“Blow the Curtain Open”: How Gene Hall and Leon Breeden Advanced the Legitimacy of Jazz in Music Education

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It is repeated *ad nauseam* that Paul Whiteman “made a lady out of jazz.” Or at least a Stepford Wife, briefly.

But to extend that tired metaphor about Whiteman, there still remained a formidable “glass ceiling” in the way of jazz’ being recognized as more than a novelty, and as an object of serious study. At North Texas, two educators and longtime friends oversaw the beginning of the Jazz Studies program at UNT, and its growth into one of the most prestigious programs on the planet.

It is not merely for self-congratulation and school spirit that I proposed this paper. Certain aspects of this struggle continue, and indeed repeat themselves across generations as jazz still occupies an uneasy place in many institutions: Those who would build a jazz program or expand it face opposition in the form of elitism, territorialism, institutional inertia, and as a competitor for finite resources of time, facilities, personnel, and funding. If nothing else, it may be some consolation that the ongoing struggles over jazz in academia are simply history repeating itself.

As a librarian, I also hope that the content of this presentation demonstrates the productive working relationship we enjoy with the College of Music in supporting its educational mission and providing opportunities for original research via special collections. Jazz need not be left out of that. And I hope it shows the importance of maintaining institutional history for future generations. All of the recordings of interviews I’ll be playing were done in the late 1970s, and all of the interview subjects are now deceased. Again, jazz should not be left out of the collection of institutional history.
Precedents [SLIDE 2]

The forerunner to the formal presence of jazz at North Texas was formed somewhat out of necessity, as an ensemble to accompany silent films, and starting in 1927, to support a Saturday night stage show which became a local institution in a prairie college town not otherwise known for its nightlife. The stage band, under the directorship of Professor Floyd Graham – or “Professor Graham” – became known as the Aces of Collegeland. Numerous performers who went on to considerable success appeared with the group, including the Moon Maids, who joined Vaughn Monroe’s band, Jimmy Giuffre, and Pat Boone.

The Aces of Collegeland and the participation of student arrangers in its activities gradually generated an interest in – and a need for – qualified training in stage band work. There were not many student arrangers, but an alto saxophonist named Gene Hall, from Whitewright, TX, advanced to the point where he was arranging for both Fessor’s band and the marching band.

Hall finished a bachelor’s degree with a dual major in music and education in 1941. Expecting to be drafted at any time, he began graduate studies at North Texas. Years later, he recounted:

"... I come back to North Texas, and [Dean Wilfred] Bain [SLIDE 3] gives me a graduate assistantship. I have three chores. One of them seems ridiculous now. One of the things I had to do was patrol the practice room area at certain times to be sure no one was practicing or playing jazz or popular music."

But Dean Bain ultimately had other ideas. When Hall approached Bain to propose a thesis topic, Bain told him he already had one picked out for him: to write a method book for teaching jazz on the college level. Hall finished his thesis in 1944, while working variously as a
band director, a touring musician, and a shoe salesman. In 1944, he replaced Don Gillis as staff
arranger at the radio station WBAP in Fort Worth.

[AUDIO 1 ON SLIDE 4]

In 1947, just as Hall was about to move to New York to begin doctoral studies and work
with Don Gillis (UNT’s first MM in composition), Bain’s successor as dean of the School of
Music, Walter Hodgson, offered him a job at North Texas. Through careful diplomacy, Hall
obtained approval from the curriculum committee for a "dance band" program because, in his
words, “jazz was such a negative term in those days.”

[AUDIO 2 ON SLIDE 4]

Here begins a bit of controversy in the historical narrative, which was hotly disputed into
the 1970s, and has reappeared from time to time in recent decades. After all, nothing invites
controversy like saying someone is the first to do something, including the issue of who was
really the “first” lab band director at North Texas. Recalling that it had become necessary in
practice to offer training to student arrangers and musicians who, discreetly and with the shades
drawn, played jazz in the privacy of their homes and not the practice rooms (We promise!),
others had carried on that work during Hall’s absence between 1944 and 1947, which he alludes
to in the recording.

Hall had clearly laid the theoretical and practical foundation for the formal study of jazz
at North Texas, and it was Hall who obtained permission from the curriculum committee to
formally establish the stage band program. But some processes toward that goal were already in
motion by 1946. There was already an established band which met to read student compositions
and play other music, and at the time that Hodgson was arranging for Hall to join the faculty, it
was directed by graduate student Charlie Meeks. Hall picked up directorship of that band when he returned to North Texas. Thus, technically, Meeks was the director before Hall of what became known as the Laboratory Dance Band, and the Jazz Studies Division now recognizes the program as having started in 1946, while previous major anniversaries were pegged to 1947. Meeks’ situation might be compared to that of John Hanson, the first of eight men to serve as chief executive when the United States was under the Articles of Confederation prior to the ratification of the Constitution.

However, the recordings show that Hodgson, Hall, and later, Leon Breeden were all in agreement about the 1947 start date, and regarded the dispute as somewhat of a tempest in a teapot. Leon Breeden recalls:

[AUDIO ON SLIDE 5]

[SLIDES 6, 7]

Not surprisingly, the new program met immediate, intense opposition. Hall had some allies, but plenty of other colleagues who were having none of it. Luckily, one of his allies was also the dean of the School of Music, Walter Hodgson. Here, Hodgson recaps the founding of the program as he saw it, starting with Fessor Graham’s band:

[PLAY AUDIO 1 SLIDE 8]

Few (if any) people are aware nowadays that the president of North Texas had Hall’s back as well the dean. It especially surprised a faculty member who decided to take up the issue with President McConnell, as Gene Hall recalls:

[PLAY AUDIO 2 SLIDE 8]
After a while, Hodgson had enough of being bombarded with complaints about the jazz program:

[PLAY AUDIO 3 SLIDE 8]

Hodgson was indeed very clear on his reasons for supporting the program. In his own words:

[PLAY AUDIO 4 SLIDE 8]

It was not long before North Texas’ musicians gained notoriety outside of Denton, and a small group called the Front Five even appeared on Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts. New successes, new audiences, new hate mail:

[SLIDE 9]

Undaunted, the program continued into the late 1950s, when Gene Hall took a job at Michigan State University, preceded by Walter Hodgson, who hoped to have Hall found a similar program there. Hall later went on to become the first president of NAJE [National Association of Jazz Educators], an ancestor of the Jazz Education Network. Replacing Hall was his good friend and former housemate, Leon Breeden.

Indeed, the mid-century years in Denton and Fort Worth produced a constellation of three closely linked, high-achieving musicians: Gene Hall, Leon Breeden, and Don Gillis. When Gillis moved to Chicago, and then to New York to work for NBC, ultimately as a producer for the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini [we have Gillis’s collection at UNT as well], it was Hall who took his position at the radio station. Both Breeden and Hall discussed
prospective employment at NBC with Gillis before other circumstances intervened; such was their caliber as musicians.

Breeden, born in Guthrie, OK in 1921, seemed destined for a career more similar to Gillis’ than Hall’s, having directed bands at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, studied at the Mannes School of Music, composed large-ensemble works, and arranged for the Cincinnati Pops under Thor Johnson. (He was turned down by Juilliard, but he still turned out alright.) Family circumstances prevented him from joining Arthur Fiedler as his chief arranger in Boston, and Breeden was directing bands at Grand Prairie High School, near Dallas, when the offer came to take over at North Texas.

[PLAY AUDIO SLIDE 10]

Breeden received about the same welcome as Hall when he took over. The transition was so rocky that he considered submitting his resignation after two weeks, and even wrote up a letter to do so after receiving a large amount of hate mail and even late-night phone calls! He fielded the same withering criticism, including warnings that he was risking his soul to eternal perdition by directing the lab band at North Texas.

Breeden was determined not to hand any ammunition to the program’s detractors, and moved pre-emptively to avoid some of the “jazzer” stereotypes among his musicians:

[SLIDE 11]

There were enough challenges as it was without piling on more. Within a few years, however, the introduction of Breeden and Stan Kenton to one another at the National Stage Band Camp proved a shot in the arm for both men.
Other successes soon followed, including a State Department-sponsored tour of Mexico in February of 1967, and a concert at the White House in June of that same year, joined by Duke Ellington and Stan Getz, for President and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, and the king and queen of Thailand.

Breeden kept up as exhausting a schedule as his health would allow. On an evening in February of 1968 when he had returned exhausted from a band clinic in Louisiana, his younger son, Danny, was killed in a hit-and-run accident at the age of 19. In a scrapbook among his papers, Breeden notes on an item from the day before Danny’s death: “This was my last totally happy day on this earth.” Years later, Breeden spoke of his regret at having not spent more time with Danny during those busy years.

Amid such profound grief, Breeden continued working with the band in preparation for its appearance at the MENC Conference in Seattle [Music Educators’ National Committee, now the National Association for Music Education], to be held in March of 1968, in front of over 3000 of America’s top music educators. As they waited to play, one band member told Breeden: “Tell them not to open that curtain. We’re going to blow it open in memory of your son Danny!” Which they did. [AUDIO 1 SLIDE 15]
Whatever prejudices about jazz and education that the audience may have harbored before the concert, the 1:00 Lab Band obliterated them. Here was a band that was not only competent, but head and shoulders above many classical virtuosi, and probably most of the members of the audience as well. The combination of technical proficiency, ensemble sense, and the emotional range of the program were such that the 1:00 gave the first encore performance in the history of concerts at MENC conferences. One can only imagine the ripple effect as those directors and administrators returned home to tell what they had seen in Seattle. But there were more concrete signs of success as well: One measure of the band’s impact came from the president of MENC about three weeks after the concert.

Breeden himself wrote in his autobiography:

“It was wonderful to receive letters from many parts of the United States from administrators who said in effect: ‘After hearing your band in Seattle, how can we get such a program started at our school?’ I wrote and gave them the best advice I could, namely that it will take a strong desire on the part of many people and also must be given strong support by your administration if your program will succeed! This always reminded me that at our school we would not have survived if the desire had not been so strong on the part of all of us. I felt in summation that we succeeded in spite of and not with the help of many who could have helped us but did not.”

Was it entirely smooth sailing afterward? No. Did all of the criticism go away? No. But Breeden and the Lab Band only continued toward greater successes, playing with countless jazz legends including Thad Jones, Ella Fitzgerald, Phil Woods, Tony Bennett, and Dizzy Gillespie. The band undertook a European tour in 1970, and in 1976, toured cities across the Soviet Union.
during the U.S. bicentennial – including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Volgograd, Baku in present-day Azerbaijan, and Yerevan in present-day Armenia. Surely, no one by that point thought that they could bully the program out of existence, as others had tried in the early years.

As Breeden summed it up:

[AUDIO SLIDE 18]

There is often a false set of distinctions in academic music between Western Art Music, “Ethnomusicology,” which has sometimes been shorthand for “music of those other people doing their thing at a safe distance,” and over on the wrong side of the tracks, musics which are intertwined with popular culture, such as jazz. But music doesn’t like rigid boundaries, and gerrymandering jazz out of participation can only stand for so long. As often as this history repeats itself, the wrong side of history is still the wrong side of history.

[SLIDE 19]

[SLIDE 20]