

Getting the Big Scholarship

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*Bass Audition at Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshop 2015
From Left: David Friesen, Tyrone Wheeler, John Goldsby, JB Dyas, Lynn Seaton*

If there were a category in the Guinness Book of World Records for the person who has served on the most jazz audition panels, I just might be a contender. Throughout my career, I have listened to myriad jazz auditions and juries and been part of and privy to the conversations of the panelists/jurors immediately following. And, I've subsequently seen just which students receive the big scholarships or placements in the top groups and why. This has given me keen insight into just what kind of audition playing reaps the big scholarship awards. Indeed, I've learned precisely what the panelists want to hear.

Based on these experiences, I offer my advice on how to prepare for and perform your auditions. I also provide pointers regarding letters of recommendation, how many schools to audition for, repertoire, and more. Follow these tips and you just might be going to college for free.

Preparation

- Visit the website early (NOW) for each school to which you're applying, to find out:
 - application requirements
 - recommendation letter procedures
 - due dates
 - audition requirements
 - audition procedures
 - audition dates
- Start preparing NOW for your audition, i.e., listen to definitive recordings, memorize heads and changes, transcribe the masters, practice with play-along recordings DAILY (just like you were playing a seven-night per week gig), etc.
- Learn as many "must-know" standards and jazz classics as possible.
- Play with a live rhythm section as often as possible.
- Select audition tunes you really KNOW, having played them for months (if not years).
- Play mock auditions for your teachers, family, and friends.
- Plan to audition for as MANY schools as possible, including ALL those within reasonable driving distance from your home. The more you audition, the better you get at it.
- Work on your sight-reading. Two excellent books are *Melodic Rhythms for Guitar* (William Leavitt) and *Reading Contemporary Guitar Rhythms* (M.T. Szymczak). Both are good for all treble clef instruments. For bass clef, I suggest *Developing Sight Reading for All Bass Clef Instruments, Volumes 1 & 2* (Gaston Dufresne). Sight-read DAILY.

Letters of Recommendation

- Request letters from your band director and primary private lesson teacher, plus noted artists who know your playing (often the more famous the name, the more clout the letter will have). Ask for these letters at least six weeks before the due date.
- Send your writers an updated copy of your curriculum vitae (CV) that includes all your school and professional experience, awards won, prominent players with whom you've performed, honor ensembles with which you've performed, tours you have taken, jazz camps you've attended, etc. Make sure this looks professional with standard formatting and no misspelled words.
- Provide your writers with specific instructions on how to submit their letters (e.g., online, via regular mail, etc.) and the due date. Provide them with the exact name, title, mailing address, and email address of the person to whom the letter is to be written (e.g., director of admissions) of each school to which you are applying.
- Ask your writers if they'd be willing to cc a copy of the letter to others who might have influence, e.g., each school's dean of music, director of jazz studies, and primary instructor of your instrument. Provide them with email addresses.
- Have as many letters written as possible. If the school requires, say, three letters of recommendation or three recommendation forms completed online, that doesn't preclude others "on their own" from emailing the director of admissions, dean of music, director of jazz studies, and/or primary teacher of your instrument on your behalf. An extra letter or two from accomplished artists and teachers can make a difference.
- Check with each college's admissions office two weeks before the recommendation letter due date to see which letters have been received. For those not yet received, gently and respectfully remind your writers of the due date (via email). Do the same three days before the due date. If any of your writers missed the deadlines, notify them by email that it's not too late (a late letter is better than no letter). Provide them again with the names and email addresses of the recipients.
- Email each writer a thank-you note once you know their recommendation letters have been received.
- Send an email update to your writers once you've decided on which school you'll be attending to inform them of your decision and thank them again for their help. If you've received a scholarship, let them know and thank them for their part in making that happen as well.

Audition Repertoire

- Visit the website for each school to which you are applying to review the required audition repertoire.
- Have *at least* three tunes memorized in each category for those schools that provide a choice of styles from which to choose (e.g., up-tempo bebop tune, straight-eighth contemporary tune, ballad, etc.).
- Have *at least* three tunes memorized in each category for those schools that provide a specific tune list from which to choose (e.g., three tunes from Column A, three from Column B, etc.).
- Know at least three blues heads and be able to play them in both F and Bb.
- Know at least three rhythm changes tunes (key of Bb).
- Quote from other blues and rhythm changes tunes (as well as from solos of the masters playing on these tunes) when soloing on blues and rhythm changes. Do not over-quote (i.e., quote sparingly), but your playing should subtly let the audition panel hear that you know multiple blues and rhythm changes tunes and that you've checked out solos of the masters.

Scales and Arpeggios

- Know and be able to play the most common jazz chord scales and their related arpeggios in all keys.
- When playing scales, start on the root, then ascend to the highest practical scale tone on your instrument, descend to the lowest practical scale tone on your instrument, and ascend to and conclude on the root (the same note on which you started).
- When playing arpeggios, start on the root, then ascend the chord tones up to the 9th, descend chord tones to and conclude on the root (the same note on which you started).
- Play 1 3 #5 b7 #9 for dominant 7 altered.

At the Audition

- Bring very readable lead sheets with you to the audition for piano, bass, and drums just in case a house combo is there to accompany you.
- Have all repertoire memorized.
- Dress up (jacket and tie for the men; dress or pants with nice top for the women).
- Be personable.

Performing/Soloing

- Make it obvious that you've checked out the definitive recording:
 - phrase at least a portion of the head as on the definitive recording
 - quote a phrase or two from solos on the definitive recording
 - quote sparingly, but do quote, **subtly** letting the audition panel hear that you've done your due diligence vis-à-vis listening and transcribing
- DEVELOP your solo, i.e., start somewhere and take it somewhere.
- Strive to climax your solo on the penultimate bar of your last chorus, winding it down for the last couple of measures and ending your solo on the first or second bar of the next chorus on a color tone of the chord, letting it sustain.
- Refer to the melody of the tune you're playing, dropping it in from time to time organically (so it doesn't sound contrived).
- Have your solo develop organically from bebop language to contemporary language (in that order).
- Strive to have your solo reflect not only your knowledge of the language of the idiom, but also the makings of your own unique voice.
- Don't solo too long (two or three choruses on a medium tempo 32-bar standard, or four or five choruses on a 12-bar blues, is appropriate).
- Listen and respond to the rhythm section. Make this obvious.
- Play at a volume that is appropriate for the rhythm section and the room in which you are playing.
- Play with quality sound, intonation, articulation, time, and technique (essential). Swing!
- Be CLEAR (most important!).

Pianists

- In addition to all of the above, make sure you can comp chords to all of the tunes you're playing.
- Be able to comp two-handed voicings when accompanying others, and one-handed voicings (left hand) when accompanying yourself.
- When comping behind a soloist, make it obvious that you are listening and responding.
- Demonstrate the following techniques when soloing: right hand soloing with left hand comping, two-hand unison soloing (hands two octaves apart), and block chordal soloing.
- Prepare at least one *solo piece*, i.e., a standard to be played unaccompanied.
- Be able to play the most common jazz chord scales and their related arpeggios in the right hand while sustaining the related chord in the left hand.

Guitarists and Vibraphonists

- Make sure you can comp chords to all of the tunes you're playing.
- Comp four-note, rootless voicings for the most part.
- When comping behind a soloist, make it obvious that you are listening and responding.
- Demonstrate the following techniques when soloing: single line soloing, octaves (a la Wes Montgomery), and chordal.
- Prepare at least one *solo piece*, i.e., a standard to be played unaccompanied as a chord solo.

Bassists

- Outline the harmony at hand CLEARLY when walking bass lines (e.g., play correct 3rds, 7ths, and alterations), landing on the roots EVERY TIME as the chords change during the first chorus. You may land on other chord tones as the chords change on subsequent choruses, however, the root should still be attacked most of the time, especially at crucial points in the chorus, e.g., the first beat of the first bar of each section, clearly anchoring the form. Use skips, drops, and triplets sparingly. Use a wide range of the instrument, from low open E up to at least high G (6th position/G string). Construct lines that are linear (scalar and chromatic) as well as chordal. Play long, connecting notes (legato). Swing.
- Make sure you can play the head and improvise a solo on all tunes (see Performing/Soloing above). Play at least a portion of your solo in thumb position. Use vibrato sparingly.
- Be able to play each tune with a variety of grooves, e.g., swing (be able to play in 2 as well as 4), Latin (e.g., bossa, samba), funk, rock, etc. Make sure you can use the bow on at least one tune.
- Prepare at least one standard to be played completely unaccompanied. For example, play an intro, play the head, walk, solo, play the head, play an outro.
- Play with a good sound (of the utmost importance); if playing with an amp, carefully adjust the sound before you begin to play. Dig in. Swing hard.
- Play with solid time, a good time feel, and excellent intonation. This is critical.

Drummers

- Prepare to play the following grooves on the drum set at all tempos (in addition to whatever snare drum and mallet requirements there are): swing (including both a 2-feel and straight ahead jazz 4 feel with both sticks and brushes), bossa nova, samba, rock, and funk.
- Be able to trade fours with yourself (alternating between four bars of time and four bars of soloing). Likewise, be able to trade eights with yourself.
- Be able to trade 12-bar blues choruses with yourself (alternating between 12 bars of time and 12 bars of soloing).
- Be able to play a tune completely solo, stating the head (rhythmically) around the kit, playing time, trading fours or eights with yourself, and playing the head out. Make sure the form is CLEAR.
- When playing with a soloist and/or rhythm section, make sure it is obvious that you're listening and responding to the other players. Delineate the form CLEARLY (via fills between sections, playing the bridge differently, changing cymbals for different soloists, etc.). Make it obvious that you KNOW the tune.
- Remember TGIF (time, groove, interaction, feel).

Submitting an Audition Recording

- Do not submit a flawed recording (record as many takes as necessary to get it right).
- Do not include other soloists on your recording (unless you are a rhythm section player demonstrating your accompaniment skills). If you are editing an extant recording of a live performance and you're not the first soloist: fade out after the head statement, then fade up four bars before your solo begins so that there's only a few seconds after the end of the head before the beginning of your solo; fade out after your solo is over.
- Record with the best rhythm section that you can afford.
- Submit the best quality recording that you can afford.

Piano for Non-Pianists

- Be able to comp (two-handed and one-handed voicings) for: II V I's in major (all keys), II V I's in minor (all keys), blues in Bb and F, and rhythm changes in Bb.
- Be able to play all the tunes in Aebersold Play-Along Volume 54 ("Maiden Voyage") as follows: head in right hand, comp in left hand; solo in right hand, comp in left hand; and two-handed comping.

At the Interview

- Speak loudly, clearly, and definitively.
- When asked about your goals, include, as applicable, your wanting to:
 - be a well-rounded, thorough musician in addition to becoming an artist with your own voice
 - perform, compose, arrange, and teach
 - give back; promulgate and perpetuate the art form (teaching, conducting clinics)
 - serve the underserved, e.g., present school outreach programs teaching today's youth about jazz and, especially, the values it represents, including teamwork, democracy, persistence, and the vital importance of really listening to one another
- Be personable, serious (but not stiff), confident (but not arrogant), humble, and deferential.

Scholarship Appeal Letters

- If your scholarship offer is less than \$100%, you may (and should) appeal.
- Call the admissions department and ask to whom the letter should be addressed (e.g., admissions director, dean of enrollment management, etc.). Send a courtesy copy (cc) to the director of jazz studies.
- The letter should be respectful, not arrogant, and not "dramatic." Make sure it is grammatically correct with no misspelled words or typos. It should include:
 - a thank-you for the scholarship award thus far offered
 - your economic hardship
 - your impressive achievements
 - your willingness to re-audition if need be
 - your having received generous scholarship offers from other prestigious schools of music
 - what you will do in return for the school
- If the second scholarship offer is still less than 100% of full tuition, you may (and should) appeal a second time. If the subsequent offer is still less than 100%, you may appeal again (but no more than three times total).

General Tips

- Apply early and audition late. The later you audition (within the possible audition date timeframe), the better (more time to practice).
- Make sure you know the composers and personnel of the definitive recordings of the tunes you are playing so that if asked, you can answer intelligently.
- Keep in mind that playing well on easier tunes trumps playing poorly on more difficult tunes, and playing well at a medium tempo trumps playing poorly at a fast tempo.
- Enjoy the experience. Make it obvious.

Valuable Articles and Websites

- “Getting the Big Scholarship” (JB Dyas) – *DownBeat*, October, 2015
http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2015/DB1510/single_page_view/140.html
- “Prepare to Nail Your Auditions” (Geoffrey Himes) – *DownBeat*, October, 2013
http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2013/DB201310/single_page_view/100.html
- Majoring in Music – <http://majoringinmusic.com>
- Financial Resources for Future Musicians: Scholarships, Tips, and Money Management Secrets
<https://couponfollow.com/research/future-musicians-guide>
- Jazz in America Guide to College and University Jazz Programs
<http://www.jazzinamerica.org/JazzResources/JazzEducation/College>
- “Methods for Fighting the Epidemic of Tune Illiteracy” (JB Dyas) – *DownBeat*, May, 2010
http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2010/DB201005/single_page_view/114.html
- “Methods for Fighting the Epidemic of Tune Illiteracy - Part 2” (JB Dyas) – *DownBeat*, August, 2010
http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2010/DB201008/single_page_view/82.html
- List of Jazz Standards Ranked by Most Recorded – <http://www.jazzstandards.com>
- List of 100 Must-Know Tunes – <http://www.hopestreetsmusicstudios.com/articles/100-must-know-jazz-tunes>
- Resume Help – <http://jobsearch.about.com/od/sampleresumes/a/sampleresume2.htm>

Tune Learning and Final Thoughts

It has been my experience that, in general, the more tunes a student knows, the better jazz player he/she is. Needless to say, having a memorized repertoire of standards and jazz classics gives you more breadth, depth, and credibility as a musician. Hence, the more tunes one knows, usually the higher the scholarship award. And although I’ve yet to conduct an empirical research study on the topic, the anecdotal evidence I’ve accumulated over the past couple of decades points to a correlation of just about \$1,000 per tune. For example, I’ve found that if a student knows 50 tunes, he/she is likely to receive a 25% scholarship, i.e., \$50,000 (that’s right, a bachelor’s degree at a top school costs about \$200,000 these days). If he/she knows 100 tunes, a 50% scholarship is the norm. And I’ve never met a student who knew 200 tunes who didn’t receive a full ride! So start memorizing tunes NOW. It will pay off, *literally*. For a methodical procedure on how to memorize and retain tunes (and just which ones to learn), see my two-part article “Methods for Fighting the Epidemic of Tune Illiteracy” in the May 2010 and August 2010 issues of *DownBeat* (links to these article are provided in the Valuable Articles and Websites resource list above).

And finally, remember that *clarity* is paramount. Often, the final judgment as to the amount of your scholarship award is based more on how *clear* you are than anything else. This means that your playing should *clearly* demonstrate that you are in the know, that is, you KNOW the tune, you KNOW the changes, you KNOW the language of the style, and you KNOW the definitive recordings. “Skating” on your solo doesn’t fool anyone. Now go for it!

Formerly Executive Director of the Brubeck Institute, Dr. JB Dyas currently serves as Vice President for Education and Curriculum Development at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz.

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