

## The Ocean County College Jazz Band

*This hidden gem swings and inspires with a contagious spirit*

By Sanford Josephson

When he was 16 years old, growing up in Ocean Township, NJ, Dave Marowitz first heard the Buddy Rich album, *Swingin' New Big Band* (Pacific Jazz: 1966). "I flipped," he recalled. "I knew this was the kind of music that I wanted to pursue."

While in college at Elon University in Elon, NC,

Marowitz met music publisher Charles Colin who provided him with contact information for

Lloyd Michels, then Rich's lead trumpet player. Marowitz sent Michels his arrangement of the Barry Mann/Cynthia Weil song "On Broadway," a hit for the Drifters in 1963. His arrangement was recorded by the band on the Rich album, *Big Band Machine* (Groove Merchant: 1975). "Lloyd said that Buddy liked the chart and wanted me to write more for the band," he recalled, "and so, I did. My arrangement of 'So What' (Miles Davis) was also recorded by his band."

Marowitz played trombone with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra and Jay and the Americans, among other gigs, before embarking on a 36-year career as an educator, beginning at Neptune Junior High School in 1977 and culminating with his retirement from the Hooper Elementary School in Toms River, where he taught instrumental music and was voted by his peers as "Teacher of the Year" during his last year in 2013.

During that final year at Hooper, he began teaching world music at Ocean County College, also in Toms River, and the following year added jazz history to his course load. "In the spring of 2014," he said, "we offered a course called 'beginning jazz theory and improvisation;' it was on the books but never happened." But since eight students registered, Marowitz decided to form a jazz band at the school.



The OCC Jazz Band: Front row, from left: Miranda Milne, bass clarinet and clarinet; Holden Swindell, trombone; Emily Boyer, baritone saxophone and clarinet; Diana McEntee, keyboards/piano; Tyler Ricker, vocals; Marcus Stephen, bass guitar/vibraphone. Back row, from left: Dave Marowitz; Jonathan Episcopo, trombone; Brandon Cooper, trumpet; Crystal Caruso, trumpet/flute; Aaron Bialoglow, trumpet; Brendan Merriney, guitar/bass guitar; Jordan Varga, alto saxophone/clarinet; Brianne Stendaro, drums. Photo by Francis Bal.

The Ocean County Jazz Band is now in its fourth year, and, based on the performance I saw on April 19 at One Flight Up in downtown Toms River, it has a bright future. Propelled by the energetic drumming of Brianne Stendaro, a future music therapy student at Montclair State, the 13-piece band played Marowitz's crisp arrangements of tunes ranging from Paul McCartney's "Get Back" to Herbie Mann's "Memphis

Underground" to the Gershwin standard, "I've Got a Crush on You," featuring a Sinatra-like vocal by Tyler Ricker. The finale, "Jumpin' Jack," written by Big Bad Voodoo Daddy guitarist/vocalist Scotty Morris, blew the roof off. (Could "Sing Sing Sing" be next up?)

What is special about this band is not just its musicianship but the spirit and camaraderie of the members. Many of the OCC jazz band members probably won't go on to music careers. But it is clear they are dedicated to making the band swing, and their visible support for each other was exciting and inspiring. "The way I see it," baritone saxophonist Emily Boyer told me, "our band is not just a band. We've created an immensely strong bond." Trombonist Jonathan Episcopo believes, "there is something special about the OCC jazz band. We can have fun while also sounding professional."

For "Jumpin' Jacks," Boyer switched from baritone to clarinet. She started playing clarinet in Point Pleasant Boro when she was nine years old. "In my senior year of high school," she said, "I was finally able to join the jazz band, as a school saxophone was available to me, and the instrument was the baritone saxophone. The baritone saxophone has always sparked my interest. The lower instruments — bassoon, bass clarinet, cello, baritone saxophone — are so rich in color and important to any piece. Without these supporting instruments, the melody wouldn't be interesting to listen to."

Switching between clarinet and saxophone, she added, “is the easiest transition between two instruments. The only differences are some of the fingerings and the weight of the baritone saxophone, which can be quickly adapted to.” Boyer hopes to major in music education and possibly minor or double-major in performance when she graduates from OCC.

Episcopo, along with the band’s keyboardist, Diana McEntee, is planning to major in jazz studies and composition at Rowan University. The jazz program at Rowan is directed by baritone saxophonist Denis DiBlasio, onetime musical director of the Maynard Ferguson Band and current executive director of the Rowan-based Maynard Ferguson Institute of Jazz Studies. Episcopo, who is from Tuckerton, NJ, credits Marowitz for inspiring him to follow a career in jazz. “My interest in jazz flourished during my first year attending Ocean County College,” he said, “when I took a jazz history course with Professor Marowitz. Before enrolling in that course, I had performed in the jazz ensemble at my high school (Pinelands Regional) but had never seriously considered jazz as a career or even listening to jazz full-time. After completing Professor Marowitz’s jazz history course, I became interested in several styles of jazz, and I decided to attend a jam session that the OCC Jazz Band was holding; later I became a full-time member of the group. After performing with the group for a semester, I enrolled in Professor Marowitz’s jazz improvisation course (now part of the curriculum), and I spent a semester working with him on developing my solos using various techniques.”

In elementary school, Episcopo’s first instrument was the tuba. “It was like the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” he recalled. “My teacher placed a tuba in my hands, and it was way too big for me. We then tried the trumpet, which I found to be too small. Finally, the trombone, which fit just right. I have always loved the versatility of the trombone. It can produce dark overtones and bright and exciting melodies. Also, it’s just plain fun to use the slide and place glissandos in melodies.” Episcopo’s main influence on trombone is jazz funk player Fred Wesley, best known for his work

with James Brown, but who also played with Count Basie and Lionel Hampton. “I owe my love of jazz funk to him,” Episcopo said. “As a trombone player, I try to emulate the funky licks that he blows, as well as the rounded, full tones that he produces.”

Boyer loves listening to baritone saxophonist Leo P’s recordings with the band, Lucky Chops, although “he may be a completely different style than I play.” She credits this writer with exposing her to Gerry Mulligan. “I’ve actually been fascinated by Gerry Mulligan since you gave a presentation at OCC last fall. His playing is so mellow.”

Trumpeter Brandon Cooper has been playing his instrument since elementary school and was part of the jazz band at Toms River High School East, but, like Episcopo, his jazz knowledge and appreciation blossomed after attending Marowitz’s jazz history class. “My tone is as mellow as Miles Davis,” he said, “but people tell me I have the potential to be able to play like Maynard Ferguson.” Other trumpet players who have influenced him, he added, are Doc Severinsen and Arturo Sandoval.

After the One Flight Up performance, the OCC Jazz Band played on May 2 at the Ocean County Library in Toms River. On May 19, their performance at the Jay and Linda Grunin Center for the Arts on the OCC campus also included the recording of a CD. And their final spring performance was at the New Jersey State Chili & Salsa Cookoff on May 20 in downtown Toms River.

As most New Jersey Jazz Society members know, many live jazz performances in the



The OCC Jazz Band in performance at One Flight Up. From left, Brianne Stendardo, drum; Brendan Merriney, guitar; and Diana McEntee, keyboards. Photo by Francis Bal.

state are populated by older audiences. So the natural question to ask these young musicians was: “What will it take to consistently attract a younger audience to jazz?” “In order for jazz to be popular with young

people,” Boyer said, “the music needs to be as captivating as the typical music they listen to. Possibly mixing modern elements into jazz will help open the door to this beautiful music. Though, once one knows jazz, you’ll come to appreciate all types of the genre.”

Episcopo believes, “One of the common misconceptions about jazz to my generation is that people believe it is confined to just the slow and melodic old time feel jazz of the ’50s. I have found that people who listen to jazz funk musicians such as Herbie Hancock or Lettuce don’t realize these are jazz musicians. The key to getting my generation interested in jazz is to be exposed to it. There are so many sub genres of jazz ... you may not like one style of jazz, but there will always be a genre that someone will like.” Cooper agrees. “I believe the only way to get young people to appreciate jazz more is to get them exposed to it more,” he said. “There’s a difference between exposing someone to something new and forcing them to experience it. I think if there was some way to be able get more of a word out that local jazz groups are out and performing, more people would take an interest in it.”

Marowitz, justifiably, takes pride in the development of the OCC Jazz Band. What he particularly likes is that, “They just have fun playing together and don’t hide it. They joke around with one another while in performance without missing a note. Audiences enjoy seeing them having so much fun, and so do I.”