

## Ghetto Classics - Nairobi, Kenya

October 23 - December 4, 2024

My time in Nairobi working with students from Ghetto Classics - Michael Tracy

Ghetto Classics is the flagship program for the Art of Music Foundation which is based in Nairobi, Kenya. This non-profit was established in 2007 to help the children of Korogocho, one of Nairobi's largest slums, through music and arts activities. There is little formal infrastructure for the 300,000 residents of Korogocho, which borders one of Nairobi's main rubbish dumps - Dandora. The inhabitants, especially the children, face a bleak existence yet find purpose by obtaining an education via music. This is especially important since there is no free public education available for these students.

"We use music education to provide the youth with opportunities to better themselves and their community. We do this by instilling in them the life skills that come with the discipline of studying art music. Our programme also provides them with income generating opportunities."

I found Ghetto Classics to be a very unique organization, especially since many teachers were themselves students from the program. From what I could tell most were self-taught, certainly with no formalized university directed music education background, yet I found the teachers to be highly motivated and committed to the program and to the success of their students. They have a great deal of pride in what they do and are excellent, caring role models, especially for the younger children. I also found the individual faculty members to be curious and eager to experience new materials, different approaches to music education and to the art of teaching.

The students varied greatly in age, from 7 or 8 to early 20's, with a skill level from very beginning to proficient at an early high school level, with all often in an ensemble together. In addition to their difficult home environment, these students face challenges that would easily overwhelm others when studying music - second and third hand instruments that are frequently shared and in great need of repair. In general they lack basic items such as strings, reeds, quality mouthpieces, neck straps, even cork grease and pencils. Rehearsal space is limited and ever changing, there is a lack of music stands and the ones they have are not adjustable. Many had to sit on benches during rehearsals which are better suited for sporting events not a music ensemble. In addition to getting guidance from their teachers, the students helped each other when facing a question. While kind and thoughtful, this often led to issues with instrumental technique, with properly reading music, not fully understanding general concepts regarding ensemble playing to name just a few. Finally, the students could not practice outside of the time they were at school because few owned their instrument. They were not allowed to take borrowed ones home for fear of them being broken or stolen. Some - like a cello, tuba, Sousaphone or string bass - were just too large to carry since almost everyone walked large distances to school.

While I found these challenges and more, I also found, without exception, keenly interested students, ones who were exceptionally appreciative, respectful, and they

were very bright. Their smiles were infectious and sincere, often breaking your heart. They worked hard, trying to accomplish what was asked of them and eventually felt safe enough to ask questions knowing that they would be taken seriously. They had a sense of pride in what they were doing and I feel honored to have worked with them.

I knew when accepting the assignment that I was going to face a situation that I had never experienced previously but I had no idea of the depth of need Ghetto Classics was successfully addressing and how these individuals benefitted. I taught at two different locations - St. John's School in Korogocho and the Ruben Center in Mukuru - both ghettos next to the Dandora dump - and my travel to and from each location took me directly through each ghetto. It was very difficult for me to witness the struggle the inhabitants faced daily, yet it compelled me even more to do all I could possibly do to help those in my classes.

Since its inception, the ensembles at Ghetto Classics focused successfully on classical orchestra and concert band material. My task was to introduce the students to jazz and improvisation. I was prepared to have small, combo-like, or more traditional jazz ensembles. I quickly discovered that neither option was really a possibility and that I first needed to help the students to establish a working knowledge of musical study that none of the group had ever experienced. The instrumentation was also very imbalanced with a combination of alto saxes and clarinets, a flute, a bassoon, a few violins, a viola and cello, a French horn, two trumpets, a trombone and tuba. Unfortunately there was no rhythm section - piano, bass or drums - at first. Their collective skill level was quite varied. This posed a major challenge when reading any arrangement. I spent a good deal of time transposing and writing out parts so that everyone would get a chance to play. This was certainly not your typical jazz ensemble/ big band yet it all eventually came together.

Developing my schedule and when rehearsals would occur proved to be challenging. All activities at Ghetto Classics occur after the school day, which limits the time available for any group to meet. The students also needed to walk to the school, which took time, varying from individual to individual. There were also competing activities (rehearsals and performances) that were already planned that we had to work around. In addition, it was a 30 to 60 minute drive, depending on traffic, from my hotel to the school. It took a few days before we were able to settle on a 2:00 to 4:00/5:00 daily rehearsal schedule at Korogocho and a 10:00 to 12:00 time at Mukuru on Saturday mornings. It was important to establish a consistent time and location.

Improvisation was not something that I tried right away. Most were very reluctant to try improvising for fear of making mistakes and failing in front of their peers. This is not unusual and happens whether the individual is new to music or an accomplished performer, in Kenya or the United States. Many just don't feel comfortable expressing themselves, it takes time and encouragement for most folks to begin to improvise as a soloist even at the most basic level. In order to develop the necessary skills and willingness to improvise, we then spent a great deal of time engaged in call and response activities.

After introducing them to how they could use material that they already knew, like major and minor pentatonic scales, I would play a short idea and the group would then play it back to me. They caught on quickly and I was able to expand while challenging them. Next, I reversed the roles, where each participant would play their own musical phrase for me and the others to play back. This proved to be highly successful and it was clear that the group was enjoying the interchange. It was clear that the group in general was improving day-by-day, becoming more free to express themselves without fear of failure.

Since jazz and improvisation was new to everyone, it was important for me to stress listening to jazz masters, describing in terms they could understand what was going on and how to learn from what they heard. I repeatedly demonstrated on my saxophone and keyboard melodic ideas, how rhythms are played, differences in articulation, interactions between the performers and much more. I often played the progressions from specific recordings on the keyboard so they could begin to experience just what an improviser would hear and how they would react.

Next, I introduced playing famous blues melodies, simple ones by Sonny Rollins, Milt Jackson, Clifford Brown, Charlie Parker and more. Doing so also helped me to introduce to many jazz masters. I played recordings and demonstrated how I would play these tunes and outline the harmony when soloing. These activities were helping individuals in the ensemble to hear and work on tone, rhythmic concepts, articulation, phrasing and more. More and more they were willing to try to improvise.

I would frequently meet with individuals for small group (3 to 6) and private lessons. During such lessons I would focus on the needs of each student(s) ranging from repairing their instrument to working on specific passages, how to improvise, answering their questions, even just listening to their hopes and dreams. As time passed, it became clear that I was viewed as a supportive resource for many, which I gladly welcomed.

A fairly consistent routine was established by the end of the third week. Sufficient groundwork had been established thus enabling me to focus on reading through and rehearsal large jazz ensemble music, all the while continuing to stress improvisation. There was a culminating concert scheduled for the end of the sixth week which helped to define the type and number of selections the group would perform. Three pieces were selected - I would direct two and Erick Ochieng, the Music Director, would direct another where I was the featured soloist. The two selections I directed had ample space for as many solos as desired.

A number of quite specific occurrences helped to define my interactions with the students. I will note just a few.

- There were only six or seven saxophones at my first meeting. As time passed, the number of attendees grew from a very consistent fifteen, ending with about sixty at my final rehearsal. The group of 7 saxophones grew to include 6 to 8 clarinets, 3 flutes, a bassoon, 3 French horns, up to 10 trumpets, 4 trombones, a tuba, a Sousaphone, up

to 10 violins, 3 violas, 3 cellos, a string bass, 4 drummers and a pianist. While the growth in numbers was gratifying, I was most pleased with the enthusiasm and now a about 1/3 being willing to improvise within the selected arrangements. There are videos that show the development of the group and their work as soloists.

- I believe that my work with the teachers, helping them to improvise and understand ways of encouraging others to do so as well, was important and highly valued. They will need to help continue the work that was started during my visit. They asked the right questions and seemed to understand the new opportunities now available for them and their students. I offered to be a resource for them and my willingness to meet via Zoom or like program to continue our work.
- Before a rehearsal a student asked if he and a friend could play a tune for me - of course, I'd love to hear them. They had learned Sonny Rollins' St. Thomas by ear from YouTube. They started playing and did a fine job, especially considering how they learned the tune. I helped them correct a few errors and then accompanied them on the keyboard. It was obvious that they enjoyed playing with the accompaniment, which helped to make their solos more interesting. This was all especially gratifying because they took the initiative to work on a piece outside of class. Later I asked both Daniel (trombone) and Willys (alto saxophone) to join me in performances at The Tribe Hotel and for the US Embassy. They had a great time and did very well.
- I performed at various venues in Nairobi which helped to broaden the audience for jazz and jazz education. I took every opportunity to share my music and to be involved within the local music scene. These events often supported Ghetto Classics through donations to the program. Performances were given for the US Embassy, The Tribal Gallery (3 total), The Tribal Hotel, Shamba Cafe, Dagoz Soul Café and even a jam session at the German ambassador's residence (he is a fine jazz pianist). I was fortunate to have a former student, bassist Jonathan Gardner, put together a quality ensemble to play with. His wife works at the UN and he now lives in Nairobi. In fact, Jonathan helped organize the connect between Ghetto Classics and myself.
- Following a full ensemble rehearsal, I met with a group of students who were interested in improvising on our final concert. Each volunteered to solo and were willing to stay longer to practice. I view this as a significant success, especially considering none of these individuals had ever done something like this previously and certainly would not have done so just a few weeks ago. Please check out the video of our time together.
- Time was winding down, my last day for classes and rehearsals, and I was supposed to spend two hours with the teachers at Mukuru. That all changed, they were at Korogocho due to a pre-scheduled concert. This happened frequently, something else is scheduled but they overlooked telling me, very frustrating. That said, without a doubt that last day was my most meaningful day of teaching here.

I first started with a young group of clarinets, helping with articulations. They caught on quickly and we were able to expand on what their teacher, Everton, had been doing. It was both productive and fun for them and me. Everton then put together students from Mukuru who played in the large jazz group. They are bussed over each rehearsal and were at the Ruben Center, waiting to be bussed over to Korogocho. There were eleven in this group and of fairly different skill levels. Three of the young clarinets joined in. I had certainly not planned on working with this type of combination - 2 trumpets, 3 altos, 2 trombones, a flute and 3 clarinets (beginners) - but it was time for me to improvise. I asked if they could bring me a keyboard and they did.

So we started playing a Bb concert major scale with me accompanying. Each played 8 to 16 measures, starting with the major scale. Some did so willingly while others really pushed back on even trying. We did this repeatedly and everyone clearly improved and became more comfortable, especially this very young clarinetist, maybe 8 or 9 years old. He said he'd been playing a little over a year. His sound was small but clear and he had no fear of playing, which he did willingly. I was amazed at how musically he played. Ideas and lines that he should not know but he played them naturally. His time (rhythm) was good until he ran into technical issues but he got back on track. I just let him play and when he was done I could see that he was tearing up and it was emotional for me too. He touched something inside himself that day that cannot be explained. I could not believe what this young man did and he did it repeatedly and without fear. Others in the group recognized this too and they all seemed to improve.

It was clear that each was now feeling more comfortable and willing to try. That was a big step for them because my guess is that they rarely get the opportunity to explore in a safe environment, not just music but anything. I think they also felt that what they played, as simple as it was, was valued. It was a great 90 minutes for us all. I have a video of that class, with this young man and others playing. It is worth viewing.

- The final concert (and meeting) was on Sunday, December 1. The jazz group opened and closed the Ghetto Classics Holiday event with another selection - Two Hearted River - in the middle surrounded by traditional holiday favorites. The concert was very well attended and festive, a good showcase for the band. The group played quite well and there were solos by ten different members. I was most pleased with the progress of the group and especially those soloing. One would not know this was the same group that I began working with six weeks ago. Hard work and their attention to details paid off, you could see it in their smiles.

I have offered to remain in touch with the administrators, faculty and students via email and video options. Several students made a point to express their interest in remaining in contact - a few have already written. I shared with administrators of Ghetto Classics and US Embassy staff that I would be interested in returning to continue what was begun. I have done so with other like institutions and would welcome the opportunity to do so with Ghetto Classics.

I have also offered to fund three to four scholarships specifically for Ghetto Classics teachers so that they could attend a jazz workshop that I coordinate in the summer. This would cover tuition and I will find home stays for these participants. They would need to cover air fare, VISA and about \$250 for meals. I believe focusing on the teachers is the best way to continue the jazz element of their program. Hopefully the administrators at Ghetto Classics and representatives from the US Embassy can work together to make this possible.

I would like to share that, before my departing for Nairobi, I reached out to friends, students and music organizations, about the need to help the students at Ghetto Classics obtain necessary items. I had spoken with the directors at Ghetto Classics before coming to find out what was most needed. I was able to raise right at \$5,000 for the purchase of reeds, mouthpieces, neck straps, cork grease and more. I was able to bring over 1,000 clarinet, saxophone, oboe and bassoon reeds - all greatly needed. I also wanted to help start a library of basic jazz books, etudes, audio play-along sets, small and large ensemble arrangements. Friends in the industry either gave me material or provided a significant discount for purchasing music. I was able to bring all arrangements and printed materials in digital format, thus saving shipping and allowing for there to be a permanent copy of all that could be shared. There are hundreds of arrangements, books, recordings and texts.

This was my fourth assignment via the Fulbright Specialist Program and I want to thank them for their continued trust and support. It would not have been possible without their help. I want to thank Wamuni Njoroge (Elizabeth), Erick, Everton, Alex, Phabian and the rest of the staff at Ghetto Classics. You all are doing amazing work and I am so thankful to have met you and honored to have played a small role in all you do. A thank you to Susan Muriungi and the folks at the US Embassy in Nairobi for helping to coordinate my visit. Thanks to Jonathan Gardner, Bill Parsons, Mike Douaire and Njihia Odups - enjoyed getting to play with you all, it was fun. Thanks to my friends and colleagues who donated in order to help these students, it made a big difference.

Finally, I want to thank the teachers and especially the students at Ghetto Classics for being so welcoming and curious, for letting me take them in a direction they had never experienced. One could not ask for a more receptive and cooperative group of individuals, readily open to suggestions and comments. I made so many new friends and know that you have had an impact upon my life. I too learned a great deal from our time together. I miss you and your glorious smiles. Until the next time - asante sana!!!

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