

UofL Jazz Studies in Brazil.

By Mike Tracy as published in the Louisville Jazz Society Newsletter

In March 2008, seven faculty members from the University of Louisville Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program traveled to Brazil to lead workshops and perform in Brasília, the capital of Brazil, and São Paulo, it's largest city. The group included pianist/vocalist Jerry Tolson, trumpeter Ansyn Banks, pianist Jim Connerley, guitarist Craig Wagner, bassist Tyrone Wheeler, drummer Jason Tiemann, and myself on saxophone. Although this was the first visit to Brazil for the other faculty members, our journey was the result of a longtime and ongoing connection between the University of Louisville School of Music and outstanding Brazilian musicians.

The connection began in the late eighties when saxophonist Vadim Arsky enrolled in UofL's Master of Music program. Though pursuing a degree in classical saxophone, he was very active in our fledgling jazz program and was a regular in my saxophone studio. Following graduation, Vadim returned to Brazil and became an influential music educator (at one time even holding the post of Director of the University of Brasília's (UnB) Music Department), teaching classical and what Brazilians call "popular" music—a combination of Brazilian and jazz—to students of all ages. He frequently recommended UofL's graduate and undergraduate programs to his students and associates who sought to continue their studies abroad, and many of them took his advice.

Walter Abbamonte (saxophone/flute) was the first student to follow Vadim, graduating with a BA in music and an MBA. Next was pianist Renato Vasconcellos, who in 2001 was the first graduate of UofL's Master's in Jazz Performance program. Many others followed including Fabio Brum, Bruno Pegoraro and Anderson Pessoa. Fabio graduated with a BM in trumpet performance; Bruno, a saxophonist, earned a BA with jazz emphasis and MM in jazz; and Anderson, another of Vadim's saxophone students, is currently pursuing an MM in jazz and is directing our exciting Brazilian ensemble. Next year, Anderson will be joined by bassist Saulo Almeida.

In the late nineties, as Brazilian students continued traveling here to study, UofL faculty and students began visiting Brazil. I made the first of my seven trips in 1998 when I accepted Vadim's invitation to work with his students at UnB, and returned in 1999 when I was invited to tour the country with my quartet. The connections I made during these trips took hold, and in 2001 a group of forty-five students, faculty, and supporters from UofL had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to tour Brazil. After those early travels our ties continued to grow. Vadim and I remained in close contact, and he, Renato, and Bruno frequently returned to Louisville to perform, teach, and visit friends here in their home away from home.

Over the years Vadim often expressed a desire to host a jazz camp in Brasília, much like the ones Jamey Aebersold presents each summer at UofL. When we first discussed the possibility in 1998 the thought was exciting, but the obstacles seemed overwhelming at first. Nonetheless, he began working toward his goal and little by little, he made progress. The final pieces began to fall into place when Vadim—with help from the American School in Brasília (Escola Americana de Brasília or EAB) the private school where Vadim now teaches—was able to secure funding from the American Embassy. Our group from UofL, along with Renato and Bruno, agreed to help by serving as faculty for the camp. And so finally, after ten years of planning, Vadim's ambitious dream finally came true.

The jazz camp in Brasília consisted of workshops tailored for three groups of participants: K-12 students from EAB, K-12 students from a public school outside the city limits, and professional musicians from UnB and the wider community. All classes, rehearsals, and concerts were held in EAB's new cultural center, an excellent modern facility. The skill level of the 100 students was quite diverse. Most of the younger students had very little jazz training, while most of the adults were quite accomplished in both the jazz and Brazilian styles. Despite this, we arranged the schedule so that classes from the three groups sometimes overlapped, allowing the faculty to more efficiently meet their common needs. But even with careful planning, the schedule was exhausting. Each day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. we offered improvisation and theory instruction, instrumental master

classes, and combo and big band rehearsals. Classes were followed by an evening concert. The week ended with a concert showcasing all of the students in combo, big band, and vocal ensemble settings. It was a great success and demonstrated the hard work and exceptional talent of all participants. Quite an evening!

Our downtime was very limited, but the faculty did manage to do some sightseeing and sample some local culture. Brasília was constructed during the late 1960s, on unoccupied land right in the center of the country. Its design was conceived by architect Oscar Niemeyer, who at 100 continues to design buildings and his work in Brasília is widely regarded as an example of excellent urban planning. The local food was amazing, especially the churrasco (Brazilian barbeque), and music is everywhere in Brazil. The nightly choro and samba parties ran from dark to almost dawn and featured some of the country's most accomplished musicians in what was literally a nightlong celebration. It was a thrill to experience Brazilian music firsthand—even though classes began just a few hours later!

Although the camp in Brasília was the main focus of our trip, we also spent time in São Paulo working with students at Conservatório Souza Lima, a private music conservatory that works in partnership with Berklee College of Music. Their international coordinator, Marcelo Coelho, is an excellent saxophonist and educator who I met several years ago. We'd had several discussions about such a visit, so when Marcelo heard of our trip to Brazil he and the director/owner of Souza Lima, Mário da Silva, arranged for our group to spend five days presenting a workshop. The students at Souza Lima are highly skilled and come not only from throughout Brazil but also other South American countries. It was like being at home working with our students, for they were keenly interested and skilled enough to absorb information quickly. While our time in São Paulo was short we made a lot of friends and had plenty of opportunities to make music with them.

The workshops in Brasília and São Paulo were a great success and exceeded everyone's expectations. One student, saxophonist André Barros, was so inspired that he resigned from his position as a lawyer at a major firm in Brasília to enroll as an undergraduate jazz major. He will be

at the S of M to start his second “career” in the fall. A number of accomplished students have inquired about continuing their studies at UofL, and talks have begun about the potential for future camps in Brazil. We also plan to explore the possibility of hosting a Brazilian workshop at UofL utilizing instructors from Souza Lima. Seems that our Brazilian connection will continue to grow and thrive for many years to come.