

Australia, Hamilton Island and Jazz Education

by Michael Tracy – Director, Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program at the University of Louisville

Imagine standing under a swaying palm tree, shading yourself from the blazing tropical sun; a welcome breeze off the ocean, helping to cool the 90+ degree heat; viewing some of the most spectacular land and seascapes anywhere in the world while waiting to go snorkeling on the Great Barrier Reef; walking on beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see; having parrots and cockatiels land almost at your feet; and all this to the sounds of jazz being played everywhere one can hear. Does such a paradise exist? Without question - you don't have to imagine it, you just have to go to Hamilton Island, Australia, where four times a year you can have just this experience - jazz in paradise. I know because during my brief stay on Hamilton Island I was able to feel, see, and hear all of this and more, first-hand. Never in my wildest dreams would I have anticipated such an experience, much less at the end of October, early November. Let me share how it all came about.

As Director of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies program, I frequently receive inquiries - students interested in our program, artists looking for performance opportunities, individuals I had met during my many travels wanting to renew our communications, questions about jazz and jazz education, and some regarding interesting projects. One such email arrived in mid-September from Glen Hodges, a jazz educator who runs the jazz program at Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM) in Mackay (pronounced Ma Keye), Australia. Glen found me via Jon Raney (NY) in his search for information on Louisville's guitar legend Jimmy Raney. Glen's PhD dissertation is on Jimmy and his influential role in jazz. He inquired if I thought it would be a good idea to visit Louisville while doing his research, and I replied that his research would not be complete without visiting Jimmy's hometown. I also mentioned that there were a number of longtime friends and musical colleagues of Jimmy who would welcome the opportunity to help him, thus helping get Jimmy his long overdue recognition. Glen accepted my suggestion and I immediately invited him to visit during Jazz Week 2006.

I also shared with Glen that I had been fortunate to have visited Australia five times in the late seventies/early eighties as a member of the Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops. My initial trip to Sydney was my first experience outside the United States, so exciting and memorable that it sparked my lifelong desire to travel and experience other countries and cultures. I told him how much I admired his country and that I hoped that my future journeys would once again include Australia.

Glen explained that his program had a highly unique relationship with Hamilton Island, located off the coast of Northern Queensland. He said that there had been considerable discussion between the jazz department and management on Hamilton about forming a relationship with an American jazz program to help further jazz and jazz education while also promoting the island. He asked if I thought UofL and our Jazz Program would be interested in exploring just such a relationship. It was an intriguing offer and there was of course no need to ask me twice. Curious to know more about the vision and scope of the project, I shared this

information with Christopher Doane, School of Music Dean, and he encouraged me to proceed. The next thing I knew I received a phone call from Glen inviting me to visit Australia to work with his students and experience Hamilton Island first-hand. The only catch was that I had to be there in less than two weeks! The reason for the short notice was that there was support for my visit with year-end funding and that classes ended on October 29. Their summer break occurs from November to March.

Traveling on such short notice is always possible but does have challenges. I had to obtain approval to leave during the middle of a semester, arrange for someone to cover my responsibilities, secure tickets, and to prepare for the unexpected. To further complicate matters, I had just sent my passport off for renewal not knowing I would need it to travel. Luckily I was able to expedite the process and my passport arrived two days before my departure. Next stop would be Hamilton Island.

The journey to Hamilton took more than 35 hours - Louisville, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Auckland, Brisbane, then Hamilton. It is a grueling trip with a 17 hour flight from LA to Brisbane alone. Because the plane was not full, I got to sleep the entire way so luckily I arrived to sun, beach and jazz fully rested with no jet-lag.

Glen and Derrin Kerr, his jazz colleague from CQCM, met me at the airport in an eight person golf cart, the primary mode of transportation on the island. What a shock from Louisville, where the weather was turning to fall. Here it was extremely bright and sunny, very hot in the sun but cooler in the shade, especially with the breeze, and I could hear a jazz group playing in the distance. What a welcome!

After settling in the five star hotel, Glen and Derrin began telling me their story. More than three years ago they approached the management on Hamilton Island about the possibility of having their groups perform there. The management not only thought it was a great idea but added that they had been interested in developing Hamilton as an educational and cultural destination and felt this would be a perfect fit. There are now four, week-long visits during the school year for all of the CQCM jazz students. Every student in the program performs, from the newest to graduating students. There are four to five groups each performing twice daily (approximately forty performances each week) throughout the island at clubs, by "Club Med" type pools at stunningly beautiful outdoor locations and at restaurants and other functions. The goal was to provide the students a first-hand, real world performing experience. They have succeeded. In addition, students have classes during the morning on a variety of topics related to their degree. Just think, a real world performing experience in a resort with classes being conducted in swimwear just minutes from the beach and Great Barrier Reef. Sound too good to be true?

The best part is that the management of Hamilton Island pays for transportation to and from the island, rooms and meals, provides space for classes, and supplements university funds to enable the hiring of outside educators to teach the afternoon sessions. To top that, the management and administrators of Central Queensland University are discussing the possibility of building a concert performance venue with teaching and practice rooms on the island and

possibly moving the entire jazz program to Hamilton. In addition, there is interest in hosting a week-long jazz clinic on the island much like is done at UofL during our summer jazz workshops. Funding would come from the university and island entrepreneurs. While not a certainty, everyone is hoping to reach a decision on these projects soon.

I listened in amazement as Glen and Derrin shared their project and dreams for the future. I know of nothing remotely like this type of cooperative relationship anywhere in the world. Certainly jazz bands are hired by numerous commercial ventures, usually on a limited basis, and often corporations provide support of various types, but there is nothing like the corporate/education relationship described by these innovative gentlemen. Clearly the management, their staff, local residents, and tourists alike really love live jazz.

My role during this visit was to listen to each student group, present morning workshops, provide comments and observations, perform alongside the faculty and students, and note the overall working relationship between all parties. The approximately 40 students played much like undergraduates at any institution of higher education in the States. The great thing was that the groups were truly performing jazz material, not commercial or watered-down arrangements. Varying in size from a quintet to septet, most groups included a vocalist who performed about half the selections. Each group was self-directed, thus requiring them to manage set-up and break-down, repertoire, dynamic balance and interacting with their audience in addition to performing. Performances ranged from two to three hours and were in a different location each day. Glen and Derrin, both excellent performers in their own right (Derrin plays trumpet), played alongside their students in one ensemble. My first opportunity to observe a group occurred almost immediately upon arrival. The location was at One Tree Hill, a spot that overlooked numerous neighboring islands and which provided an amazing view in every direction. Hardly anyone was present when they began, but within minutes people were walking and driving in on golf carts to hear them perform and enjoy the dramatic sunset. What a way to end a long trip and begin my stay.

The students worked very well with each other and often offered suggestions on how to improve their performances and to better interact within the group and with the audience. During the morning education session, Glen and Derrin offered an opportunity for the students to share their experiences and for them to pass on comments from the management. Next it was my turn to work with the entire group. Various ensembles performed for me so that I could offer suggestions, everything from standard jazz combos to a Motown group, from a blues group to a Latin ensemble. While the jazz combos are the most common performance group utilized on Hamilton (a nice turn of events!), the other more commercial groups often perform at the larger corporate and special events that occur frequently as part of the partnership. The jazz department has developed these to broaden the student's training and improve their employability. Glen says that while jazz is the primary focus of the course the commercial groups have actually increased the opportunities for jazz performances by enabling the jazz department to provide a varied product that enables a complete entertainment package to be offered. Interestingly, numerous

tourists stopped by the open walled meeting area during our morning sessions to listening to the students and to check out comments made by me and the faculty. It was amusing to look up and see people in various styles of bathing suits just hanging out, so to speak, during our sessions. Nothing like that ever happens at UofL.

Activities on Hamilton concluded for the group on Friday, which happened to coincide with the end of their term. Imagine spending the last week of your term, and for some their final term at university, on an island paradise playing music. Everyone then boarded boats to return to the mainland and an approximate two hour drive back to Mackay. The drive was highly interesting for me and a stark contrast to Hamilton - flat with mountains in the distance, very dry after years of drought, with miles and miles of sugar cane fields. Like the rest of Australia, there are very few towns between the main cities.

My time in Mackay was spent at the Conservatorium meeting administrators, interacting with students, and discussing a variety of possible ways for our two schools to work together. Both Glen and Derrin are currently working on their PhD degrees. Derrin's is specifically on the Hamilton Island project. He is documenting and looking for ways to define the unique relationship between the Conservatorium, students and Hamilton management. Each asked for my suggestions on their dissertations and Derrin conducted an extensive interview related to my observations. There was also discussion regarding their current three year degree and the possibility of adding a fourth or Honor's year. Many of their students are interested in attending universities in the States for a Master's degree. I explained how important it would be to have more than three years of training. We also discussed their including a Master's program at the Conservatorium. There is a great deal of interest and few programs outside of Sydney and Melbourne offer such an experience. Their challenge, like ours at UofL, is having enough qualified faculty to offer necessary courses. Ironically one of the possibilities offered by the Hamilton Island project is that they could possibly help secure the services of other jazz faculty positions for the Conservatorium jazz program.

I left Mackay having had a wonderful time developing new friendships, seeing up close how business and music programs can work together and having countless thoughts about how our two programs might work together to benefit our students. I feel certain that Glen and Derrin will be on our UofL campus during the upcoming months. Derrin plans to attend the International Association of Schools of Jazz Annual Meeting which is being hosted by the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program from June 25 - 30 and the Summer Jazz Workshops. While the weather at that time might be similar to what I experienced during my time in Australia, the rest will be vastly different.