

An Unlikely Symbiotic Relationship - A Unique Jazz Education / Island Resort Partnership

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Background

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.

Since 2002 the jazz students at the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM) have benefited from a partnership between their music school and one of Australia's most prestigious island resorts. Four times each year students of the Bachelor of Jazz Studies (BJS) degree travel two hours north to Hamilton Island (HI), a tropical island located off the north east coast of Australia to undertake five days of classes, interaction with faculty and visiting artists, and performances. For the students a typical day on the island consists of a short morning training meeting followed by a master-class, instructional session or group rehearsal with a national or international visiting industry professional. The afternoon and evening are filled with performances in the island's many quality bars, restaurants and entertainment areas.

How much would you expect that students pay for this experience? As part of their contribution to the partnership HI covers all related expenses for each of the 35-40 students, staff and visiting artists for the duration of the visit. This includes transfers, five star accommodation and fine dining. As well as this, Hamilton Island often complements University funding to enable high caliber visiting artists of national and international repute to be brought to the island to engage in the project.

Birthered out of the symbiotic idea that teaching does not have to occur in the classroom and that holiday destinations are much more appealing if they provide educational and cultural opportunities and experiences, the main goal of the HI project is to provide students with first-hand performing experience that will better equip them to handle the demands of the industry after graduation. There is a strong expectation from both the CQCM faculty and the island management that students will produce professional results compatible with the island's standards. This serves as a constant benchmark that infiltrates all areas of the educational process and produces a variety of "real world" skills that cannot be taught in the traditional classroom.

On a recent visit professor Michael Tracy, esteemed jazz educator from the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program from the University of Louisville, described the partnership in the following manner. "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 developed by these innovative gentlemen"

Performances

The most developed of the many resort islands in the region; HI contains private businesses and residences, as well as resort facilities and services. Among these are a variety of high quality performance venues suitable for the delivery of an intensive performance program. While on HI small jazz ensemble performances are delivered at as many as seven different locations each day. Over four nights this equates to twenty-eight gigs and with four visits to the island annually, one hundred and twelve separate performance opportunities. This scenario enables every student within the degree to be provided with valuable time on the bandstand, irrespective of experience level. In fact, first-year students deliver performances on HI within seven weeks of commencing study. This is significant, as performance training can tend to favour individuals of the highest musical standard or an institution's premier performance group, often the big band.

There are a number of important characteristics of the HI performances that make them a useful educational tool. Due to the quantity of gigs and their durations, each ensemble is required to play between two to four hours of repertoire. In addition, as ensembles are rotated through the island venues, ranging from informal settings such as beside the pool to the five star exclusive beachfront restaurants, it is necessary for students to adapt their performances to fit each environment.

The jazz department also provides entertainment for the island's most prestigious special events, the Great Barrier Feast (international wine and food festival), and Race Week (international yachting event). Commonly these performances take place in a more formal setting and include audiences of up to one thousand people. These events often require students to cope with the type of demands common to corporate gigs. The department is capable of providing music from a large cross section of musical styles, including specialty rock and popular music ensembles. Although focused primarily on the small jazz ensemble, the jazz department also has a big band, soul band, swing band, Latin band and blues band. Having a more dramatic and widespread impact, these large ensembles are particularly useful during the islands special events.

The Audience

In relation to audience, the attributes of HI make it ideal for the delivery of a performance program. Being a holiday destination, the island guests are free of everyday schedules and obligations and are free to take advantage of entertainment and other events provided. Competitive style advertising for a built-in audience of this nature is not required. It is often enough to place the events on the island's activities schedule. The common practice that many mainland establishments have of focusing their musical entertainment over the weekend does not apply on HI. The entertainment requirements are the same from one day to the next.

As HI has a continuous turnover of guests, the audience is naturally replaced on a regular basis. This, teamed with the jazz department's practice of venue rotation means that it is unlikely that guests will hear an ensemble more than once in any given visit to the island. This allows ensembles to play a similar set of music without the fear of audience boredom. Repeating songs in this fashion has been a practice undertaken by many of the great jazz players. According to Leibman, the John Coltrane Quartet played the same set of tunes for 4 years while on the road ("In Conversation with Lieb", Aebersold, 2000, Track 7). Obviously, care must be taken not to allow this to instill complacency in the students regarding repertoire assimilation. As with any music program, other performances, concerts and class requirements ensure that this does not occur. But the benefits of providing students with an environment in which they can become familiar and comfortable with sizeable sections of the repertoire in a performance setting has been an undeniable boost to the standard of the program.

The Visiting Industry Professionals

Hamilton Island has its own domestic jet airport which caters for almost 50 flights a week from the Australian mainland; Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Cairns. This means easy and direct connections to international flights as well as providing the hub for air travel for the surrounding islands. This service enables easy access for industry professionals brought in to work within the project. In 2005 the project included three international artists, Dr Michael Davison (University of Richmond), Dr Rick Holland (University of Oswego) and Prof. Michael Tracy (University of Louisville) as well as a number of national artists. Accommodation and meals are provided for these visiting professionals by HI which enables the funds available from the University, always meager, to be stretched that much further. The Island takes advantage of the profile of these artists to boost the image of their events and activities and so once again the partnership provides mutual benefits.

Professional training

In order to encourage ownership and to avoid interfering with the learning process the teaching faculty deliberately take a hands off approach to gigs. Student ensembles coordinate all aspects of presenting the day's performances, including developing set lists, setting up and packing down equipment, interacting appropriately with the audience and monitoring group and personal presentation. As well as this, student ensembles are required to elect a leader for each gig to liaise with the venue management throughout the performance.

Each morning the jazz faculty meets with the entire student body to discuss the gigs from the previous day. This is a great opportunity as many issues both positive and negative relating to gig presentation surface and are openly discussed. These may include volume levels, issues of presentation, solo lengths, management liaison, gear issues, audience feedback, musical aspects, etc. As a part of this process the faculty pass on feedback and also receive regular feedback from the island management and pass on these comments to the students during this session. The visiting industry professional also has the opportunity to participate in the discussion and relate personal experiences and advice.

With the institution of this process, the island has, in effect, become the classroom with students acquiring and developing a variety of important skills that are not required for the traditional classroom. Michael Davison from the University of Richmond comments on the students involved in this project, "... the minute they get the call they will know exactly how to act ... these students will know about the professional side of what they do." (Davison, M. pc, 2004)

Mentoring

Mentor relationships have been a significant tool in the training of musicians (Hays, 1998). In many ways the environment on Hamilton Island intensifies mentoring between visiting artist and faculty, faculty and students, visiting artist and students, students and other students.

Living in close quarters has its disadvantages but for the most part is a positive experience that encourages musical interaction that would otherwise not occur. In particular, students see faculty and visiting artists in different light, as normal people that do all the regular everyday things as themselves. Many students take advantage of the relaxed atmosphere by asking questions while sitting by the pool or over a meal. In a recent survey over 80% of students revealed that they interacted with the visiting artist outside of the formal sessions. Of these students, 80% indicated that they had learned something musical from this interaction. These types of personal interactions have a powerful and lasting impact upon the young student.

Mentoring through performance is another important part of the project. This is multifaceted as students learn not only from their own gigs but also by observing other students, faculty and the visiting industry professionals. A great deal of interaction occurs between students in this environment. In many cases the passing of knowledge occurs without the presence of faculty member.

Hamilton Island

As an active partner, there are a variety of reasons for the Island management's interest in the project. Bringing an element of sophistication and class, jazz is a welcomed change from the popular music artists that make up the majority of the musical entertainment. Having forty jazz musicians on the island at one time creates an intensity of performance that is unmatched at any other times throughout the year. "Having this many musicians on the island has a positive impact on the island's atmosphere and ultimately enhances guest experience" (Huber, PC, 2005). This raises the quality and variety of the islands entertainment offering and also, perhaps even more importantly, provides a sense of culture that is not achieved from discreet groups of hired performers.

It should be noted that the Island has not reduced its employment of other performers; in fact they have increased the variety and scope of hired artists over the last twelve months, but sees this project as a way to build an ambiance that would not be achievable through normal artist employment. A further benefit of the commitment of the Island to its existing artists is that these performers themselves provide professional input, both formal and informal, to the jazz visits.

A further benefit to HI is that when the jazz department visits the island all the musicians within the group are accountable to the CQCM staff. This is beneficial to HIE in a number of ways. The quality of the product is closely monitored, which not only ensures that performances are delivered in a professional manner, but ensures that ensembles are placed in suitable venues and adjustments made as required.

Regional Support

This project fosters the talents of local musicians rather than looking to the capital cities to source all entertainment. Levy (1998. p.124) states, "Too often, local industry complains about a lack of skilled technicians but will not support the local program." In supporting a local product HI is assisting in the training of people that may enter the resort entertainment circuit and providing opportunities to regional students that they could have previously only dreamed of. In fact it has become clear from discussions with faculty from metropolitan institutions that students in the large city schools are afforded considerably less performance opportunities overall and certainly nothing that provides the kind of intensive all-round training being developed on Hamilton Island. Could it be that we see students turn from larger city schools to programs like this due to these opportunities? Evidence from enrolment statistics over the last few years suggest that this may well be the case.

Coda

To develop a performance program comparable to the Hamilton Island project would require considerable financial resources for venue hire, event advertising and promotion, and administrative staffing and costs to say nothing of accommodation, meals and transport. Collaborative relationships with external bodies will be important to the future success of the music institution as financial pressures increase (De Haan, 2004). The Hamilton island project is one such collaborative relationship that has enabled a performance program to be developed for all students within the degree at little cost to the university.

The project has been driven by a few important principles. The first is that when dealing with opportunities one must not only have exciting ideas but a quality product that can demonstrate the potential. A focus of the department over the last five years is to expect that level of quality from its students and implement procedures that ensure the standard is reached. A common report from the public on student performances is “ I thought they were professionals...”. The second principle is that as long as something has mutual benefit the outcomes will be pursued and support by all parties. While this goes without saying often educational institutions are reluctant to put themselves on the line and explore radical ideas. If we are to take advantage of an “improvisational” attitude then there must be a change in the way ideas like this are handled. Trust and professionalism go hand in hand in the business world and universities must not let the bureaucracy get in the way of projects that have industry on-side. Lastly, wear your heart on your sleeve. That is, have your complete motives clear and obvious to all. All we wanted from this project is to improve the quality and scope of the jazz program and to make it into something that was unique and world class. With no ulterior motives and with this motto on the table at every discussion our partners have known exactly where we were focused and could see the ways in which our goals could be useful to them. This makes for frank and easy negotiations whenever issues or planning matters arise.

A truly unique concept, this unlikely symbiotic relationship has produced favorable outcomes for both CQCM and Hamilton Island. Currently the island and Central Queensland University are negotiating an escalation of the project that will not only represent further performance opportunities but support for the expansion and development of the program. More information about the Hamilton Island project can be obtained from the website <http://www.cqu.edu.au/cqcm/>

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