Aprendendo a improvisar no sul dos EUA: Histórias orais de *Old-Cats*

MODALIDADE: COMUNICAÇÃO

SUBÁREA/SIMPÓSIO: IMPROVISAÇÃO MUSICAL, INTERAÇÃO E CULTURA

Luiz Claudio Barcellos
Georgia State University - lbarcellos1@student.gsu.edu

Tyrone Jackson
Georgia State University - tjackson62@student.gsu.edu

Resumo. Este estudo explora as práticas de educação musical no Sul dos Estados Unidos através das perspectivas de músicos de jazz que cresceram no Sul durante as décadas de 1950 e 1960, no presente estudo denominados *Old-cats*. Este estudo utilizará técnicas metodológicas de imersão e saturação (VOLK, 2003) sobre a história das práticas de aprendizagem do jazz (formal e informal), aliadas à análise de conteúdo; e entrevistas de história oral com *Old-cats* do sul. O contexto histórico e as questões de segregação podem revelar a falta de acesso à educação musical formal. Esse contexto pode ter beneficiado o surgimento de ambientes informais para o desenvolvimento da musicalidade jazzística, principalmente a improvisação.

Palavras-chave. Música jazz. Educação musical no sul dos EUA. Improvisação. *Jam sessions*. Jazz nas escolas. História oral.

Learning to improvise in the American South: Old-cats' oral histories

Abstract. This study explores music education practices in the American South through the perspectives of jazz musicians that grew up in the South during the 1950s and the 1960s, hereafter known as Old-cats. This study will employ methodology techniques of immersion and saturation (VOLK, 2003) on the history of jazz learning practices (formal and informal), combined with content analysis; and oral history interviews with southern Old-cats. The historical context, and issues of segregation, may uncover the lack of access to formal music education. This context may have benefited from the emergence of informal environments to develop jazz musicianship, particularly improvisation.

Keywords. Jazz music. Music education in the South. Improvisation. Jam sessions. Jazz in school. Oral history.

1. Introduction

It is common ground to think of jazz as an example of informal learning music practices, something that happened despite music education's disdain. This assumption, however, may not be accurate. Before conducting the oral history portion of this study, researchers focused on a content analysis on available data from the jazz masters, such as Herbie Hancock, and Max Roach, content that is available through oral history books, Feather's encyclopedia of jazz, The New Grove Dictionary of American music, and YouTube videos. After a preliminary immersion on the available data, a few patterns of jazz teaching and learning were identified (MAY, 2005). However, not much is available on the pedagogical practices of the American Southern musicians.

This study intended to combine what was found in the literature with the data collected via oral history interviews, and "let the known serve as a guide to the unknown" (HELLER; WILSON, 1992, p. 104). During field work, however, researchers realized that jazz musicians have their own culture (SPRADLEY, 1979). Thus, an ethnographic lens was brought to the analysis of the data.

Previous content analyses have indicated that jazz musicians may have found in "nurturing families" (MAY, 2005, p. 29), jam sessions, big bands, and the church suitable means to develop. The combination of informal and (the lack) of formal learning practices within a context of institutionalized segregation may have provided the perfect storm for the creation of "the most important music in the world" (HUMPHREYS, 2015, p. 97).

By giving attention to the teaching and learning of jazz improvisation in the South of the U.S., this study may provide useful and “critical information about the process of music learning” (MAY, 2005, p. 32), particularly on improvisation, information that can be used in today’s context. Moreover, by enabling the Old-cats’ stories to be told, this study preserves “accounts that otherwise would be lost” (HELLER; WILSON, 1992, p. 105). Moreover, the assessment of cooperative and interactive ways of knowledge transmission, out of the necessity to self-express and the struggle to "adjust to white culture" (SMALL, 1998, p. 274), may provide "critical information about the process of music learning" (MAY, 2005, p. 32).

After visiting their homes, studios, and living rooms, we absorbed a small fraction of the Old-cats’ worlds (EZZY, 2002), We “listened, watched, and allowed these men to become” (SPRADLEY, 1979, p. iii) our teachers. Learning about their learning experiences, the stories behind their formative years, studies, hangouts, jam sessions, hotel gigs, mentors, influential figures in the family, schools, church, and radio programs all resonated deeply with us. Nevertheless, the most important was their respect for the music. Our aim here is to pay respect to this tradition of music makers, learners, and teachers of jazz music practices and knowledge, this complex culture called jazz. Perhaps, by looking at the interactions that take place in different environments where jazz musicians “play and develop” (MARSALIS apud SIDRAN, 1995, p. 337), not just schools, we might be able to uncover the instructional dynamics (BALL; FORZANI, 2007) behind jazz teaching and learning, and improvisation.

Participants have shared different environments for jazz to breed: radios (from New York and other locations in the country), family members, church (as an opportunity to socialize, be together, exchange musical ideas), jam sessions (“the school” for Robertson, “very important”

for Jennings), band leaders ("learning from them without having a single lesson" according to Hatcher), "enlightened high school leaders" (BERLINER, 1994, p. 26-27), school friends and classmates, neighbors, minstrel shows coming to town, soldier musicians coming from the World War II.

2. Review of Literature

In A History of American Music Education, one can find few mentions on the "musical life and music education" in the South (MARK; GARY, 2007, p. 60) but not enough for a proper study on jazz teaching and learning practices. According to May (2005), several families played a critical role in the musical development of young jazz musicians. May describes famous families in the Indianapolis Black communities: the Hamptons, and the Montgomery brothers, and how some of these family musicians didn't know how to read music. Sometimes it related to the instruments that they played, Wes Montgomery, the legendary guitarist, for example, learned from his older brothers. The fact that Wes did not know how to read, may relate to the fact that his instrument was not part of the school band, so he did his learning outside of school (INGRAM, 2008).

Tony Williams mentioned learning from his dad, and his dad's friends: "I had the opportunity to play at night a lot of times with my dad because he was a musician. (...) I'd be living this one life, as a child eleven or twelve years old playing with men in their thirties and forties (apud SIDRAN, 1995, p. 277). Duke Ellington's mom was a piano teacher when he was growing up in Washington DC (FEATHER, 1960), while Hank Mobley, born in Georgia but raised in New Jersey, was taught saxophone by his uncle, thanks to an illness, and time on his hands to practice. But how did parents, uncles, or other family members learn in the first place?

According to Sidran (1995), "jazz was passed on from sideman to sideman" (p. 272), they learned from each other, on the job, through osmosis (BERLINER, 1994), and especially in jam sessions. Hancock (apud SIDRAN, 1995) stressed that when he was growing up, they used to have jam sessions and now young musicians learn from records, and "it's not the same" (p. 272). Although he does acknowledge that it still works, there is something that happens when you are playing live, "this relationship that you feel as a musician with the audience... that kind of stimulation, that feedback you get from the audience. In the studio, there is no feedback except for the other musicians" (p. 273). George Benson shared Hancock's idea about the learning aspect of a jam, "I was in my late teens... and I wanted to learn how to play... I would take my guitar to jam

sessions and all the musicians would walk off the bandstand when they saw me take it out of the case... the treatment they gave me... made me more determined to play" (apud SIDRAM, 1995, p. 324-325).

Everybody knows the famous event of Charlie Parker being hit by a cymbal during a solo in a jam session in Kansas City. Thus, jam sessions had a strong influence on jazz musicians' formations. In a study about African-American jazz musicians in the 1930s and 1940s in Indianapolis, May (2005) acknowledged the importance of jam sessions as "an integral part of aspiring jazz musicians' lives, providing a breeding ground for creativity and innovation" (p. 25). That innovative side of jazz is at its best during jam sessions, when musicians, after finishing with their paid gigs, join fellow musicians to just play, and eventually push the boundaries of the music, its tempo, its harmonic content, melodic material, but mainly its improvisatory character.

Improvisation, as it pertains to jazz, was legitimately accepted in the school curriculum in the early 1970s (HICKEY, 2009). If the implementation of jazz improvisation in schools is nearly 50 years old then how did the Old-cats learn jazz improvisation? These musicians continue to improvise today at a high level over a myriad of complex harmonic material yet without any additional "academic" training. Furthermore, academic learning of jazz improvisation is difficult "because of the paradoxical relationship between the freedom of musical expression associated with the act, and the restriction that necessarily accompanies stylistic parameters" (LOUTH; LOUTH, 2012, p. 10). The development of the student relies on the teacher's ability to customize a program of study unique to the student. So that, in the future, the students can develop their own styles.

3. The purpose of the study and research question

This study's purpose is to explore music education practices in the American South through the perspectives of jazz musicians that grew up in the South during the 1950s and the 1960s, hereafter Old-cats. An additional aim of this study is to find out if there is any deviation in the way jazz improvisation is taught generationally as well as demographically. The main research question is the title of this study: how have jazz musicians from the 1950s and 1960s learned jazz and jazz improvisation? After looking at the initial data collection, through interviews and documents and photographs collected, researchers "relocated the original research question" (LECOMPTE & PREISSLE, 2003, p. 235), and started identifying emerging patterns to help complete the puzzle of what it means to be a jazz cat and how much have the Old-cats relied on

their jazz education, enculturation, and music practices within the continuum of formal and informal (FOLKESTAD, 2006). According to Green (2008), indicators of informal learning practices in music include students learning from each other, among friends, getting songs by ear, and without adult supervision, and not in a sequential way but hazardously. In summary, practices in tune with students' natural approach to listening and copying learning process (GREEN, 2005).

4. Research design and data collection

This study has employed methodology techniques of immersion and saturation (VOLK, 2003) on the history of jazz teaching and learning practices in the U.S., oral history through interviews with the Old-cats, and document analysis (photos, newspaper cuttings, flyer, programs, college handbook, among others). In this study, the term Old-cats means someone born in the South between the 1940s-1950s with a long career as a jazz musician. This will be a qualitative study using a historical-ethnographic research approach to explore jazz musicians' learning experiences and culture. The researchers immersed themselves in texts such as *Talking Jazz: An Oral History* (SIDRAN, 1995), and *Thinking in Jazz: the infinite art of improvisation* (BERLINER, 1994), music education history publications, jazz encyclopedias, American music dictionary, and YouTube links. The oral history portion of this study will encompass two 60-minute semi-structured interviews with 5 jazz musicians from the Southern U.S., mainly from Atlanta's jazz scene, participants were chosen according to their age (65-83).

Inspired by Monson's (1996) approach to interactive interviewing that "created a kind of interaction that had more in common with conversational situations in the jazz community than did a traditional interview" (p. 18), although we had a semi-structured interview protocol, we played each interview "by ear" (p. 18), as an improvisation.

4. Data sources

Participants	Age	Phone number	Where did you grow up?	Instrument	Interviews (date/time)	Location	Duration	N. of pages	1st round	Data sources (artifacts)
Bill Hatcher	71	770-972-0082 ✔	Brimingham, AL	guitar	MON, 8/2 - 4:00 PM	Online (Zoom)	1:14:54	23	✔	photo Andre Ford (1972), flyer, news on Rochester AM station
Joe Jennings	83	404-502-6805 ✔	Natchez, MS	sax/clarinet	TUE, 8/3 - 1:00 PM	Residence	1:12:27	24	✔	Spelman College handbook, NPR news women jazz program (2018)
Edwin Williams	67	404-403-8033	Willmington, NC	bass	TUE, 8/3 - 3:30 PM/FRI, 8/6 -10 AM	Online (Zoom)	42:40/27:03	21	✔	Dante's proclamation video (2013)
John Robertson	65	404-312-4783	Florence, SC	piano	SAT, 8/7 - 1:00 PM	At the Rialto	1:15:25	26	✔	videos at Dante's, proclamation speech, Emory wheel blog (2021)
Ojeda Penn	77?	404-310-6744	Montgomery, AL	piano	SAT, 8/14 - 10:00 AM	Residence	1:14:46	24	✔	photo (1978), album cover, CD

6. Data analysis

We are analyzing and coding the data collected from the interviews (SALDAÑA, 2009), identifying themes that emerged from the data and comparing them to the information gathered from our preliminary content analysis of historical sources. The following are codes for analysis: jazz runs in the family, jam sessions, learning by doing, learning on the job, performance opportunities in the church, school band, informal vs. formal, segregation, migration, and challenges, among others. In this study in-vivo codes were used to demonstrate a point of view.

7. Preliminary results

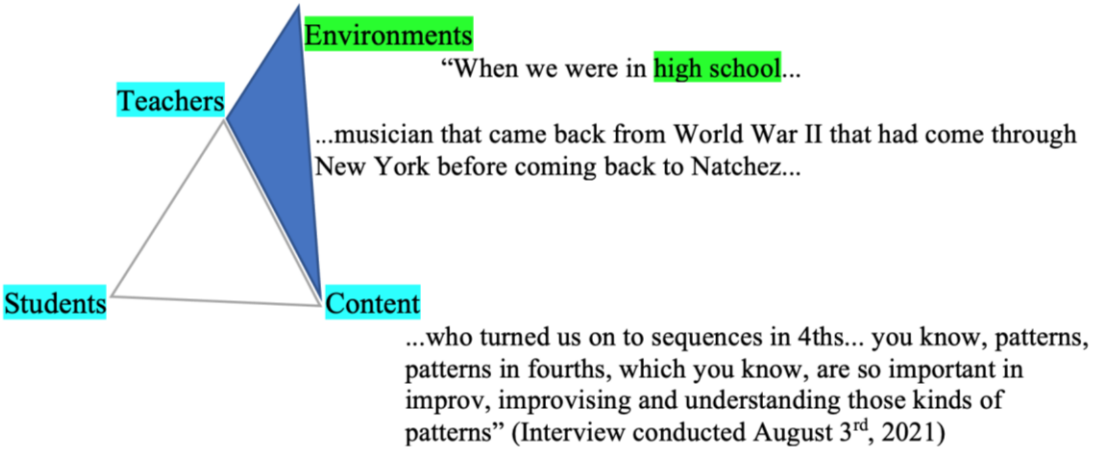
After a preliminary phase of analysis, many of May's (2005) learning environments were identified in more than one interview. So far, we may say that there is no single pathway to jazz learning; no two jazzmen are alike. Moreover, there is no separation between teaching and learning in jazz; every jazz musician is a source of teaching and a potential learning force. If we accept jazz as the art of the musical encounter, then every encounter with another musician is an opportunity for jazz-making and jazz learning (Prouty, 2012). As Old-cat Joe Jennings put it: "every musician you meet...ask them to show you something" (interview conducted August 3rd, 2021).

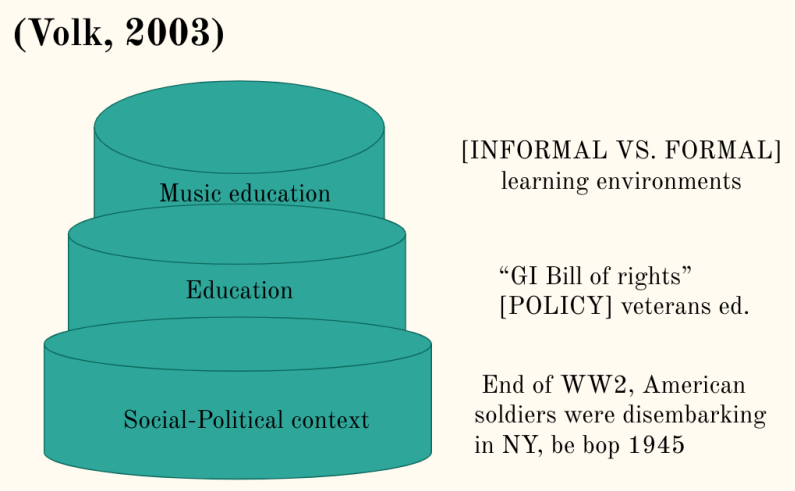
One of our main findings is that jazz is a well-balanced combination of formal and informal learning practices, regulated by teachers and other types of mentors, such as band leaders or older players. Mentors helped forge jazz learning environments, making use of the opportunities available, mostly out of necessity, but also because of a shortage of jazz musicians who played jazz in the south. On the other hand, young musicians' enthusiasm towards practice turned jazz into a learning on-the-job situation, allowing for the emergence of non-official (non-formal) learning environments. Follow excerpt from Jennings interview [INFORMAL VS. FORMAL]:

> ...the **radio**, you know, which kept the music flowing. Now, it wasn't in my culture, as far as a family is concerned as most as my father was educated and my mother sang church music, jazz music wasn't really a part of my environment at home. I got it from the radio, you know, I'm getting to bed and I put my cover over my head. You know, jazz stuff. Then we had friends, some of my younger **friends**, when we did begin to start taking **instrumental music**. In the **school**, we're talking about, the regular school traditional **school band**. And we didn't have a marching band at schools at time, but we did for parade... We played duets in the **church** to talk about jazz musicians, tried to play it. Then there were some other musicians who came through town... I remember one fellow who played with Louis Armstrong. They had other groups playing other kinds of music there...There was another gentleman who had played with the *Carolina Cotton Pickers*, who was like a **nomad**... His

> name was Geechy Robinson... we had to learn it through meeting other people... like what someone told me once, "every musician you meet... ask them to show you something" you know? That became like a kind of a mantra... anybody like that... so, with the friends that we would hang out together (Interview conducted August 2021).

By using an interdisciplinary conceptual framework combining the instructional triangle (BALL; FORZANI, 2007) and the layer cake (VOLK, 2003) we can frame our findings within a broader context of social-political context, general education and music education, the interaction between the Old-cats learning experiences and informal ways of transmission.





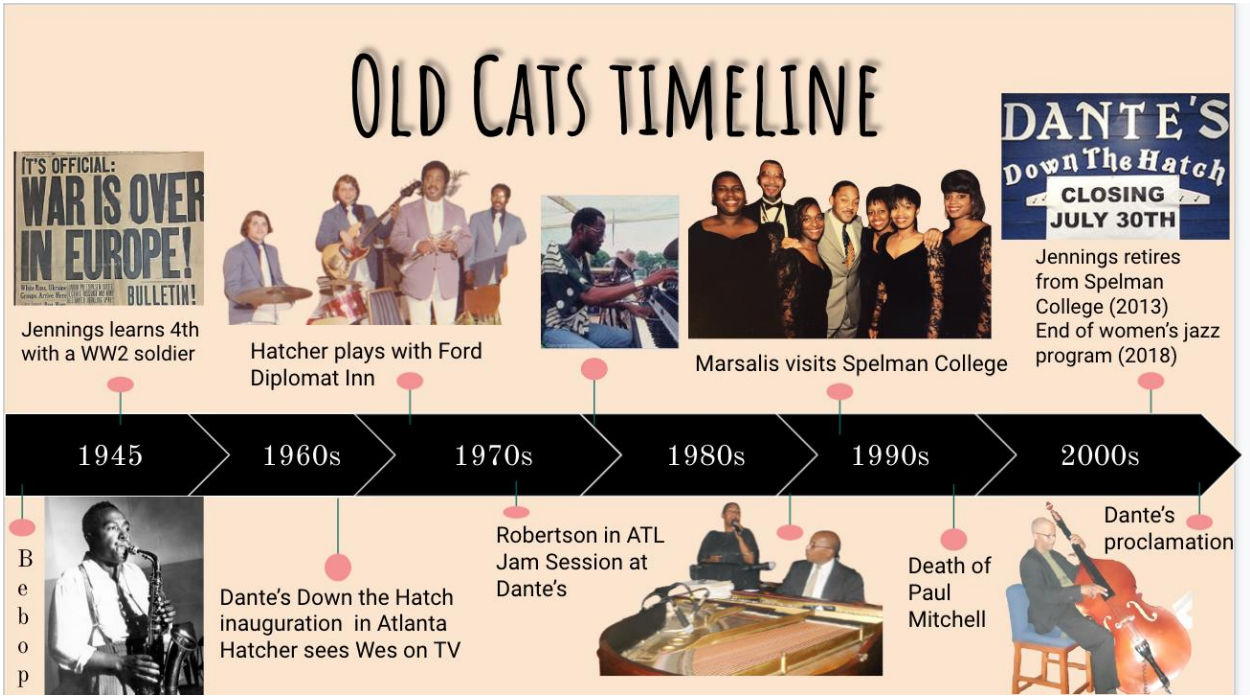
As far as documents are concerned, participants have shared photos, flyers, programs and other sources of visual data of events or personnel cited during the interviews, such as Andre Ford's band flyer (ANEXO A), one of Hatcher's first paying gigs, in his early twenties, where he

learned "everything... [he] needed to learn" (interview conducted August 2021), or in a newspaper cutting provided by Jennings, of his time as the director of Clark College Jazz Ensemble, where we understand the struggle of "not having a budget" (ANEXO B). Both documents touch the idea of [JAZZ BUSINESS], and issues on advertising, prospecting gigs, sponsors and donations.

8. Limitations of the study

It is a small number of participants; we will be looking at depth instead of breadth. By looking at 5 jazz musicians we cannot generalize and assume that this is the way jazz teaching and learning was done overall in the American South; the region presented, and still presents, different realities and economic developments, opportunities, and challenges in different levels. However, we do believe there are patterns of learning practices that can be identified, information that is definitely lacking from our music education history books.

As a conclusion, we would like to share our work in progress Old-cats timeline, showing the development of events and main "environment" for jazz learning:



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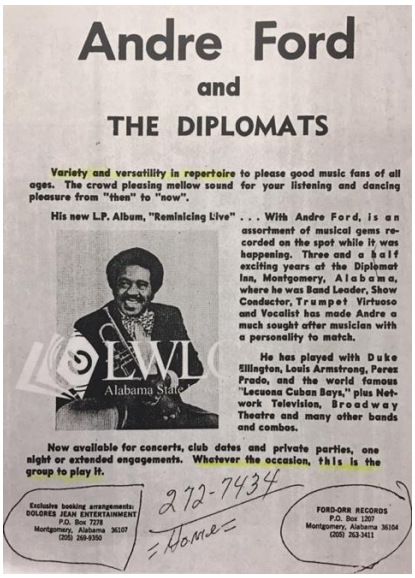
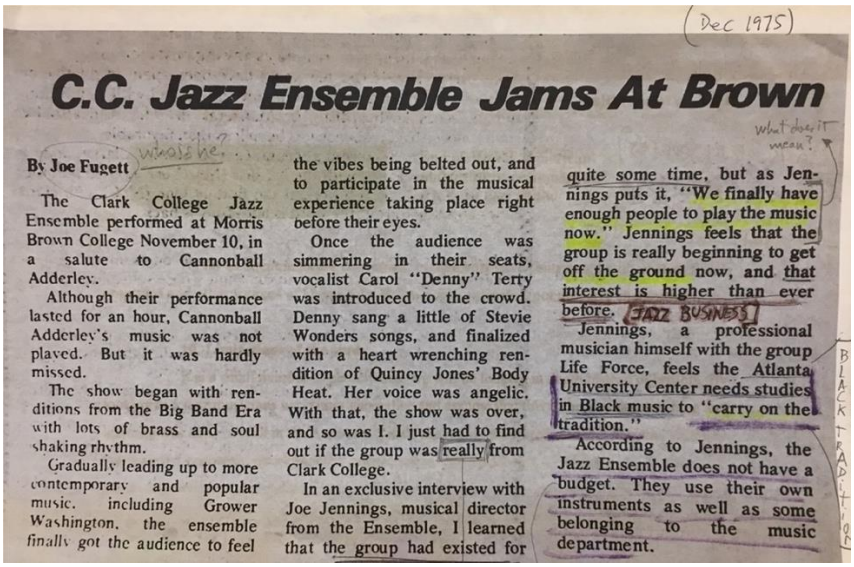
ANEXO A - Andre Ford and the diplomats band flyer (Hatcher's paying gig)



ANEXO B - Clark College Jazz Ensemble (Jennings direction)



(Dec 1975)

C.C. Jazz Ensemble Jams At Brown

what does it mean?

By Joe Fugett

The Clark College Jazz Ensemble performed at Morris Brown College November 10, in a salute to Cannonball Adderley.

Although their performance lasted for an hour, Cannonball Adderley's music was not played. But it was hardly missed.

The show began with renditions from the Big Band Era with lots of brass and soul shaking rhythm.

Gradually leading up to more contemporary and popular music, including Grower Washington, the ensemble finally got the audience to feel the vibes being belted out, and to participate in the musical experience taking place right before their eyes.

Once the audience was simmering in their seats, vocalist Carol "Denny" Terry was introduced to the crowd. Denny sang a little of Stevie Wonders songs, and finalized with a heart wrenching rendition of Quincy Jones' Body Heat. Her voice was angelic. With that, the show was over, and so was I. I just had to find out if the group was really from Clark College.

In an exclusive interview with Joe Jennings, musical director from the Ensemble, I learned that the group had existed for quite some time, but as Jennings puts it, "We finally have enough people to play the music now." Jennings feels that the group is really beginning to get off the ground now, and that interest is higher than ever before. [JAZZ BUSINESS]

Jennings, a professional musician himself with the group Life Force, feels the Atlanta University Center needs studies in Black music to "carry on the tradition."

According to Jennings, the Jazz Ensemble does not have a budget. They use their own instruments as well as some belonging to the music department.

BLACK TRADITION