



Skidmore Summer Jazz Institute offers private and semi-private lessons, small group combo rehearsals and master classes.

MARIA MCCOLL

ENCOUNTERS WITH ELITE PLAYERS

By Thomas Staudter

For 65 or so select individuals each year, the Skidmore Summer Jazz Institute (SJII) stands as the nonpareil destination for attentive and engaged instruction in the improviser's art. The two-week program, which is celebrating its 29th year in 2016 and features a faculty of top jazz practitioners, is held on the campus of Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, a charming burg just north of Albany initially made famous by the pur-

ported health benefits of its abundant mineral water springs.

The jazz aspirants of the Skidmore program join a large annual influx of visitors to Saratoga Springs, which becomes a veritable summer playground of endless activity, thanks to its thoroughbred horse racing season (established in the 1860s) and a full schedule of arts and entertainment events. The Philadelphia Orchestra and New York City Ballet each take residence for several weeks in the city, and the

Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC) welcomes a wide array of musicians and dancers to its stage. SPAC also hosts Frehofer's Saratoga Jazz Festival, which will be presenting its 39th edition on June 28–29.

SJII offers private and semi-private lessons, small group combo rehearsals and master classes, coaching in performance skills and ProTools recording classes. It has established strong ties with some of the country's top performing arts high school programs, regularly hosting the best and brightest students from New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Houston High School for the Performing and Visual Arts and Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts.

Attendees (past participants include present-day stalwarts like Kendrick Scott, Jonathan Batiste, Myron Walden, Christian Scott, Sullivan Fortner and Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews) arrive in time to catch the two full days of music at the Frehofer's festival—a fitting introductory jolt of inspiration and one of the aspects of the program that sets it apart.

Todd Coolman, the institute's director since 2011, points to a picky application process and the college's support staff as key factors in the program's success. "This is a place where serious-minded students are being nurtured by great teachers, all of whom are beneficiaries of months of preparations and careful attention to detail," said Coolman, a two-time Grammy Award-winning bassist and educator known for his long tenure with James Moody and heading Purchase College's Conservatory of Music Jazz Studies Department for 10 years. "Everything is directed toward creating a life-changing experience for these young musicians. And even though the college receives only indirect benefits from hosting the jazz institute, it provides generous use of its resources and infrastructure."

The Skidmore campus is renowned for its beautiful setting, but better yet, all instruction at SJI as well as performances by students, faculty members and guest artists take place in Skidmore's Arthur Zankel Music Center, a new 54,000-square-foot facility that includes a 600-seat concert hall, lecture halls, recital spaces and administrative offices. "It's a state-of-the-art building with perfect acoustics that totally impresses everybody," said Coolman.

Evening SJI performances are offered at little or no cost to the public; all tickets are under \$8, and some are free. Part of the institute's mission is to educate the surrounding community in the art and history of jazz and to expose them to musicians of the highest caliber. Guest artists frequently conduct free master classes as part of the concert series.

One of several educational programs set up during the 1980s to utilize Skidmore's buildings and dorms during the summer months, SJI was the brainchild of Don McCormack, a dean of special programs at the college—and a good friend of record company executive Bruce Lundvall (1935–2015) since their college days at Bucknell. McCormack and Lundvall helped get the program off the ground in 1987, though the first year was limited to performances for the community. The following year McCormack hired trombonist/educator Gerald Zaffuts as a director, who recruited the first group of faculty members—two of whom, legendary bassist Milt Hinton and *Tonight Show* drummer Ed Shaughnessy, a formidable rhythm section in their own right, became a natural bedrock of the program through its first decade.

"When we first started the Summer Institute, one of the decisions made was to emphasize small group playing and improvisation instead of playing in a big band format," recalled McCormack. "This way, the students could spend a lot more time interacting with the faculty and receiving closer instruction."

Many prospective attendees of summer jazz

programs fixate on opportunities to study with elite jazz stars, and in this regard Skidmore has always boasted of a superb faculty consisting of jazz artists with a zeal for education. Among the notables gearing up for the 2016 Skidmore students are trumpeter Jon Faddis, baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan, drummer Kenny Washington, saxophonist Jimmy Greene and guitarist Vic Juris. The popular SJI faculty concerts have helped to build a jazz audience in Saratoga Springs, according to McCormack.

Tuition and board for SJI cost about \$3,000. Financial aid is available. At the program's inception, and for 28 years, Blue Note/Capitol Records and Lundvall helped to establish a scholarship fund for promising young musicians who would otherwise not be able to attend. Saxophonist Myron Walden was the first Blue Note Scholar. This year, SJI has established a new scholarship fund in honor of Lundvall, fondly remembered as a friend, advisor and benefactor who would visit campus each summer when the institute was in session.

Los Angeles-based pianist Bill Cunliffe, who'll be trekking east and marking his 10th year on the Skidmore faculty in 2016, marvels at how the summer program balances intense learning, both one-on-one and on the bandstand, with an environment that frowns on wall-to-wall programming. "The focus is on discovery and progress," Cunliffe said. "Instead of memorizing charts, there is reading, writing and collaborating in different ensembles." The combos, created with several carefully matched students, play together throughout the session and are guided by both a faculty combo leader and rotating faculty members. The entire experience often inspires students to return for a second year.

In 1998, long before he joined the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra or recorded albums with Roy Haynes, Russell Malone and Wycliffe Gordon, bassist David Wong attended the two-week-long Skidmore Summer Jazz Institute. Later, as a member of the Heath Brothers band, Wong performed at the institute as a guest artist. Now, this upcoming year will be Wong's third as a member of the institute's faculty.

"Being on the younger side and having attended the Skidmore Jazz Institute, I can still remember the excitement and anxiety that came with learning jazz from the beginning," said Wong. "All of this, I think, helps me connect with the students at Skidmore and make it as meaningful and relevant experience as possible for them."

SJI has received widespread acclaim, and numerous important organizations support it. SJI is sponsored in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Howard Bayne Foundation and the Arthur Zimbaum Foundation.

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