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Young jazz musicians improvise career paths

By George Kanzler
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"Most of the people I graduated high school with have their college degrees now," says Adam H. Niewood, 22, of Glen Ridge. "But they don't know what they're going to do, what kind of jobs to look for - they're lost."

Niewood may be a member of that same age group - call them twenty somethings or Gen-Xers who have recently entered the adult world with few moorings and little sense of purpose. But he can't be characterized the same way.

"Compared to them," he says, "I at least have a sense of direction. I know where I want to go."

The always demanding and often financially less-than-rewarding life of a jazz musician is what Niewood wants. And he's not alone. He's one of many young New Jersey musicians facing the rewards and challenges of pursuing the jazz life today. Their approaches to the music and individual styles may differ, but they all share a dedication and sense of purpose.

"You have to make a lot of sacrifices, put in a lot of time and pretty much not have a life to be a jazz musician," says 21-year-old trumpeter James Gibbs III, of Irvington. "That's why I'm not as far along as Nicholas Payton (the young trumpet wunderkind from New Orleans who made his major label debut as a leader at 20 in 1994). I want to have a life for myself, too."

Gibbs shouldn't be too hard on himself, though. He only took up the trumpet five years ago, and already he's been a member of the late Betty Carter's Jazz Ahead national talent search program, and appeared on stage at the New Jersey Performing Arts center, co-leading his own quintet.

"My love of jazz came from trying to learn it, to understand it," says guitarist B.D. Lenz, 27, of Parsippany. "You just get sucked in. But it's a struggle to find work and to be able to put the time into it that it deserves."

"When I was doing my military service in Israel," says violinist Miri Ben-Ari, 27, who now lives in Jersey City, "I bought a CD of Charlie Parker's music. When I heard it, I knew that was it. Jazz was what I had to do."



Photo by William Perlman
(From left) James Gibbs III, Miri Ben-Ari, B.B. Lenz, Adam H. Niewood and Winston Byrd are all pursuing careers in jazz.

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Star-Ledger File Photo
Trumpeter James Gibbs, 21, shown performing with a youth ensemble at NJPAC, says he is willing to sacrifice to become a jazz professional, but "I want to have a life for myself too."

"So five years ago Ben-Ari, whose violin studies and playing had all been" classical and Middle Eastern music to that point, bought a plane ticket to New York, enrolling at the Mannes School of Music at the New School University and becoming involved in the Big Apple's vibrant jazz scene.

"I was just a typical kid interested in the pop music of the day when the teacher played a Maynard Ferguson album in middle school music appreciation class," says trumpeter Winston Bird, 25, of South Orange. "When I heard that record it was like being hit in the head with a baseball and seeing stars. I had a goal, to play trumpet in big bands as much as I could."

Bird became such a proficient lead trumpeter in high school that when his school's jazz band program in South Jersey became moribund he became a "ringer," playing lead for other high school big bands in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Bird is unique in that he hasn't studied jazz at the college level. After high school, he enrolled at the Mannes School of Music, but after only two days of classes he got an offer he couldn't refuse - joining the backup band for the vocal group the Stylistics on a world tour. He never went back to school.

"I'm not knocking college, but I've learned a lot out here," says Bird of his years with such jazz big bands as David Murray's, Illinois Jacquet's, the Duke Ellington Orchestra and the Count Basie Orchestra.

Last summer Bird played in a big band performing Dizzy Gillespie's music at an outdoor concert in South Orange's Floods Hill Park. The leader was trumpeter Jon Faddis, a protege of the late bebop giant.

"Jon Faddis is my hero," says Bird, who now plays a trumpet given' to him by Faddis. "He is the most musical and versatile musician around today, and he's someone I can talk to and learn from."

"Niewood doesn't have to look to bands or recordings for a hero and role model; he lives with his. Gerry Niewood, his father, is a jazz saxophonist, clarinetist and flutist best known for his work with Chuck Mangione. It was playing on stage as a young teenager with his father at a Mangione concert that "sent me along the road to jazz," says the younger Niewood.

Currently a student in the jazz program at William Paterson University in Wayne, Niewood also studied for two years at the Berklee School of Music in Boston. Last month, he played with an award-winning William Paterson student jazz sextet at the JVC Jazz Festival in New York, and with a band led by a former colleague at Berklee at the DuMaurier Toronto Jazz Festival.

Gibbs says that just playing the trumpet made him aware of jazz. Then percussionist Lawrence Killian, a family friend, introduced him to the Jazz Institute of New Jersey (formerly the New Brunswick Jazz Institute), where he began learning improvisation with other teens. That's when he heard recordings

percussionist Lawrence Killian, a family friend, introduced him to the Jazz Institute of New Jersey (formerly the New Brunswick Jazz Institute), where he began learning improvisation with other teens. That's when he heard recordings by trumpeters who would become his heroes, including Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, Roy Hargrove and Payton. He's now studying at Delaware state University with veteran jazz trumpeter Donald Byrd.

"My goal is to make it as a jazz musician/artist," he says, "but I'd also like to teach in the Newark school system. We need to bring the music back to the kids while they're young and be serious about it, teach them to like it because it's rewarding to play."

When Lenz went to the Musicians Institute in Los Angeles after high school, he wasn't that interested in jazz.

"I was into the burning guitar player thing," he says, "but I loved and really wanted to study music. I loved rock music too, but it can only take you so far as a musician, I want to know my instrument as much as possible and that road leads to jazz."

Ben-Ari thinks of jazz more as the starting point for the musical roads she wants to travel. "Yes, I studied jazz and I'm addicted to jazz," she says, "but I see myself as merely a musician, without labels. I want to be open-minded about my music and I want to talk to as many people as possible with it. Jazz gives you a freedom that other music and musicians don't have, but at a very high level. Which is why my roots are in jazz."

The five all have different takes on jazz, at least the music they want to play. Bird wants to have as "many different musical experiences as I can, playing lead and section in big bands, yes, but also developing the vocabulary playing solos in small groups." Ben-Ari's goal is to "make as beautiful music as I can and make many people happy, including myself," whether it's bebop-based, Middle Eastern-tinged or funky.

Niewood, who sees jazz as changing and fusing with different musical styles, admits being influenced by bebop and rock, but wants to work as a sideman with musicians he admires while developing a "classical approach to improvisation, using counterpoint and thematic development."

Lenz, who is comfortable with the term fusion, sees jazz divided between "the purists who want to keep it as it is and those, like myself, who want to try to mix it with whatever is current, so wherever pop music goes you try to blend that into your jazz." Gibbs is more interested in straightahead playing, like his heroes, and of "how to keep in a jazz zone."

However differently they view the music, one thing about which all five agree is the feeling of artistic accomplishment they derive from playing it. As Lenz says, there is "great personal satisfaction in having this creative outlet, being able to pursue something and become really good at it." Or as Bird says, "I love playing as much as possible, it keeps the horn in your face and that's what makes me feel good."