Where Are They?" After opening remarks by APAP President and CEO Sandra Gibson, Jeff Walker, the co-chair of the Quincy Jones Musiq Consortium, ably took over as moderator, keeping the conversation on track, moving ahead, and summarizing points from time to time.

Sara Donnelly, Program Officer for the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, in Baltimore, observed that the jazz ecology includes artists, presenters, journalists, museums,

educators, agents and other commercial interests—all of whom were represented in the room.

Bob Breithaupt, Executive Director of the Jazz Arts Group, based in Columbus, Ohio, noted that the Doris Duke Foundation has provided JAG with a grant to undertake a two-year study of the jazz audience. JAG and its partner organizations will be looking at ways to reach performers, educators, artists, presenters, and others to formulate conclusions about what the jazz audience is.

A topic which came up repeatedly was one which could be called “community.” For many of the most active people in jazz, the International Association for Jazz Education (IAJE) had provided a crucial sense of community, annually bringing together educators, students, performers, funders, presenters, critics, broadcasters, and individuals from government, museums, record companies, music publishing, and musical instrument manufacturing. The IAJE’s demise was mentioned briefly during the Forum but undoubtedly underlay many of the comments regarding community or lack thereof.

A young filmmaker from New Orleans, Darren Hoffman, argued that “too many people are working independently. . .in silos, not talking with each other, not helping each other.” Echoing Hoffman’s call for a “common support system,” Gene Dobbs Bradford, Executive Director of the Jazz Center of St. Louis, said “jazz may suffer. . .from the fact we don’t have a service organization.” Marty Ashby, Director of MCG Jazz in Pittsburgh, Willard Jenkins, former Executive Director of the National Jazz Service Organization, and Lois Gilbert, who runs Jazzcorner.com, all spoke in favor of creating a new service organization for jazz. Writer and critic Larry Blumenfeld observed that “the jazz community has. . .splintered.” Without worrying about defining the music, he said a jazz

service organization should understand the *context* of the music and should be broad, and “without thinking of the past organizations,” should be “jazz-shaped, whatever that means.”

Not all comments about establishing a new service organization for jazz were positive. Margaret Lioi, CEO of Chamber Music America, cautioned against reinventing something that is already existing, noting that “maybe we [national performing arts organizations] need to do a better job of informing you of what is available for you to take advantage of.” Mary Jo Papich, President of the Jazz Educators Network, spoke up to say that JEN is already working to advance education, promote performance, and develop audiences in jazz. Presenter Randall Vogel, of the Mesa Arts Center in Arizona, said he doesn’t have time or the travel budget to get involved with another organization, and Jana Herzen, head of Motema Music, agreed with that sentiment, arguing that people should work through APAP.

Marty Ashby of MCG Jazz advocated creating three task forces of concerned people from the Forum—to address marketing, education, and a national service organization. Moderator Jeff Walker observed “I think if you guys work together, you can do it. You know, the problem is, if it keeps falling apart because you’re going your own independent ways, then you get what you deserve.”

At the local level, Randall Vogel told of having convened a “jazz summit” in Mesa, to prompt various communities—presenters, radio DJs, fans—and stakeholders to work together, to develop audience together. “If we all do this together, we’re going to develop the audience and we can all survive.” He warned “If we don’t do this together, we’re all going to just strangle each other till one person’s standing.”

Artist representative Scott Southard, head of the International Music Network, argued that “non-profit resources need to be shared communally.” Lois Gilbert of Jazzcorner.com argued for sharing mailing lists through the World Wide Web and collaborating on social media, specifically a “universal Facebook page.”

Education, in the broadest sense, was another recurring theme. Michael Alexander, Executive/Artistic Director of Grand Performances in Los Angeles, advocated educating jazz audiences about artistic standards and standards of the jazz repertory, so concertgoers have yardsticks to measure performances. Howard Mandel, President of Jazz Journalists Association, urged presenters to invite jazz journalists and broadcasters to give pre-concert lectures to educate their audiences, especially during Jazz Appreciation Month (April). Their participation would also generate advance publicity, which would increase ticket sales. Writer Larry Blumenfeld supported Mandel’s idea.

Several speakers—including presenter Jenni Taylor Swain, Vice President for Programs at the Walton Arts Center in Fayetteville, Arkansas—stressed the importance of motivating high school band directors to go beyond marching band and do more with jazz, for school systems to offer more choices for musically-minded students. Jackie Lyle, Executive Director of the Performing Arts Society of Acadiana, located in Lafayette, Louisiana, spoke of multiple needs: (1) to motivate band teachers—offer them the chance for trophies by sponsoring more jazz band competitions; (2) to enable the creation of more jazz bands by recycling musical instruments; (3) to press one’s school system to do more; and (4) to motivate parents to understand the value of the music and get involved.

Jana Herzen, owner of Motema Music, implied a need for better training of music teachers: “I think a lot of teachers need to be taught more of the vibrancy” of jazz, to master

how to teach it so kids “can relate to it.” Herzen called for education of presenters, too. “Half of the presenters don’t know a clue about jazz,” she offered. “I know—some of them talk to me.”

The business of jazz, especially presenting jazz, became another topic of discussion. Artist representative Scott Southard, of the International Music Network, argued that too many at the conference emphasized contributed income [raised through fund-raising], rather than earned income. The way jazz is supported by the governments of Europe, he said, “is never going to happen in the United States—let’s be honest about it.” He asserted that “If there’s going to be a sustainable ecology in jazz, it’s got to be a market-based solution.”

Marketing became a topic as well. One of the few under-30-year-olds in the Forum, publicist Matt Merewitz, of Fully Altered Media, called for more activity in the jazz “Twittersphere,” observing “It’s all about the online space. If you’re not on the online space aggressively, then you’re not anywhere.” [Merewitz was speaking specifically of performing artists, but his comments can be said to all aspects of the jazz enterprise.]

Myles Weinstein, of the Unlimited Myles agency, argued that musicians should be pro-active not just in creating their music but in developing their careers—they can’t rely only on agents and managers. Artist representative Eric Hanson of Tree Lawn Artists in Philadelphia, called for greater clarity when artists and agents market their offerings—if an artist has seven different programs, how can someone tell which one(s) are the foremost?

Suzi Reynolds, CEO of Suzi Reynolds and Associates, observed that “for decades jazz has been used commercially to represent luxury brands,” and more young people can

afford those brands, so “we need to find a way to get to” these corporate brands to mutually help one another.

Joann Stevens, the Smithsonian’s Director of Jazz Appreciation Month, spoke of an impression among some that jazz is “old people’s music,” but argued that “everybody has a place in [jazz]. . .it’s intergenerational, it is cross-cultural, it is different backgrounds and classes,” in other words, the music is inclusive; but that the jazz community needs to better project that message of inclusiveness. One of many avenues to do that, Stevens said, is increasing the use of museums and cultural heritage organizations to bring audiences of all ages to the music. She pointed to both Jazz Appreciation Month and Jazz Day in America, set for April 9, as ways to bring jazz more prominence.

Generational differences were another recurring theme. Producer and artist manager Suzi Reynolds argued that more “torch-passing has to go to younger artists who are going to be the future, who are going to keep this art form alive,” such as “opening acts for the legends.” Publicist Matt Merewitz urged that jazz and presenting organizations hire more young people. Many speakers recognized the growing importance of social media, and this implies a need for more tech-savvy people to reach out to young people, the heaviest users of social media.

The presenting “context” for jazz was discussed by several participants—the kinds of venues, price points, framing/positioning of the performances, stylistic diversity of audiences, and the use of social media to reach them. Bill Bragin, Director of Public Programming at Lincoln Center, spoke of an outdoor festival that offered a “friendly, populous context and brought [the music] to the audience rather than. . . .trying to bring the audience to them.” Bragin argued that “people’s tastes and perspectives are far broader

than they're given credit for and they're not breaking down the styles in the same way that we're trying to force into the categories." Publicist and festival consultant Don Lucoff, head of DL Media, challenged presenters to "please think outside the box, think outside of your comfort zone and take the music to the people" in new, nontraditional ways.

What could be called "mindset"—a set of perceptions and attitudes—also sparked discussion. Seth Abramson of the Jazz Standard night club in New York City said while jazz is perceived by some as a "four-letter word," a lot of people find, if exposed to the music, that they like it, and don't realize they were listening to "jazz." Abramson argued that we need to "figure out how to get over that hump of this four-letter word that . . . unfortunately . . . puts people off." Jazz, he said, is a "global music," much more inclusive than some might think. Another young person, Diane Heim [sp?] of Brooklyn admitted "Jazz is a dirty word. For me to admit that I'm going to a jazz show is not cool." She asked: how can we make jazz cool, make it draw in audiences?

Erika Floreska, Director of Education at Jazz at Lincoln Center, asked what can be done to take the message about jazz out of the room and reach different kinds of people, different types of audience members. What are the talking points about jazz? What can be said about jazz to translate the music to a wider audience? And how do people and organizations at the local level implement these "global" issues and points?

Performer/songwriter Alan Harris advocated stepping "out of our box" and looking at other, successful musical genres—such as country and hip-hop—to see if the jazz community can learn anything helpful.

Pianist Vijay Iyer spoke of jazz's "image problem" and also of a false dichotomy of the "inherent tension" between "the vast and incredible cultural legacy of this music" and

“whatever we want to call the future of jazz. . . . I’d just like to advocate. . . not really treating [them] as opposites but really part of a continuum.” The tradition of jazz, he argued, “is creativity.”

Unaddressed Questions

The Jazz Forum prompted robust discussion of a number of issues, but the breadth of concerns facing the jazz field and the time constraints of the ninety-minute session meant that some questions went unasked. Among them:

- How much of the aging and diminishing of the U.S. jazz audience is due to the same factors affecting participation in other performing arts, and how much is specific to the genre of jazz?
- Is the jazz audience going through a similar diminution in other countries?
- Besides the infrequent NEA reports on arts participation and the current study by the Jazz Arts Group, what else needs to be done to increase knowledge of the American jazz audience?
- Are some jazz performers to blame for the music’s audience problems—for not engaging their audience from the stage, not announcing their tunes, turning their backs on the audience, and refusing to woo or entertain them? If so, is there a role for APAP in redressing these ingrained habits?
- Beyond high school bands, which were briefly discussed, what needs to be done to educate the vast U.S. student population (76 million students from kindergarten through graduate school) about jazz? What role should arts presenters and performing artists play in such education?

- What can APAP, presenters, and artists do to make jazz more accessible to young people?
- How much of a role can Jazz Appreciation Month and Jazz Day in America play in combating the shrinkage/aging of the jazz audience?
- Should APAP play a greater role in convening the various parts of the jazz community, or should it focus on its core group of stakeholders—those involved in presenting?
- Should APAP prod local jazz presenters to—as was done in Mesa, Arizona—work collaboratively?

These and other questions could be addressed in an effort to reverse what appears to be threats to future of a music that many believe is *the* great American artform, or at least one of the greatest.