

Jonathan Greenstein

638 W 160th St. New York, NY 10032
www.jonathangreenstein.com/berklee

617-504-3392
jgjazz@gmail.com

STATEMENT ON MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Many years ago, when I was just starting to play Jazz music, I was in an ensemble at the Israeli Conservatory of Music directed by Amos Hoffman, a great guitar player who lived in New York in the early 90's and was part of the scene that birthed Brad Mehldau and Avishai Cohen. While I was studying with him, I stumbled upon his debut album for the famous Spanish label Fresh Sound and asked him about composing and putting together a record. His answer was simple but profound – you know how you practice improvising on the saxophone every day and most of it is ok, but maybe some is gold? The same is true for composing. Practice it every day. Most of it will be just ok, but there will be some gold in there.

I'm always surprised when people think they can't compose. It always goes hand in hand with a feeling that there are math-like rules to theory and harmony that they just can't understand. I've had the pleasure to work with students from very different backgrounds – social, gender, financial access – and unfortunately, that problem crosses those lines. It is one of my personal goals to correct this. I can't explain the joy of seeing a kid from inner city Milwaukee understand how the chords in a Robert Glasper song connect, and turning him on to Mulgrew Miller, seeing his eyes sparkle at the discovery and deepness of lineage. Or, after doing it for the first time at an ensemble I taught, the beauty of seeing a young women drummer overcome the biases against her and lead a (mostly male) band with her own music, now booking her own shows in Madison, WI. If there's one thing I would like to be able to change about Jazz theory and composition, it is this. To me, all Jazz improvisation is composition. Some of it might be spontaneous and some pre-conceived, but we are all composers.

All the teachers I looked up to over the years were also great performers. Now that I get to teach, I see even more vividly how important the role of the performer-teacher-scholar is. There is great joy in being able to share what I do and how I think. I get excited whenever I find out something new – “this person uses this chord this way?!” – and it is as rewarding for me to present that to my students as is it playing my original material on stage. In my classroom, I try to maintain that level of curiosity. Instead of thinking of harmony as a set of rules, I consider the Berklee method as a set of *tools* for creating art. In addition, I make sure to always speak in tendencies – This chord *wants* to do this, it doesn't *have* to. I believe this approach enables the students to open up to the idea of choice. As composers, we choose to

create the music a certain way. There are no wrong notes, just stronger and weaker choices for the emotions we are trying to convey. This ignites our curiosity – can I do this? What happens if we go there? – those questions actively inspire the students to explore. Explore the music – we analyze music in class, listening, describing in detail what is happening, examining if other choices could have been made and work just as good or even better – but also explore their backgrounds and their dreams. A student who is interested in making left-field instrumental beats will bring in a very different approach to the writing assignments than someone who is more a straight-ahead Jazz person. The only limit becomes their imagination.

Inspired by Amos, there's a down to earth quality that I try to maintain. Jazz theory is practical for me. It's fun to learn more about it since that enriches my own music. The more I know about composing, the more ideas I try, the stronger my art becomes. The students pick up on it as well. Being able to see me in both capacities – excited about the discoveries of theory, of other people's works, of their *own* compositions in class and being just as excited at my own shows and for my own records inspires them to create. It inspires them to believe in themselves. To not diminish this, especially given the different backgrounds and interests, I try to rely more on assignments for grading as opposed to exams- an analysis of a standard or submitting an AABA composition leaves more room for creativity. This way, I also get to fight for every student – again, a writing assignment is not as “final” as an exam and I can tailor it to accommodate any needs in class. This approach allows me as a teacher to get closer to the students and it is not cliché to say that I do learn as much from their choices as they do from mine.

The realities of Jazz in Israel taught me from a young age that performing and teaching go hand in hand. This still rings true for me today – every great musician I've had the pleasure to work with was also a great teacher. And now that I myself am also a teacher, I get to learn from my students, while also staying curious about the choices my friends, colleagues, and the people I look up to make. I take pride in my ability to encourage that curiosity in my students and try very hard to be reflective about my own teaching and stay connected to my own curiosity and excitement. Luckily for me, the study of Jazz harmony and composition is rich with possibilities and the answers the students bring to the question of art never cease to surprise me. I hope I can keep teaching these subjects, so I never stop growing as a teacher, performer, and human being. I try to practice that every day and there is definitely some gold there.

Jonathan Greenstein