

How to Cultivate a Jazz Culture in your School Band Program

By Chris Drabyn

In order to have a strong flourishing jazz program at your school, the culture for it must be set up. Students need to be excited about the music and have the desire to seek out answers for themselves. Time spent listening to the music, studying improvisation, and playing together are key to students fully understanding the music. The tasks and responsibilities of a middle school or high school band director are quite extensive, and adding more after school rehearsals or extra class duties is not always a welcomed choice. To help solve this problem, here are five ideas to use that help the culture grow with minimal time and responsibility added to the band director's full plate and places the task in the hands of the students.

1. Create a Jazz Listening Room

Most music departments have a practice room, storage space, or rehearsal space that can be used as a listening room. Set up a sound system with either CDs (already going the way of the record) or a computer with listening tracks for the students. These listening examples could be the specific jazz band tunes that are being learned that semester.

Having students spend after school free time listening to Count Basie, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* album, or John Coltrane's *Blue Trane* can greatly improve your teaching and rehearsal experience by having students that are coming to you with a clear concept of what the music should sound like. For rhythm section players especially, this will help the band director when explaining how the ride cymbal pattern should sound, how to create fresh rhythmic piano/guitar comps, how to get that "Freddie Green" sound on guitar, or what walking a bass line really sounds like.

2. Start a Combo

Probably the best way to make your big band sound better is to start a combo. The rhythm section should be treated as the heart and soul of the band where the energetic swing feel should emanate. Unfortunately, this group gets ignored in favor of fixing notes and rhythms of the horn players. An area most band directors feel more comfortable. Creating a combo lets the rhythm develop the way they need. Further, it will give your horn players a chance to develop their solos to a higher level.

Start this group yourself then give the leadership to one of the students. Find them a place and time to rehearse on their own with you giving occasional coaching. Assign the students easy tunes first. A blues such as *Tenor Madness* or *Now's the Time* and easy standards such as *Autumn Leaves*, *Summertime*, or *Blue Bossa* are good places to start. Give them a direction such as whom to listen to, what is required in the chord changes, and how to practice by creating easy arrangements of tunes with an intro and ending. Encourage them to seek out other tunes that interest them and to set up their own

rehearsals on off times in the band room. This will have amazing positive results that will manifest themselves in your big band.

3. Find Opportunities for Combos to Perform

Once the combo has taken off and the students have taken ownership, find them a place to perform. If possible and schedules allow, try to have the combo perform a lunchtime concert. If the administration allows, this can create a focal point during lunch and lets the student be scene in front of their peers in a different light. If your community allows, coffee shops and bookstores can also be great places for the combo to perform. This could become a fundraiser for the band program and shows the community the music program in a different way than the usual pep band exposure. Further, this can create a new spark with students when they see that there are other ways to perform music than in a concert or contest setting.

4. Provide Jazz Information Materials for Students

Finding time to teach music theory and improvisation can be difficult with compact rehearsal time. Create a place in your band area where students can freely get jazz materials. Set up a bin or wall mailbox where students can pick up scale sheets, jazz improvisation handouts, or jazz solo transcriptions to study. This could be announced at the beginning of the year, and then talked about periodically without talking too much rehearsal time. There could be a handout of the week that it announced or written on an assignment board for students to access. Any of the Jamey Abersold or David Baker materials are great starting places.

5. Give Individuals Assignments

Most schools do not offer a jazz class during the day or have time to teach in depth jazz improvisation to students. To overcome this, give specific students who are interested in the music personal assignments. Have a trumpet student learn the first couple choruses of Freddie Hubbard's F Blues solo on *Society Red* from Dexter Gordon's *Doin' Alright* album. Give a piano student a sheet of piano voicings and have them listen to Wynton Kelly and try and recreate his rhythmic feel. The beauty of this is that each assignment can be geared to help a specific problem spot in your ensemble without taking time from group rehearsal.

It is my hope that these ideas once started will start a wildfire of enthusiasm for jazz within your band program. This will really pay dividends when the younger students or others not previously involved see how much fun is being had in jazz. Students will have more intelligent comments about what is going on and will be able to inform each other. In essence, you will have created a well-oiled jazz machine that will feed itself and make your job more fun. Good luck!