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RAYON RICHARDS



# Designing Your Career — The Missing Link in Jazz Education

I remember watching an interview with Quincy Jones where he stated, “We as musicians forget that the music business is a business.” I couldn’t agree more. All the aspects of a business—scalability, sustainability, growth, vision and purpose—are all necessary to consider when trying to establish oneself as a business entity. And the music business is no exception.

On my first day of ensemble class at The Juilliard School, jazz drum veteran Carl Allen posed the question to our class, “Are you guys interested in making a living or designing a career?” I immediately raised my hand and asked, “Carl, what’s the difference?” He then said, “Young brother, when you make a living, you are working as a musician and only

focusing on what gigs/performance you will take, based on the monetary value only. When you are building a career, you are incredibly strategic about the placement each performance will create for you. You also begin to build your mind and your talent, learning to foster the right relationships, so that what you possess is a career, not a mere means of paying your bills.”

During my time at Juilliard (2001–2006), I discovered that, like most conservatories, there is a very antiquated approach to the business of music. I was taught what to study (the history of jazz), and what to play, but I was not taught how to take all those components and create a career. For example, I took a music business course with the classi-

cal majors and the focus was creating a beautiful headshot, formatting a nice resume and bio, and auditioning for particular orchestras. By my third year in school, the New York Times published two articles that changed my life. One, titled, “The Juilliard Effect; 10 Years Later,” (Dec. 12, 2004), cited several stories about students who obtained highly regarded degrees, but, because they weren’t taught how to build a career, they opted for more traditional paths in finance to sustain their growing economic needs. The second article, “As Funds Disappear, So Do Orchestras” (May 14, 2003), focused on the large number of orchestras closing down because of the lack of funding available to them.

Within the jazz department, the business

of music professor was great, yet his focus (with his admittance) was on an antiquated record-label model that was being shattered by the invention of the iPod, major shifts in CD sales and the emergence of streaming services like Apple Music and Spotify. Our first day in class, he asked, "What if Tower Records, didn't exist anymore?" We all thought he was the "Musical Anti-Christ," but within a year the Tower Records that we all loved on 66th Street went out of business, and all the other locations in New York closed within a year later. However, no true mention of career building was taught in that class, and when I speak to other students around the world, this pattern continues in most universities and conservatories globally.

What I found during my research of understanding when formal jazz education began (1947) and was introduced at colleges is that there has always been this tense relationship between the professional gigging musicians and their lack of desire for the art form to be taught within the institution. One of the key ways musicians in the past would learn from musicians is by forming a close relationships with them, like family, and integrating themselves into that musician's life by assisting them with whatever daily needs they had. In return, those musicians who were seeking knowledge would get information on how to play better or be allowed to shadow the more experienced musicians at gigs, which allowed the novices to gain more opportunity to be indoctrinated onto the jazz scene. Even Louis Armstrong gained his "stripes" by apprenticing with the great Joe "King" Oliver on trumpet. One of the pioneers of this music, Jelly Roll Morton, scorned formal jazz education and in many ways felt that creating an opportunity for this music to be learned outside of mentorship and adoration of the masters would dilute its power and impact.

The reality of this tension is still very much prevalent within jazz education, with scores of professional musicians feeling that if you are truly talented, school is no place for you. This attitude is one of the main reasons why within jazz programs, the subject of teaching business and entrepreneurship is taboo because there is a degree of learning that is still reserved for outside the institution.

However, that attitude is not only bullshit, but it is also a complete abandonment of responsibility from administrators. This abandonment of responsibility will cause a reversal of the system. Students will no longer think it's sensible to invest \$30–

# LESSONS IN CAREER-BUILDING

By Ulysses Owens Jr.

## LESSON #1: FINISH YOUR COLLEGE DEGREE

Within the first semester of my time at Juilliard, I met Mulgrew Miller, who became my mentor and started hiring me for gigs. In March 2002, he pulled up in a navy blue mini-van, and I loaded my drums into the trunk, hopped into the back seat with bassist Darryl Hall and began my first tour. That tour was short but amazing: Mulgrew led by example and showed me what it meant to really pursue the music. When the tour was done, he flew me back to school so I could make my classes. I was floating on Cloud 9, and I was no longer happy being in school. I had experienced more in the three days I was on tour with Mulgrew than I had in six months at the conservatory, so I didn't want to be in school anymore; I just wanted to play music. How did I navigate that? Mulgrew told me, "Ulysses, the road ain't going nowhere. Trust me, it will always be there." He assured me that I needed to get my college degree because something in my future would depend on the degree. He was right. I had no idea that after I graduated, I would end up starting an organization for inner-city kids that would utilize my college degree, and my network. College is also the perfect environment to intimately understand your weaknesses and work with a team of educators to fix and remove those weaknesses and refine your strengths.

**CHALLENGE:** Work on removing the anxiety that would make you shortcut the necessary experiences you will need to distinguish yourself in the world. Think about what is challenging you from completing your degree, and remove it, knowing that your future requires it.

## LESSON #2: UTILIZE FACULTY RESOURCES

After I graduated Juilliard, I planned my first recording. I selected the studio, the band, the tunes, etc., but I felt that I needed some assistance. Greg Knowles—the esteemed producer, label executive and drummer—came to my rescue because I always had a great relationship with him while in college. His input was incredibly insightful as he assisted me with the process of making that first album, and in many ways he taught me about the process. He was also the first person to tell me that I had the potential to be a producer.

**CHALLENGE:** Think about some resources and teachers within your current environment now, and try to envision how you can enlist their assistance for something you want to accomplish in the future.

## LESSON #3: WRITE THE VISION

School doesn't teach about money or how to create a budget and plan for future goals. I remember when I sat down with Greg Knowles and told him about my recording, the first thing he asked me to send him was an email of my "pre-production plan," including my budget, timeline and an outline of how I was going to complete this project. I said to him, "Sure, I have that. I'll send it when I get home." I didn't have it, and I had a lot of work to do when I got home. Young musicians today can rely on the power of Google and Wikipedia to find out how to properly write these documents. Google them and copy the format. Having this ability to understand how to truly create plans, budgets and realistic timelines will give you a skill that you can utilize the rest of your career.

**CHALLENGE:** Write a business plan for an idea that you have, even if you don't intend to implement it right away.

## LESSON #4: RELATIONSHIPS BUILD BRIDGES

Going to college in New York City was great because I was able to start working on my career in the environment that I would eventually be working in. This was a blessing, but it also came with challenges. I essentially was learning from professors and colleagues who were part of the jazz scene, so when I would make dumb mistakes, those were also the same people who would be considering me for opportunities in the future. I had a few issues with several professors where, to be honest, I was acting young, and a little cocky, especially once I started to work with professional artists. By my second year, I started working every weekend, and certain musicians started to know who I was, and it got to the point where I was on the rise a little. Foolishly, I thought my professors were impressed, and it made me mishandle some relationships. Honestly, I had to work hard to rebuild those bonds. I realized that once I graduated, these people would no longer be my teachers; they were my future colleagues. I see them now at festivals, recording sessions, the airport, etc., and having a good rapport with them is healthy for business and life.

**CHALLENGE:** Understand that relationships are incredibly key, and they will be the reason why opportunities come your way (or don't). Identify at least one mentor right now who can help you achieve your goals.

## LESSON #5: MAINTAIN A WORK ETHIC

Much of what I have been writing about in this article has to do with mental conditioning. However, action must always follow any intention, otherwise you will not be successful. I remember early in my college career, Victor Goines, who was the artistic director at Juilliard, called me out and basically said that I was talented but a little lazy. I resented him and that comment so much that I pledged at that moment that no one would ever be able to say that about me. Now people often say, "Man, you work so hard; you need to slow down." I much prefer to hear that than hear that I need to work harder. Remember, none of what you want to happen in your life will happen if you don't work.

**CHALLENGE:** Create a daily to-do list, and make yourself get into a routine of working on something constantly. This helps because when it's time to work on something important, you won't have to condition yourself to reach the goal.

DB



60K a year for four years of jazz “education,” only to still be lost and not fully educated on how to be successful in this art form. Jazz programs owe it to students, to give them a complete education and prepare them for the world at large. Medical schools, law schools, business schools, etc., prepare their students fully for the pitfalls they will encounter in the corporate world, and in the “startup business” culture.

One of the fortunate aspects of my career is that I get to teach and travel around the world and encounter many kinds of students. One commonality shared by students majoring in music, specifically jazz, is fear. The students I’ve encountered are afraid of having a degree that doesn’t translate to real value in the world. They are also fearful because they are not sure about how they connect with a scene of professional players with a large percentage of their career accomplishments not associated with jazz education programs, though they may currently teach in jazz programs.

We need to give this new generation answers, instead of just telling them how to preserve the art form of jazz, and when to play and/or echo the voices of yesterday. We need to answer a few hard questions. How will they survive? How will they build sustainable

careers? How will what they love and study create a life for them?

We are currently living in a time where the presidential office has plans to eliminate the National Endowment of the Arts. “45” refused to participate and show up at the Kennedy Center Honors celebration last year, which is the first time this has ever happened in the history of this country. “45” has also chosen to actively not be present at any such celebratory moments—not just for jazz, but for all fine arts in this country. We also lack a consistent national budget for festivals, unlike other countries that have a consistent place in their budgets to produce jazz, theater and other artistic events.

Facing this reality, students will have to be honest about the current climate and learn how to build and understand that multiple bands and opportunities aren’t necessarily awaiting them post-graduation. The number of bands and gig opportunities is steadily decreasing. What will define their success will probably be something they create themselves as they learn how to partner with other creative entities outside of the jazz world.

I would like to express my thanks to Carl Allen for this lesson, because it allowed me to create a secondary statement and pursue mul-

ti-ple career avenues. What Allen challenged me to do was look at my friends and colleagues who have careers in other fields (medicine, finance, academia, etc.), discern the goals and career arcs they have created for themselves and their families, and then apply the same principles to my own career.

I chose to design a career, and that career has and will continue to lead me to some incredible experiences.

My challenge to this new generation is to study jazz, learn everything you can about business and fully embrace the concept of entrepreneurship. Become inspired by multiple sources of knowledge, because that’s ultimately what will allow you to truly be successful. **DB**

Drummer, producer, educator and entrepreneur Ulysses Owens Jr. has toured and recorded with Christian McBride, Wynton Marsalis, Kurt Elling, Diane Schuur, Renee Fleming, Monty Alexander, Russell Malone, Mulgrew Miller, Marcus Printup and Joey Alexander. He has released three albums of his own, including 2014’s *Onward And Upward* (D-Clef). As co-leader of New Century Jazz Quintet, he has released two albums on the Japanese label Spice of Life: *Time Is Now* (2014) and *In Case You Missed Us* (2015). Owens’ writing journey began in October 2016 when he started chronicling his touring experiences and sharing them with his fans. Partnering with editor Geveryl Robinson, he found his voice by composing his blog “Words From U,” initially available on Owens’ website (usojazzy.com). He now publishes his blogs on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and has more than 20,000 followers. Owens is currently writing a book on music entrepreneurship that will serve as a resource to help artists and students design purposeful careers.



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