



Saxophonist-educator Plunky Branch (right) rehearses with the combined students of VCU and UKZN in March.

VCU Jazz Students, Faculty Members Connect With South African Counterparts From UKZN

WHEN ANTONIO GARCÍA SAW THE WORDS “UNIVERSITY OF KwaZulu-Natal” (UKZN) on the list of sister schools to his own Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), his heartbeat quickened. The potential for collaboration with the jazz program founded by Darius Brubeck that had shown the way for breaking the color barrier in South Africa in the 1980s was too good an opportunity to resist.

“While I was serving as editor of the IAJE Jazz Educators Journal in the late ’90s, Dr. Michael Rossi had submitted a terrific article about jazz at what was then the University of Natal [UND],” explained trombonist García, now VCU’s director of jazz studies. “I’d heard its integrated student jazz combo, the Jazzanians, was fascinated by South African interest in jazz, befriended both Mike and Darius, and then twice hosted one of UND’s most acclaimed alumni, saxophonist Zim Ngqawana. So I knew first-hand how special this South African jazz connection was.”

Fast-forward more than a decade later to 2010, when García was reading the announcement that VCU’s Global Education Office would welcome grant applications for up to \$50,000 toward a year-long collaborative effort with any one of its sister institutions. He immediately contacted UKZN to gain its initial interest, then waited a year while securing a matching commitment of \$50,000 from VCU’s top-ranked School of the Arts if his GEO grant proposal were accepted. Finally, in June 2012, he received word that the full \$100,000 was at his disposal; a mere five weeks later, García and a handpicked combo of VCU students—Trey Sorrells (alto sax), Brendan Schnabel (tenor sax), Victor Haskins (trumpet), Chris Ryan (guitar), Justin Esposito (bass) and C.J. Wolfe (drums)—were on a plane to Durban, South Africa.

In September 2012, Professor Neil Gonsalves, a pianist and the director of the UKZN Centre for Jazz and Popular Music, led six UKZN students to Richmond, Va.: Linda Sikhakhane (tenor saxophone), Sakhile Simani (trumpet), Sebastian Goldswain (guitar), Lungelo Ngcobo (piano), Ildo Nandja (bass) and Sphelelo Mazibuko (drums). Additional weeklong exchanges followed in March 2013, along with four commissioned works (two from Durban, two from Richmond), several new arrangements, rehearsals shared over the Internet, and collaborations with South African music legend Madala Kunene and Richmond-based saxophonist-educator Plunky Branch. Other activities included concert performances, sessions with guest clinicians, visits to jazz advocates in Washington D.C., and trips to the KwaMuhle Museum in Durban and to Richmond’s Black History Museum and American Civil War Center.

García and Gonsalves had made the study of racism and segregation in the history of these two cities an integral part of the experience for students and faculty alike. “Music comes from people, and people come from a culture and a history,” offered García. “Richmond is the former Confederate capital, and ‘The Durban System’ had been the basis for what later became the policy of apartheid throughout South Africa. But out of oppression on both continents came music that spoke for freedom. This teaches the next generation of jazz musicians that you don’t find your musical voice merely to express Gm7–C7; you seek it to express what you feel.”

“South African jazz has its own swagger, rooted in the many kinds of urban music that are part and parcel of a migrant culture,” said Gonsalves. “Through the gift of this educational exchange, we can proudly say that local South African music forms and styles such as *mbaqanga*, *maskanda* and *marabi* have taken their place alongside the blues, standard tunes and bebop as platforms for musical dialogue between our respective ensembles. This dialogue is rooted at least partially in our common Southern heritage of migration from serfdom to global citizenry, and we acknowledge the effectiveness of this jazz bridge that we’ve built towards developing greater understanding.”

The students resonated with that same feeling. “Reading and playing music weren’t the only purposes of the exchange,” said Sikhakhane. “This involved a lot of spiritualism through sound and cultural experience. All the influences of our forefathers came to action. And the best part of this was sharing all our understandings through jazz music of this caliber.”

Schnabel agreed. “Physical distance and cultural differences cannot blur our universal humanity,” he said. “I can think of no better way to express this revelation than through the joy of music.”

At press time a joint CD from live concert tracks, *Leap Of Faith* (VCU Jazz), was slated for release in late September on both continents. The CD features the students and faculty; guests Kunene and Branch; the commissions by García and VCU student Victor Haskins and by UKZN’s Professor Sazi Dlamini and alumnus Stephan le Roux; plus other originals and arrangements.

Plans are afoot to continue the partnership of these two jazz programs. “As marvelous as the musical output has been,” enthused García, “it still cannot compare to the knowledge we have all learned and especially the friendships we have all made.”

—Antonio García & Neil Gonsalves

More info: wp.vcu.edu/vcu jazz; jazz.vcu.edu; music.ukzn.ac.za/Academic-Programmes/Jazz-Studies.aspx