



OAKTOWN JAZZ WORKSHOP

Enter a performance studio at the Malonga Casquelourd Center in downtown Oakland and you may hear instructor and bass player Ravi Abcarian direct 17-year-old drummer Evan Monroe to “bash it.” Another young musician, Savannah Harris, 14, adds, “Do you really want to tell a rock drummer to bash it?”

Dialogue like this, along with exceptional jazz sounds, is not uncommon during an Oaktown Jazz Workshop (OJW) session. Based in Oakland and formed in 1994, OJW provides afterschool music instruction, performance experience and mentorships to nearly 70 youths ages 10 to 17.

“It’s so sad,” explains drum instructor Jack Dorsey. “We go around to schools and kids ask us how we got started playing jazz. Growing up, our schools offered music classes. Now, only a handful of schools provide music education.”

At OJW, students not only develop a foundation in jazz music improvisation, theory and history, but also learn to work as a jazz ensemble arranging and composing music to perform and record. OJW has recorded two CDs, “Pocketized” and “Oaktown Jazz,” and has benefited from Grammy Award-winning guest instructors like Roy Hargrove, Branford Marsalis and Terrance Blanchard.

“I play other types of drumming and jazz is my favorite,” explains Evan. “It has helped me to improve in all other forms. The improvisation gives you more room to express yourself.”

OJW offers a safe, structured performance space where young people can explore their shared interest in jazz regardless of their age or skill level. Eleven-year-old flutist Maureen Sides has already learned to create her own arrangements. “I was playing marching and classical and my teacher asked if I wanted to start playing jazz. I was like, ‘What’s that?’” jokes Maureen.

Executive director Khalil Shaheed, a trumpeter, has led the way in providing afterschool jazz music programs for 15 years. “People say that kids today only want to listen to hip-hop,” explains Khalil. “This is true only if you never expose them to other types of music. It’s important to me to make a classical American music like jazz accessible to young people.”

“I listen to everything right now from Fela Kuti to Woody Shaw,” states Savannah. Listening to an African ’70s musician and a post-bop jazz trumpeter is not the norm for most students Savannah’s age. But with the support from The Clorox Company Foundation, professional OJW artists can continue to teach young people how to expand their relationship with music and to become experienced performers and engaged listeners.

