

Teaching Artist Bobby Broom (right) works with students at the Chicago High School for the Arts.



Living the **Dream**

How to get a job in jazz education

By JB Dyas, Ph.D. 

Today's jazz landscape is exploding with opportunities in education. Unlike the hey-days of traditional jazz, swing and bebop, in which jazz was virtually all self-taught and learned via apprenticeship by playing in groups led by edifying bandleaders, the contemporary jazz scene is dominated by formal, structured and professional jazz education. There are literally thousands of institutions and organizations around the globe, especially in the United States, where jazz is studied under the guidance of professional teaching artists and jazz educators.

But just where are these jobs, and how does one go about getting them? What skill set is required? Based on my years of diverse experiences as a jazz educator and jazz pedagogy teacher—and having helped myriad musicians secure employment in jazz education—I offer the following advice on how to find, prepare for, and get a job in this exciting field.



Institutions and Organizations

One need not look further than the annual October jazz education issue of *DownBeat* to find a comprehensive listing of virtually every university, college, and conservatory that offers a bona fide jazz program. In addition to these institutions of higher learning, thousands of high schools offering at least one jazz ensemble – including well over a hundred performing arts high schools that feature courses in jazz improvisation, combo performance, piano, history and more – are found throughout the country. Many middle schools offer jazz bands as well.

There are also many independent and non-profit community arts education organizations around the nation that offer music instruction and employ jazz teaching artists and educators. Besides the *Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz*, where we engage dozens of musicians each year to teach students at all levels from middle school through graduate school, other organizations employing jazz educators include *Jazz at Lincoln Center* in New York, *Jazz House Kids* in Montclair, NJ, *B'Town Jazz* in Bloomington, IN, *Colburn School* in Los Angeles, *New Jersey Performing Arts Center* in Newark, *Levine Music* in Washington, DC, and copious others throughout the United States and beyond.

Summer jazz camps and workshops have proliferated as well, not only in the United States, but also around the world. Notable examples include the *Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops* in Louisville, KY; *Litchfield Jazz Camp* in New Milford, CT; *Jazz Port Townsend* in Port Townsend, WA; and dozens more, including scores of others affiliated with universities like Stanford, North Texas, and Miami. International summer jazz programs include the *Dutch Impro Academy* in The Hague, Netherlands; *Samba Meets Jazz Workshop* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and *Funote Summer Music Camp* in Jia Ding, China. These programs and many others all require the services of jazz musicians who know how to teach. A comprehensive list can be found in the annual March jazz camp guide issue of *DownBeat*.

Additionally, many commercial music stores and studios hire jazz musicians to teach private lessons, present various workshops, and direct jazz and rock combos. *Guitar Center* alone has some 269 locations around the country. Various houses of worship, boys and girls clubs, jazz festivals and associations, Musicians Union locals, home studios, civic organizations, private learning centers, and the Internet round out the numerous arenas where jazz education takes place and jazz educators are employed.

Skill Set and Credentials

In the current precarious jazz performance business, in which gigging alone often falls short of providing financial security, many jazz musicians look to teaching to supplement their annual incomes. Also, most of the jazz musicians I've encountered over the years find teaching not only a moral obligation – passing the art form along to the next generation as it has been passed on to them – but an absolute joy as well. Even jazz greats like Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter (who work with our graduate students at the Monk Institute) find teaching among the most gratifying components of their careers.

But if you're not a household name like Herbie and Wayne or other eminent jazz musician with an impressive discography – like Terri Lyne Carrington (Berklee), Benny Green (Michigan), Antonio Hart (Queens College), Sean Jones (Peabody), Bob Mintzer (USC), Walter Smith III (Indiana), Terell Stafford (Temple), or Bobby Watson (UMKC) – in order to get a job in jazz education today you must be an *obviously* effective and dynamic jazz educator, band director, administrator, and pedagogue. And you *must* be able to play. Versatility is key. This means you not only need to be an accomplished and well-versed jazz musician on your primary instrument, but a *functional* player on all rhythm section instruments – especially piano (see minimal skill set required for each rhythm section instrument on p. 5).

You also should be able to teach students of all ages and levels, especially beginning and intermediate, as those are the levels of most jazz students. Strive to have the majority of your teaching and band directing sessions employ *active* learning, with your students actively *doing* (e.g., playing their instruments) as opposed to passively listening or note taking. I always provide my students with handouts that include all pertinent information regarding the topic at hand. Not having to take notes allows them to be completely engaged throughout the entire session.

When teaching private lessons, the cardinal rule is to do whatever is necessary so your students continue. This means teaching them not only what they *need*, but also what they *want*. After all, if they quit you lose any chance of ever giving them what they need. Also, I've found that time spent pontificating about how your students should practice more and be more disciplined usually just results in valuable time wasted. Rather, I suggest you spend the entirety of each session getting something *accomplished*, that is, getting something solid under their fingers (in addition to giving them a definite assignment). The progress your students make is far more likely to inspire them to practice on their own accord than any sermonizing you might do. And always be as encouraging as possible and never, *ever* demeaning. Following these recommendations will likely make you a better teacher, increasing your reputation as such and the demand for your services.

I always say that if you want to know how well a jazz musician plays, listen to him or her play; if you want to know how well a jazz musician teaches, listen to his or her *students* play. They are your best promoters and strongest advocates.

Today's jazz educator also needs to have administrative skills and be a competent writer. Being computer proficient and knowing a variety of software programs (including Word, Excel, Acrobat Pro, iPhoto, and Finale or Sibelius) is a definite prerequisite. Having the ability to design and create handouts and programs, write articles, and run a department have all come into play throughout my career. Organization, efficiency, and people skills are paramount.

Regarding credentials, for teaching positions in middle and high schools, performing arts high schools, and, especially, colleges and universities, the more advanced degree you have from the more prestigious institution, the better. A minimum of a bachelor's degree is required for a fulltime position as a band director in middle and high schools. And it's almost impossible to get a fulltime college gig without at least a master's degree (doctorate preferred). However, the degree and university prestige level doesn't matter nearly as much in all other arenas. This is often true for college and university adjunct (part time) positions as well. How well you play and teach is what is most important.

Getting a Job – College and University Positions

First off, I suggest you subscribe to the *College Music Society* for a current listing of virtually all college and university openings. Then apply to as many schools as possible, even if the job description is not perfectly aligned with your skills, as university music department needs are often in flux. For instance, if the opening is for, say, someone to primarily teach jazz composition and arranging, and your forte is, say, trumpet playing and band directing, the powers-that-be just might engage an adjunct instructor to teach composition and arranging and hire you to teach trumpet and direct jazz ensembles if they're really, *really* impressed with you. Or they might remember you in the future when a trumpet/band directing position does eventually open up. Perhaps they will recommend you to a friend or colleague at another school where you would be a perfect fit. You never know. It really is a numbers game, that is, the more schools to which you apply, the more people who see how fabulous you are, the greater your odds of landing a job.

All applications must include a cover letter and resume. Your cover letter should succinctly include an overview of your experience and qualifications, respectfully state why you think teaching at their institution would make a great fit and, most important, make a positive impression. Of course, it must be grammatically correct with no typos or misspelled words. If writing such letters is not your strong suit, go to someone who can help you. It's important. Your resume should include your name, contact info, and a listing of your education, experience, and references (see p.5 for details). It should look professional with standard formatting and, again, absolutely no typos or misspelled words.

Interview and Audition

If your letter and resume strike a chord and rise to the top of the search committee's stack of applications, you will be invited for an interview and audition. Make sure you are thoroughly knowledgeable about the school, its jazz program, and the faculty members on the hiring committee prior to your visit. Don't wait until the last minute to decide on what you are going to wear. Dress up, that is, jacket and tie for men, dress or nice top and pants for women. Be personable, animated, upbeat, and likeable at your interview, having your winning personality shine through. Engage your committee members, subtly letting them know you are aware of and admire their accomplishments. Say nothing disparaging, never use any foul language, don't complain about anything, and say "yes" as often as you can. Make it obvious that you would not only be a teacher of the first order, but an exceptional colleague as well, willing to go well beyond what is expected or required of you. This would include your being delighted to serve on committees, recruit, and contribute to the community.

Besides interviewing, you also will have to perform, teach a class or two, and perhaps direct an ensemble in front of the search committee, other faculty members, administrators, and current students, all of whom have a say in whether you get the job. Your goal is to impress *everyone*. For your performance, pick a diversified, exciting, and impressive set list featuring tunes that require no rehearsal with the house rhythm section and that will blow everyone away! Be sure to bring very readable lead sheets for piano, bass, and drums.

Your teaching session should reflect your knowledge, organization, flexibility, warm personality, dynamism, sense of humor, and pedagogic prowess. Come in with a definite, *practical* topic (e.g., II V I's in minor) and predetermined goal, but be flexible. Provide a concept, examples that can be learned/completed in class, and a strategy for continuing. Demonstrate on your instrument and/or piano whenever possible and applicable. Also provide students with meticulous handouts (color coded for faster accessibility), keeping the students' note taking to a minimum so they can participate *actively*. Be profoundly clear, interesting, educative, and entertaining, and speak loudly and articulately enough so that those sitting in the back can easily hear and understand you. Use eye contact and humor (but not too much).

If the job description includes ensemble directing, you will be asked to direct a big band and small group during your visit. For big band, I suggest you bring a few of your own charts that include different level arrangements (beginning, intermediate, and advanced) that you know especially well. But first, listen to the band perform what they consider the best tune currently in their repertoire. After hearing them play, make general comments with a positive spin, then address weaknesses with tangible suggestions that will improve their playing immediately. Rehearse those sections again with everyone seeing (hearing) marked, immediate improvement. Follow this up by handing out one of your charts, choosing the one best suited for the level of the group you just heard. After talking down the form, have the band sight read the arrangement from beginning to end, then rehearse particular sections focusing on phrasing, blend, feel, time, dynamics, intonation, articulation, rhythmic interpretation, and the like. Demonstrate on both your primary instrument (which should be easily accessible) and piano whenever applicable. And don't forget to address the rhythm section. The session should culminate with the ensemble playing the tune again from beginning to end with everyone awed by how incredible the band sounds and how much it improved in such a short time! Again, make sure that whatever chart you choose to rehearse will be playable by the band at hand and that their performance of it at the end of the session will impress everyone involved.

Similar methodology can be used for working with a small group, especially with regard to first hearing the group play a tune they know, then working on an appropriate level tune that you select. In the combo setting, you can (and should) spend far more time on head arranging, groove, improvisation, rhythm section/soloist interaction, and the like. And it doesn't hurt to show the pianist and guitarist some contemporary chord voicings, the bassist a couple of great walking lines, and the drummer a hip samba groove. Again, demonstrate as much as possible and *play* with the group, *demonstrably* enjoying what you're doing. The period should end with the ensemble sounding so much better than at the beginning of the session, with all participants having gained *tangible* jazz skills and further knowledge, tremendously inspired to take all they learned and apply it to the next tune.

Positions in Middle Schools, High Schools, Performing Arts High Schools, and Other Venues

To find possible teaching gigs outside the college and university setting, visit the websites of the public school district(s) in your area, as well as the websites of all private schools in which you may be interested in teaching. Review the job openings and follow the College and University guidelines above. For all other teaching venues (arts organizations, music stores, etc.), I suggest you send a cover letter and resume even if there are no available positions at the moment. A week later, follow up with a phone call requesting an appointment to meet with the director in person (this is usually granted), make a superb impression, and offer a *free* workshop. Then, knock their socks off! I suggest you do this at *all* possible teaching venues and institutions (including all colleges and universities) that are within reasonable driving distance from your home. Remember, it's a numbers game.

General Tips and Do's and Don'ts

When auditioning for a job, be punctual, be likeable, don't be opinionated, and do have an open mind. Don't insist on anything extra, e.g., rehearsals, longer class periods, extra equipment, etc. Don't make *any* excuses; even if they're legitimate, keep them to yourself. Don't make multiple calls asking questions of the search committee chair, director of jazz studies, dean, HR (human resources) or anyone else who might find this annoying. Most everything you need to know can be found on the school's website. Make sure you have the "must know" list of standards and jazz classics solid under your fingers; you don't want to get caught not knowing what others consider obvious. Don't discuss salary until *after* an offer is made; *then* negotiate, realizing that the first proposal is often significantly lower than what they're willing to pay if they really want you. Be savvy. Negotiate confidently yet respectfully. Be willing to compromise, and never dig your heels in so far that they might retract the offer altogether.

As it is for finding employment in virtually every field nowadays, networking has never been more important. This is especially true in jazz education. Join the *Jazz Education Network* (JEN) and attend their annual conferences. I also suggest you join your local jazz association (e.g., *California Alliance for Jazz*, *Los Angeles Jazz Society*, *Tacoma Jazz Association*, *Texas Jazz Educators Association*) and attend their conferences as well. Apply to perform and present a clinic. Meet as many potential hirers as possible. Impress them. Impress everyone.

It comes down to three basic steps: learn to play and teach as well as possible, be entrepreneurial, and, most important, *do everything to the nines*. Following these guidelines will put you well on your way to enjoying one of the most satisfying and rewarding careers in the arts: actually teaching *jazz* for a living.

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Rhythm Section Instrument Minimum Skill Set

Besides being an accomplished and well-versed jazz musician on their primary instrument, well-rounded jazz educators should be *functional* players on all rhythm section instruments, especially piano. Below are the minimum skill sets required for each instrument. These skills can generally be acquired within one or two years by practicing 75 minutes daily – 30 minutes on piano, and 15 minutes each on guitar, bass, and drums.

Piano

- Be able to comp two-handed jazz voicings for blues in Bb and F, rhythm changes in Bb, major and minor II V I's in all keys, and all tunes in Aebersold Play-Along Volumes 54 and 70
- Be able to comp one-handed jazz voicings in the right hand while walking bass lines in the left hand for all of the above
- Be able to play the idiomatic keyboard patterns associated with easy jazz tunes, e.g., *Cantaloupe Island*, *Maiden Voyage*, *Watermelon Man*, *All Blues*, *Killer Joe*, *So What*

Bass (upright and/or electric)

- Be able to play a simple bossa nova bass line for easy jazz tunes, e.g., *Blue Bossa*, *Song for My Father*
- Be able to walk a blues in Bb and F, rhythm changes in Bb, and all swing tunes in Aebersold Play-Along Volumes 54 and 70
- Be able to play the idiomatic bass patterns associated with easy jazz tunes, e.g., *Cantaloupe Island*, *Maiden Voyage*, *All Blues*, *Footprints*, *Killer Joe*

Drums

- Be able to play a basic swing beat (in 2 and 4) with sticks and brushes, a bossa nova, a samba, and a basic rock/funk beat

Guitar

- Be able to comp basic 4-note jazz voicings for blues in Bb and F, rhythm changes in Bb, and all tunes in Aebersold Play-Along Volumes 54 and 70 (this can be done with just a half dozen or so simple, but authentic, movable chord forms)

Your Resume

Your resume should look professional with standard formatting and no misspelled words. It should include:

- Your name, mailing address, email address, and phone number
- Education – including institution names, majors, and graduation dates; as well a list of eminent jazz artists with whom you have studied
- Teaching experience
- Performing experience
- Recording experience/discography (if applicable)
- Publications (if applicable)
- Awards and honors (if applicable)
- Professional activities
- References – including the name, title (if applicable), email address, and phone number of each reference (often the more famous the name, the better). Make sure you acquire permission from each potential reference to include him/her in your list of references, and be *certain* that each of your references will give you a glowing recommendation.

Suggested Resources

Piano

- “Piano Voicing Mnemonics” (JB Dyas), IJD website – <https://jazzday.com/educational-resources>
- *Jazz Piano Voicings for the Non-Pianist* (Mike Tracy)
- Jamey Aebersold Play-Along Volumes 1, 54, and 70
- *Transcribed Piano Voicings* for Aebersold Play-Along Volumes 1, 54, and 70

Bass

- “Linear Bass Line Construction” (JB Dyas), *DownBeat*, August, 2006
- “Linear Bass Line Construction, Part 2” (JB Dyas), *DownBeat*, August, 2007

Drums

- *Volumes 54 and 70 Maiden Voyage Drum Styles and Analysis* (Steve Davis)
- *The Ultimate Play-Along for Jazz Drummers* (Steve Davis)

Guitar

- *Easy Jazz Guitar - Voicings and Comping* (Michael DiLiddo)

Tune Learning

- “Methods for Fighting the Epidemic of Tune Illiteracy” (JB Dyas), *DownBeat*, May, 2010
- “Methods for Fighting the Epidemic of Tune Illiteracy, Part 2” (JB Dyas), *DownBeat*, August, 2010

Jazz Band Directing

- “Jazzing Up Jazz Band” (JB Dyas), *DownBeat*, January, 2018

Combo Directing

- “Guidelines for Directing a Jazz Combo” (JB Dyas), IJD website – <https://jazzday.com/educational-resources>

Teaching Venues

- Colleges and Universities – *DownBeat*, annual October issue • *The College Music Society*: <http://www.music.org> • *Jazz in America*: <http://www.jazzinamerica.org/JazzResources/JazzEducation/College>
- Summer Jazz Camps – *DownBeat*, annual March issue
- Performing Arts High Schools – *Arts Schools Network*: <http://www.artsschoolsnetwork.org/membership-list.html>
- Public School Districts – *Wikipedia*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_school_districts_in_the_United_States
- Community Arts Organizations – *National Guild for Community Arts Education*: <http://www.nationalguild.org/MemberSearch/Member-Directory.aspx>

Resume

- *Resume Genius*: <https://resumegenius.com/how-to-write-a-resume>

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Dr. JB Dyas has taught jazz to students of all levels in a wide variety of venues, including middle and high schools, performing arts high schools, summer jazz camps, colleges and universities, jazz institutes, and more. His “How to Teach Jazz to High School and College Students” video series can be found free online at www.artistshousemusic.org. Formerly the executive director of the Brubeck Institute, Dr. Dyas currently serves as Vice President for Education and Curriculum Development at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at UCLA.