

The Carnegie Jazz Band: Community Music in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside An Interview with Brad Muirhead

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BM: Brad Muirhead and I'm the director of the Carnegie Jazz program.

BM: There's a guy named Earle Peach who's quite involved in the music and the... social community in the downtown—especially in the downtown eastside. So I've known him for many, many years. He was originally running this little jazz band, and, at some point he needed a brass player to come in and do some work with the horn players to give them some advice, and I went in and did that a couple of times, and he, I guess he liked what I was doing and then he, at one point decided he didn't want to be doing that anymore. He's not really a jazz guy himself; he's a singer, a choral type singer as opposed to a jazz singer. When he decided not to do the program... run the band anymore he asked me to take over and I said, "Sure why not."

BM: The nature of the local community, and the downtown eastside, and what goes on at Carnegie... the band was totally just a drop in kind of thing, and so the people who were there were kind of different every week... so the instrumentation was different every week, different playing levels—anyone is welcome to come and hang out and play... so the playing abilities was a wide range of actual technical ability on, in terms of the instrumental technique, and that sort of thing, so it was quite difficult to get anything happening, but slowly over a period of time I gradually steered it in the direction of really playing jazz, and that slowly started attracting people who were a little more able to play certain instruments, to at least have a core going—a core of the band that can keep a jazz tune together and then everybody sort of latches on to that and goes along for the ride or whatever, you know? Depending on their own personal abilities.

BM: The program, started moving more towards really being a jazz program as opposed to this little drop in music program that it was before... some of the people that were really interested in actually playing some jazz started coming out more regularly, and, I started noticing that there was some frustration going on within the group. Where the more advanced players, were having to spend a lot of time sitting around waiting while I would explain things to the other people who didn't really know what was going on, or not as familiar with the... improvisation, and the actual... the general approach of playing jazz from lead sheets. That kind of thing.

BM: So there's a bit of frustration on two sides happening. And so I went and talked to the powers that be and they gave me an extra hour. So what I did was I decided to split the class into... instead of a two-hour session, a one-hour beginner jazz theory session, and then the playing session.

So for the beginner jazz theory session, we spend, any amount of time on the simplest things to make sure everybody slowly starts to get the basic concepts, and starts

to understand the concepts of applying [clears throat]... excuse me, scales to chords and how chords and scales relate to each other all that kind of stuff we get into the musical thing there... I'm not sure if you want me to start talking about any of that on this particular interview, but... [laughs] and basic rhythmic things... as you know, as you've seen—general musical concepts. There are some people there who have been making music and are actual pretty good at it, but do not really know the musical language or how to communicate with musicians using the musical language. So that's also part of it. There are some people who played entirely by ear, but don't really read a note of music, or don't know how to talk about—as I said—don't know how to discuss music... using the musical language.

So, all of those things I kinda covered in this first session... the beginner theory thing, and then from there we go into the playing session and people sort of start showing up and... one at a time, and as the band slowly gets together we start playing tunes. And I usually start with an easy tune or two and work towards, at the end of the session, the much more challenging material for the more advanced players. So that way, everybody gets a little bit of something out of it, and once the playing starts there's no... one of the things, the big success from actually splitting the classes, once the playing session starts, there's no sitting around while... I explain things to the beginner players, right? Where I sometimes have to spend ten or fifteen minutes explaining something... that they don't get. That doesn't happen anymore. So once we get into the playing session, I start with something that's easy so that they can... they can handle it, and then as we, as we get into the more advanced stuff, I sometimes just say, "Okay play along, and you're kind of, sink or swim," and, or, "Just listen, or and check out what's going on, or take a break!" Right? So they... so the beginner players have something to learn while the advanced player do their thing as well.

BM: The mandate is inclusiveness, and it's a drop in sort of thing, it sometimes has that tendency to be a little bit different every week so it's very... at times it can be very challenging to plan ahead as to what is going to happen in each class, because I never know for sure who's going to be there.

BM: On a week-to-week basis, and I just go in there and improvise. I improvise with the class in other words.

You never know what's going to happen so you have to be prepared to improvise. I find even with my school band, I go into every class with a plan, and about three minutes into it I've completely changed the plan and I just do what needs to be done.

And that's kinda what I do at Carnegie, I just see what's happening at the time and decide what I think needs to be worked on and go with that.