



BOB MINTZER: ««

Practice What You Teach

The saxophonist, composer, bandleader and Yellowjackets veteran channels a lifetime of experience into his instruction at the University of Southern California

IT'S A SWELTERING LATE AUGUST DAY, the start of a new semester at the University of Southern California. Young people pass LED signs reading "Welcome Back Students!" as they head for the Carson Center soundstage in the Thornton School of Music complex. In room G128, the class is jazz composition.

So Bob Mintzer, naturally, is talking about Stravinsky.

As he plays recorded excerpts from *L'Histoire du soldat* and *Three Pieces for Clarinet*, the 62-year-old tenor saxophonist, who has taught at USC since 2008 and chairs the school's jazz studies program, urges his students to listen for structural and motivic ideas they can incorporate into their own work. He points out "mini-phrases that stagnate and then develop," the utilization of dissonance, triad pairs and jazz-like rhythms that recall Stravinsky's time spent in Harlem clubs. Mintzer brings these concepts home with a taste of fellow tenor Michael Brecker's solo recording of Monk's "Round Midnight," as well as some simple scales-based runs that Mintzer plays on both the room's piano and his horn.

The atmosphere is relaxed but informative. Mintzer commands the room with almost off-hand authority, borne not just from decades as a Grammy-winning instrumentalist, composer and bandleader, but also from vast experience as an educator, both at USC and at Manhattan School of Music, where he taught for over 20 years prior to his Los Angeles relocation. Mintzer has also written trusted instructional music books, hosts downloadable play-along videos and has overseen the development of numerous notable musicians, some of whom have become jazz educators themselves.

Not bad for someone who, as Mintzer admits to his students, never took a formal course in arranging or composition.

BY MATT R. LOHR

MINTZER EXPLAINS THAT THERE ISN'T A GREAT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOW HE INSTRUCTS A CLASS AND THE WAY HE DIRECTS HIS BIG BAND.



► Mintzer leads the USC Thornton School of Music Jazz Orchestra at the Monterey Jazz Festival in 2011

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THIS DOESN'T MEAN THAT MINTZER ISN'T WELL STUDIED.

He's certainly logged his time on the other side of a lectern. Those lecterns, however, weren't always found in a classroom.

Mintzer's interest in music was cemented in 1967, during his sophomore year of high school in the New York commuter town of New Rochelle, when the educational and outreach organization Jazzmobile presented a quintet concert featuring trumpeter Blue Mitchell, bassist Ron Carter and Jazzmobile cofounder Dr. Billy Taylor on piano. "I was knocked out by the sound the band produced," Mintzer remembers. "It was so colorful, swinging, conversational! I had no idea how they were able to do that so effortlessly. It inspired me to find out more through listening to the music and seeing how it all developed over time." Mintzer received a scholarship to spend his senior year at the esteemed Interlochen Center for the Arts

in Michigan, where he concentrated on classical clarinet but also played and studied saxophone, flute, guitar and piano. "My year at Interlochen set me straight as far as how to spend focused time in the practice room, and what kind of work ethic would be required to develop on a high level," he says. "I got to rub shoulders with several players who wound up in major orchestras, as well as people like [drummer] Peter Erskine," now part of Mintzer's USC faculty.

Interlochen was followed by a stint at the Hartt School in Hartford, Conn., where Mintzer studied jazz history under alto saxophonist Jackie McLean. "Jackie was a terrific teacher," Mintzer says. "He taught from his own experiences as well as from the historical literature. It is very inspiring to hear someone talk about Miles, Monk, Trane, Bird and recount personal stories about their time spent with those artists." In 1973, at McLean's urging, Mintzer transferred to Manhattan School of Music, where



► The Bob Mintzer Big Band performs and records its most recent album, the R&B-inspired *Get Up!* (MCG Jazz), in Pittsburgh in 2014

he would later forge his own identity as an educator. He was still on the classical track then, but “I was drawn to the loft scene, where cats were playing at all hours, sometimes in heatless lofts during the winter—whatever it took to play a lot! The scene basically sucked me out of school a little at a time.”

By 1975, Mintzer had made the saxophone his primary instrument. That year, he joined drummer Buddy Rich’s big band, a gig he held for two and a half years. It was during his time with Rich that he solidified his skills as a composer and arranger, and also when he received his earliest teaching opportunities, starting with workshops that eventually led, in the late ’80s, to an offer to join the faculty at his former alma mater. “It was quite a shock at first,” Mintzer admits. “Much of what I was doing up to that point as a player and composer was self-taught and by ear. I had to really work on the craft of articulating the detail in the music in a concise way.”

Like his USC stand, Mintzer’s two-decade in-

structional tenure at Manhattan School coincided with a thriving career in a variety of settings, notably his own big band and Yellowjackets, the leaderless quartet he joined in 1991 and in which he plays with keyboardist and fellow USC instructor Russell Ferrante. At Manhattan, Mintzer recalls, “I worked on refining my teaching in a way where students were being exposed to the key components that would help them develop as well-rounded players, composers, bandleaders. I felt like I was growing from the experience as much as my students.”

When the offer to join the USC faculty came, Mintzer admits it was not an easy decision to make, given the comfort of his New York setup and six-months-a-year touring schedule. But “the prospect of living in Los Angeles and becoming more involved in a music program seemed like an interesting possibility. ... The move has proven to be a good decision.” (Mintzer and his wife live in the Hollywood Hills, in a house formerly owned by Arnold Schoenberg.)



► From left: Mintzer in New York in 1981; gigging with Yellowjackets at the 2013 M&T Syracuse Jazz Fest: Russell Ferrante, Mintzer, Felix Pastorius and Will Kennedy (from left); playing his first electric guitar at home in New Rochelle, N.Y., in 1965; working with his original big band in 1983: Mintzer, Peter Erskine, Pete Yellin, David Sanborn, Michael Brecker and Roger Rosenberg (from left)

"I feel like I have been able to make a difference in the program at USC, and the challenge of keeping things moving forward is inspiring."



MINTZER CONTINUES THIS MOMENTUM AS HE FRONTS

the day's second class, called "Jazz Elements." Here, it's all about hard bop, as the saxophonist guides an intricate deconstruction of the Bobby Timmons composition "Moanin'." As he breaks down the song's intro as recorded by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, interspersed with student solos and unison statements of Timmons' themes, Mintzer provides a top-to-bottom overview of a wide range of ideas. He urges the students not to be afraid of practicing scales, often neglected by nascent jazz players whose desire to play sometimes drives them to skimp on fundamentals. He emphasizes the role of the drummer in the recording ("We are all timekeepers," Mintzer says) and reiterates the importance of listening to your fellow musicians. "Be sure to play with the people you're playing with," he says. "Find a way to join the conversation."

Most important, Mintzer reminds the class of what he calls the three-part process of jazz composition: *Think of it, practice it, plug it in.* He caps this idea with some myth-busting, telling the students that not everything they hear from a jazz musician,

even in the heat of a solo, is pure improvisation. Much of it, he says, comes from phrases and ideas unearthed and refined in performance, practice and hours of rehearsal.

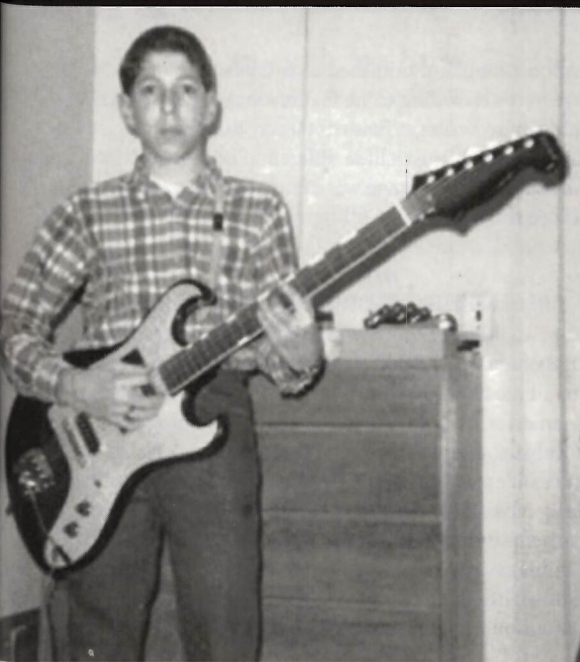
"They *worked* on their stuff," Mintzer assures his students. "It didn't just fall out of the sky."



MINTZER EXPLAINS THAT THERE ISN'T A GREAT

difference between how he instructs a class and the way he directs his big band. "The key is to be respectful, clear and, in a few words, convey what it is the music needs," he says. "The most challenging aspect of teaching for me is to create some level of continuity in the teaching plan over time, where things flow logically and keep students interested and inspired to continue the learning process on their own." Mintzer happily concedes that classroom work is educational for him, too. "Ideas are tossed around and students offer their perspective on the stuff we are working on. ... Every student has something unique to offer, much of it full of surprises and great information." He also appreciates USC's relatively small class sizes, which means that "individual students get lots of personal attention."

The saxophonist is abetted by a faculty full of longtime colleagues, including Ferrante, Erskine, saxophonist Bob Sheppard, pianist Alan Pasqua and composer-arranger Vince Mendoza. "[It's] a fairly tight-knit group," Mintzer says. "We are



all likeminded in terms of teaching concepts and what the goals should be in terms of prepping students for the world at large. We communicate regularly and discuss curriculum, direction, etc. ... Everybody who is interested needs to get a solo, but we are also in an ensemble that calls for unity, empathy and conversation."

Mintzer has frequently hired former students for outside projects, including pianist-arranger Jacob Mann, drummer Jake Reed and trombonist Erik Hughes. "In every class that Bob teaches," says Hughes, "he creates an environment in which the standard is high, very similar to a professional one, which makes the transition from USC to the real world feel pretty smooth." Hughes admits that "sometimes ... [Mintzer] will dish out a little bit of tough love in a constructive manner. I think this is incredibly important for music educators to do, because once you get into the real world, no one points out your flaws to you."

Mintzer has also worked with three teaching assistants during his time at USC, all of whom have gone on to their own careers as educators. First was trumpeter John Daversa, already working on his doctorate when Mintzer arrived, who now chairs the department of studio music and jazz at the University of Miami's Frost School of Music. Daversa was well versed in Mintzer's career before coming under his tutelage, having used his popular piano etude books and studied his recorded work

in depth. (He says he's listened to Mintzer's first album with Yellowjackets, 1991's *Greenhouse*, "hundreds of times.") "[Mintzer] is somebody that asks a lot of questions," says Daversa. "He seeks the truth, and I think he goes into the classroom the same way. He wants everyone to experience things for themselves and ask the questions. It's the opposite of intimidating. He celebrates everyone's individuality while nurturing and pushing them to be the best versions of themselves."

Daversa was succeeded as TA by multireedist Matt Zebley, now the director of jazz studies at Diablo Valley College in Northern California, not far from where saxophonist Greg Johnson, Mintzer's third teaching assistant, directs the jazz program at the Marin School of the Arts. Originally an alto specialist, Johnson switched to tenor after hearing 1995's *The Birthday Concert*, a recording of a 1981 Jaco Pastorius performance featuring Mintzer. Johnson emphasizes personal characteristics that make Mintzer an exceptional administrator. "One quality I admire most about Bob is his even temperament," says Johnson. "[He] never freaks out or gets irrationally angry, which allows him to plow through problems without expending much energy. Sometimes professors can get caught up in the bureaucracy of a program or the logistical expertise of how things are run. In my experience those people age really fast and disappear. Bob, on the other hand,

will always be relevant because his top priority is the music."

Mintzer appreciates that USC, a "full-service" university, offers cross-disciplinary opportunities unavailable in more narrowly focused instructional settings. "Just within the music school," he says, "there are myriad activities to explore, from film scoring to pop songwriting, Pro Tools, video, classical composition, as well as the more traditional jazz study. We are offering a curriculum that allows students to develop a multidimensional skill set. This all takes place in Los Angeles, where there is a lot going on. Many of our students are working long before they graduate, as the scene is quite active, and potential employers have their eye on our programs."

At the end of the day, he recognizes both the differences and commonalities between the USC students of 2015, his first students at Manhattan School and himself when he was just starting out. "Basically, all students of jazz want to play," he says. "Some want to write, others become interested in recording, video, perhaps a business aspect of music. ... The difference between the music scene now and 30 years ago is that the nature of the work has changed. In the '70s and '80s there were lots of live music jobs, touring bands, recording work and a record business. Now there are far fewer live

freelance situations, a much-diminished record business and a different structure to the recording scene that involves home studios and overdubbing on recordings. That's not to say that the best players are not doing things. It's just a little different. Every generation seems to think that the earlier scene was better than the current one. But I still see the serious cats filling up their datebooks."

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DURING CLASS, ONE OF MINTZER'S STUDENTS MENTIONS THAT HE HAS NOT yet received a printout of the course syllabus. Mintzer offers him a copy, which includes a guide of "Things to Think About" that he provides to all his freshman and sophomore students at the start of each semester. This document, available as a blog post on Mintzer's website, goes into strong detail about short- and long-term musical lessons the students need to absorb, as well as "life stuff" designed to help them be healthier, happier and more productive, as people and players. It's a fairly involved treatise, but nothing Mintzer can't sum up with his characteristic blend of depth and down-to-earth concision: "Work hard, be a decent person, pay attention to detail and play your ass off." **JT**

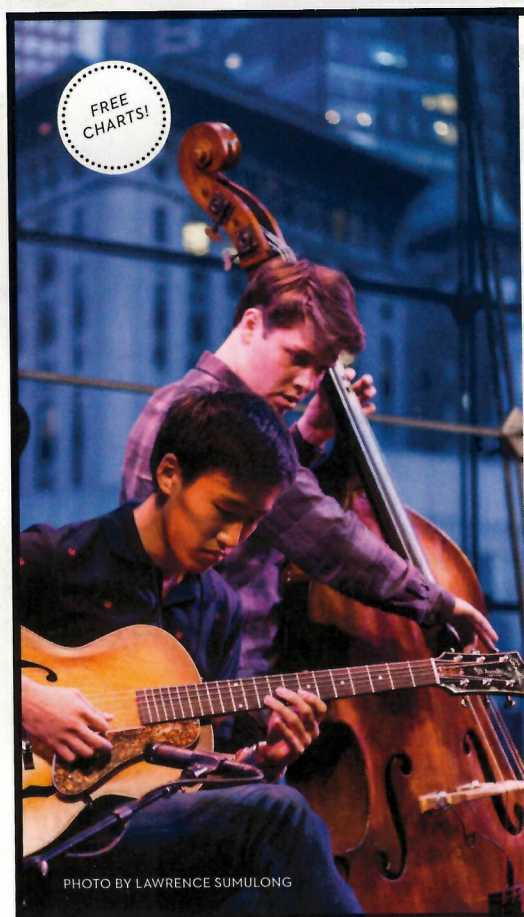


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THINGS TO THINK ABOUT: HANDOUT FOR MY USC STUDENTS

By Bob Mintzer

WHAT A BANDLEADER LOOKS FOR:

Players who have a positive attitude and are respectful, communicative and encouraging, show up early, contribute to all aspects of the activities of the band, answer phone calls and emails promptly and, on the rare occasions they are unable to make the gig/rehearsal, give advance warning and offer a sub who has seen/learned the music. Bandleading is labor-intensive. Leaders (bandmates) neither need nor appreciate drama.

Players who study the music/recordings thoroughly and in many cases memorize the music. They typically learn the form and solo changes even if they are not soloing. You never know when the opportunity will arise for you to solo on a tune.

Players who are versatile: good soloists in a variety of styles, good readers, team players (good ensemble players), active participants in rehearsals, composers-arrangers who contribute to the repertoire.

Players who seem like they want to be there (even if they don't), who participate, don't talk/text excessively during rehearsals and generally seem engaged and interested in what's going on.

Remember, your teachers and classmates are prospective employers and partners in future creative endeavors.

THE MUSICAL SKILLS YOU SHOULD BE WORKING ON RIGHT NOW AND FOR THE REST OF YOUR MUSICAL LIFE:

1. Playing your instrument at a high level.
2. Having a vast vocabulary in a variety of genres of music.
3. Having a vast repertoire that includes standards, a variety of jazz tunes, your arrangements of standards/jazz/pop tunes, original material, classical music and musics of Brazil, Africa and anywhere else that might attract you.
4. Being an accomplished composer-arranger who has considered how to use composition as the vehicle for their playing.
5. Organizing reading sessions of your music and establishing relationships with likeminded players. Making demo recordings of the music—your calling card!
6. Becoming fluent in using Sibelius/Finale and Pro Tools and developing some video capabilities. Having some idea of what you are trying to convey with your music and what the specific components that make up your sound are, how they work and why.
7. Pounding the pavement! Send your demo tapes around to festivals, schools, clubs and record companies. Instigate! Don't personalize rejection. Lots of that to go around. The energy you put into developing playing/recording situations will eventually come back around.
8. Making efficient use of your time. Try to structure your time so that you cover the areas you need to in regular (daily) small doses. A good 45-minute practice session where you cover the critical areas can be better than practicing for five hours.
9. Listening to all kinds of music for inspiration and information. Select the music that really rings your bell and get inside that music through transcription and extraction.

BEING IN SCHOOL CAN BE A DAUNTING EXPERIENCE. You are still forming as a creative artist, and part of you wants to just stay in the shed and work on your music. You are being inundated with coursework, and you are getting some calls for gigs. Remember that musical expression reflects the whole person. You want to be well read, articulate, able to manage your time well and comfortable in your own skin. A lot to deal with! Some life stuff that may help:

USC AND MOST UNIVERSITIES ARE A PETRI DISH FOR VIRUSES AND OTHER FUN DISEASES. BE SURE TO:

- **EAT WELL!** Read *It Starts With Food* by Dallas and Melissa Hartwig. Eat nutritious foods; don't eat foods with empty calories. (More energy!)
- **HAVE A SHORT EXERCISE REGIMEN** that you do every morning. (More energy!)
- **GET ENOUGH REST.** Go to bed early and get up earlier. You will do your best work in the morning when you are fresh. (More energy!)
- **STAY AWAY FROM DRUGS AND ALCOHOL.** They are opposite of the direction you want to go in. (Lots more energy!) Success in life is contingent on good connections with people. Drugs and alcohol cloud those connections.
- **START THE DAY WITH A POSITIVE AFFIRMATION.** You have another shot today at working on music, learning about the world and learning how to deal with people in all kinds of situations.
- **TRY TO GET IN THE HABIT OF FOCUSING ON WHAT YOU ARE GRATEFUL FOR.** Make a list if necessary. It will help you to be a person others want to be around.