

Reflective paper – my experience in BGJI, class of 2019

My time could be summed up in the Berklee Global Jazz Institute as nothing short of transformative. I have been challenged and stretched beyond my previous predictions and anticipations. The experiences, opportunities and situations I have been exposed to over the past 10 months have cracked me open as musician and human being and led me to realise that there is nothing that can't be accessed and achieved when one has pure-hearted motive, conviction and persistence.

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I began playing the drums at 14 years old and instantly fell in love with the rhythmic responsibility playing a percussion instrument granted me. Since performing professionally at age 16, I have strived to study and seek out guidance and direction towards becoming the greatest musician and drummer I can possible. This serendipitously led me to undertake a Masters degree in the Berklee Global Jazz Institute, spearheaded by artistic director and master pianist Danilo Perez and managing director and renowned saxophonist Marco

Pignataro. Through collaborating and learning from the highest calibre of musicians (Terri-Lyne Carrington, Ben Street, John Pattitucci, Joe Lovano, Alan Pasqua and George Garzone, to name a few), including Perez and Pignataro, I experienced and was consistently exposed first-hand, to examples to some of the highest peaks of musical and artistic mastery, accomplishment and integrity.

Being surrounded and immersed in the fertile and creatively inspiring environment of the Berklee Global Jazz Institute and in the greater Berklee music community, I continued to mount, overcome and relish in the learning curves that presented themselves throughout the duration of the Master's degree. From exercises and thought experiments of a musical and conceptual nature to emotional and psychological mind stretches inherent in the process of artistic maturation, I was challenged and encouraged to jump into the unknown, sometimes before I thought I was ready too. One life-changing example of this was a mini tour with artistic director Danilo Perez and fellow BGJI students in October 2018.

In a quartet featuring Perez, vocalist Berklee fellow Farayi Malek, fellow BGJI students saxophonist Luke Norris and bassist Benjamin Jephta, I was privileged to play and perform in New Orleans, namely at renowned club Snug Harbor and the University of New Orleans. Through the process of rehearsing Perez's compositions and arrangements, working together as a team and bonding in our time exploring New Orleans, this was admittedly an

exceptionally special experience of which I am so privileged to have had. Playing and bring the repertoire to life was a richly satisfying experience and one of the highlights of my musical life thus far. Additionally, living and exploring the rich cultural heritage of New Orleans provided also a full circle moment for me. We were accommodated not far from Congo Square in the French Quarter, the historical birthplace of the art form I have centered my life around, namely a fusion African rhythmic vocabulary with the European marching band and classical music, the tradition and culture we know as jazz/social music.

As a continuation on the theme of travel and outreach, I was privileged to be featured in the ensemble representing the BGJI at the 16th Panama Jazz Festival in January 2019. Through the wonderful time making music with trombonist Andre Hayward and the Panama festival community we were able to see the power and effect of music on those hungry for increased involvement in an arts practice. Through participating in jam sessions, to conducting individual and group led masterclasses, the evidence of the potential and amongst the students for musical learning and growth was blindingly obvious. This experienced exemplified a recent quote of Perez's (the founder and director of Fundación Danilo Perez and Panama Jazz Festival): "leave your ego at home before you step onto the bandstand". To see his influence extend and return back to his place of birth was a source of tremendous inspiration for myself and fellow bandmates: trumpeter Alonzo Ryan, pianist Aga Derlak, saxophonist Alexander Johnson and bassist Jacob Jezioro.

In March 2019, with Johnson, I represented the BGJI in the inaugural GAIA (Global Association for interconnective Arts) ensemble, developed by Perez and formed through a collaboration between leading music schools around the USA and Europe: Berklee, The New School of Music New York, Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, Siena Conservatory of Music and Conservatorium van Amsterdam, on the latter's campus of which the project was debuted. Throughout our time in Amsterdam we had the privilege of performing a repertoire of original compositions/arrangements at the famed Bimhuis and as part, also, of the Taste of Jazz performance series. We also witnessed first hand how the power of music can bridge cultural gaps during our outreach in a refugee camp in Utrecht. Through jam sessions and dialogue with the inhabitants, awaiting their habitual status in the camp, we had the privilege of sharing special moments of kinship and connection through music.

True to its description, each of us in BGJI were required to research towards, compile and complete a Culminating Experience recording and presentation, pertaining to a musical and political area of exploration and study that individually resonated with us. For mine, (entitled Middle Eastern Rhythms and the democratization of Gender roles) I decided to delve into the rich tradition of the Middle Eastern and Lebanese music and rhythmic canon. Having Lebanese ancestry and being born the offspring a Middle Eastern migrant family, settled in Sydney, Australia (during the mid 20th century), I sought, and will continue, to seek towards the potential of creative fusion between Middle Eastern rhythmic and percussion vocabularies with democratic sensibilities of

jazz/social music. I also aimed to exemplify the concept of gender equality through the metaphor of artistic and instrumental democracy that jazz/improvised music espouses. Unlike that of Arab music traditions, jazz music places equal importance and artistic responsibility on every music/sonic voice in an ensemble. Through using two beloved and politically resonant Lebanese folk tunes made famous by legendary vocalist Fairuz (Nassam Alayna Al Hawa, Sal' Alouni Al Nas), an original composition (Beit Kassab) and arrangement of a piece by a renowned jazz drummer (Drum Music), I aimed to interpret and translate the idea of gender and social equality through the lens of creative freedom applied to tunes steeped and representative of political and social empowerment during a time of civil unrest in the late 20th century. Notoriously, women instrumentalists have been underrepresented in the Arab world. Through utilising pieces made famous by a well-known Arab female vocalist I sought to leave my listeners and adjudicators with a final question: could the increased inclusion of female creative voice in middle eastern arts practice further contribute and serve to influence of equality amongst genders in the larger political and social realms of Arab culture and life? I was able to accomplish this sonic experimentation and journey with my fellow musicians and alumni from the BGJI and Berklee College: violinist/vocalist Layth Sidiq, Laoutoist Vasilis Kostas, percussionist Alber Baseel, bassist Benjamin Jephtha and pianist Noe` Zagroun.

The next chapter in my professional and creative life will take place in New York City where I will complete a Fall internship with freelance Australian-born piano player Matt Baker. This period of time in the fall help solidify and grow my professional network in New York and help jumpstart and further develop my creative practice and

collaboration within the myriad music scenes of the City as well as extending my reach and building audiences nationally and internationally.

Through this richly inspiring process and time spent in collaboration with some of my favourite musicians on the globe, I came to see the potential inherent in myself to affect positive change through musical excellence and commitment. The effects on the immediate and global community in the political, social and environmental realms were regularly made apparent through inspired teachings of Perez, Pignataro and the above mentioned guest artists and teaching faculty of the BGJI and greater Berklee College of Music. At the final commencement ceremony for our class of 2019, we were left with a poignant and incredible final encouragement from master musician and one of my greatest inspirations Wayne Shorter (communicated via text message from Perez) that put the icing on our proverbial BGJI Master's completion cake:

“The paths you take may present challenges which are in essence opportunities for a life expanding adventure, beginning with ‘Once upon a time’...GO FOR IT...See you in the future”

Onwards and upwards from here!

Love,

Jodie Michael, 2019