

Sabbatical Report Fall 2009

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Music - Music, Dance & Theater Arts

Trombone Performance and Jazz Studies:
Private study on trombone and jazz improvisation.

My sabbatical experience was a complete and overwhelming success. Never in my professional life have I had five months (August – December) to focus on my own personal/professional growth and development without distraction. The teachers and experiences I sought out and the schedule I developed for the body of my sabbatical work combined to create a platform from which I not only gained during the sabbatical but one from which I continue to work and grow today. The schedule of my travel and study was driven by the schedules of those with whom I intended to study as well as my own performance schedule and obligations. Between each of scheduled sabbatical activities I allowed a number of days to be home where I could work on concepts and techniques attained.

I began my work on August 3rd, 2009 by attending and participating in the Alessi Seminar, (the premier trombone seminar in the world), August 3 – 11 in Albuquerque at the University of New Mexico. The seminar was lead by two of the world's leading trombone teachers and performers, Joe Alessi (principal trombone – New York Philharmonic & Trombone Instructor at Juilliard) and Peter Ellefson (Trombone Instructor – Indiana University and trombonist with the New York Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony). This 9-day seminar brought together 56-trombonists from around the world all of whom are seeking to achieve the highest level possible on their instrument. Of these trombonists, eight are among the best trombonists in the Americas and these eight were the subject of dozens of hours of master-classes and clinics that took place daily.

As an auditor of the seminar I participated (performed) in all warm-up sessions and rehearsed and performed as a member of the mass trombone choir. I attended five hours of master-classes and instructional sessions each day totaling more than forty-hours in all. I also attended four trombone recitals given by the featured artists, Peter Ellefson and Joe Alessi.

The notes I took during master-classes amounted to nearly thirty pages of text. Over the past months I have worked from these notes and from a collection of recordings from the Alessi Seminar as I continue to strive for a higher level of personal performance.

The second phase of my sabbatical took place at the University of Northern Colorado, (Greeley), August 17-22. My activity at UNC consisted of conversations and observations with the jazz faculty and the head of jazz studies at UNC, Dana Landry.

Over the course of five days in Greeley I observed a number of jazz classes and rehearsals with the intent of gaining insight into jazz practices and pedagogy. My primary objective at UNC was to employ the techniques and materials gained via the Alessi Seminar and to apply them as I began to work on my jazz playing. UNC is well known as having one of the top jazz programs in the country and I know their instructors to be outstanding. Initially I had hoped to spend some time playing for and with Dana Landry (jazz pianist) and to get feedback from Dana. As it turned out; Dana was busy playing piano with the Colorado Symphony in Denver the week of my visit and we never got the time to do any playing together. I spent four to five hours practicing each day, attended a faculty jazz recital, attended large group and small group jazz rehearsals and improvisation classes and attended a concert by the Jeff Hamilton Trio (Jeff is one of the world's top jazz drummers).

The third phase of my study took place in New York with Luis Bonilla, jazz trombonist – Manhattan School of Music and Temple University. I flew from Eugene to NY on Sunday, September 27th and was in Birdland with Luis by 8:00 that evening to hear the Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Jazz Big Band. Birdland - the legendary jazz club....I was in the heart of Manhattan and at the home of modern jazz. Luis personally introduced me to every member of the band. We stayed for both sets and the music was hot!

Luis Bonilla. I first met Luis in 2006 when I brought him to Lane for our Oregon Jazz Festival. It was obvious at that time that Luis was an incredible teacher and a fabulous musician. We became fast friends but I never imagined what that brief 3-day encounter might spark a few years later. To study with Luis and to have him as a model, mentor, colleague and friend is a true gift.

I spent nearly fifty-hours with Luis over the course of nine days. Luis gives lessons to jazz students at both The Manhattan School and Temple in Philadelphia. I attended many of these lessons and played trombone trios with his students as part of their lessons. We would play jazz together in these lessons and feed off of each other – it was tremendous! Our final session was just Luis and I. After eight days together I said, “Luis – now I want you to give me the good stuff”, and he did! We spent nearly four hours together on a Monday afternoon. We played, we talked, Luis coached and encouraged and I soaked it all in. Understand – Luis Bonilla is in high demand as a jazz trombonist and teacher. He gets \$100 per hour for lessons and more for session work. We spent dozens of hours together working on trombone over the course of nine days and he wouldn’t take a nickel!

Luis plays the ‘jazz chair’ in the trombone section of The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. The VJO is absolutely my favorite big band and I heard them play two sets on consecutive Monday nights. I now know 6-7 guys who play with this group as I’ve had them here for our Oregon Jazz Festival over the years. Originally the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, the VJO has played Monday nights at the Vanguard since 1966. The music of Thad Jones and those who have come to compose for The VJO is at the core of the jazz repertoire for modern jazz band. Here at Lane, our Lane Jazz Ensemble studies this music and I’ve been studying this music and teaching it for decades. To be at the Vanguard and to sit in front of that band has been a life-goal. To be welcomed and accepted as a colleague and friend by members of this group is a deep honor.

I found the time to get to several other jazz clubs while in NY and I spent time with a former student who now does a lot of jazz trombone playing there. I also took a few hours to visit the Museum of Natural History, went down to the World Trade Center site and rode the “A-Train” up to Harlem.

This was my first trip to New York and it won’t be my last.

I wrapped up the traveling portion of my studies by driving to Walla-Walla for a week of study and observation with Dave Glenn at Whitman College. Dave is a professional jazz trombonist and terrific composer. Dave spent several years playing in NY in the mid-seventies before taking his teaching and conducting position at Whitman. I’ve known Dave for years and bring him to Lane each year for our jazz festival. As well as I’ve known Dave and

his playing, he had never heard me play. I really wanted to play for Dave and to get his feedback after having several months to work on things that I'd gathered from the first part of my sabbatical. I have a high level of trust with Dave and value his musicianship and opinion. This really could not have worked out better. I played for Dave and we played together. I also was able to share many concepts and techniques from the Alessi Seminar with Dave, (Dave's not a 'classical player' by trade), making our exchange even more fruitful.

Perhaps the most valuable thing I got from Dave was that I simply needed to play more Jazz. Dave understood that I was a good trombone player and solid musician but that I just had not spent much time working on the art and craft of playing jazz. His encouragement was invaluable and the perfect catalyst for me at that time.

OUTCOMES:

In November I formed with colleagues 'The Lane Faculty Jazz Sextet'. We have been meeting weekly and have performed numerous times since. This ensemble gives all of us a quality musical outlet and a vehicle to work on our Jazz playing.

My personal performance level as a trombonist has reached new heights. I am finding new joy and satisfaction in daily practice and have increased my practice time three-fold since beginning my sabbatical. The passion I hold for playing the trombone has never been as strong.

Certainly this sabbatical has had a positive impact on my teaching. We bring our experience, knowledge and passion to the classroom and share them with our students. Countless comments from students and colleagues confirm that my sabbatical experience has enhanced my teaching effectiveness.

On February 11, 2010 I played a solo recital here at Lane. My last recital was in July of 1984 and prior to this sabbatical I had no intention of playing another; it just would not have been possible. I needed information, affirmation, encouragement and the time to study, practice and rehearse. The recital was a great success and a perfect culmination of my sabbatical experience. Nearly 200 students, colleagues, community members and friends were there to lend their support and I was honored to play for them.

