



Jazz in Japan:

Music, Community, Culture

By Chris Lewis '09

Thriving. Dynamic. Unique.

Such words tend to describe the tremendous impact that the distinctly American art form of jazz has had on Japanese culture throughout the past several decades, since it first became popular during the Roaring Twenties.

Although Japan's rich jazz tradition is widely unknown in the United States, its inimitable grasp on the greater Japanese culture first caught the attention of Dr. Robert Hodson '89, associate professor of music, many years ago, well before he began teaching at Hope in 2002. Through a unique collaborative research project that included a three-week visit to Japan in July with a group of jazz students, he is hoping that the tradition will soon be better understood by others as well.

This summer's experience built on Dr. Hodson's time in Japan in the fall of 2008, when his interest in Japanese culture and admiration of jazz history led him to a semester-long position as an exchange professor at Meiji Gakuin University. In addition to enjoying the opportunity to teach two jazz courses at the university, which is located in Tokyo and has had close ties with Hope since the 1960s, Dr. Hodson took complete advantage of the time he had away from the classroom – by fully exploring the Tokyo jazz scene.

"Tokyo has a huge, thriving, and highly developed jazz scene. There are literally dozens of jazz clubs featuring live music every night and many high-level, skillful, and creative jazz musicians play on the Tokyo scene," he said. "The scene rivals – and, in some ways, surpasses – the jazz scene in New York, which is considered the 'Jazz Capital of the World'."

Throughout his semester-long teaching

experience, as well as his continuous explorations of Tokyo's jazz scene, Dr. Hodson's curiosity and fascination in the unusual development of jazz in Japan only increased.

"I was primarily interested by the fact that jazz is an indigenous American art form that developed in New Orleans around the turn of the 20th century from a fusion of African and European musical styles. It's a quintessentially 'American' art form and is even described by many as 'America's Classical Music,'" he said. "At the time, I thought it was very, very intriguing that the jazz scene in Tokyo is so highly-developed, so I decided I wanted to explore this vibrant scene further."

The opportunity to do so came through a competitive student-faculty research fellowship from the ASIANetwork, which is a consortium of more than 170 North American colleges, including Hope. Significantly, the \$26,000 fellowship not only enabled Dr. Hodson to return to Japan this summer but included support for a team of students to accompany him as collaborative researchers and experience the influence of jazz in Japan first-hand themselves.

During the three-week visit, Dr. Hodson, senior Larry Figueroa of Holland, Mich.,



A faculty-student research project mentored by Dr. Robert Hodson '89 of the music faculty has provided an opportunity for students to learn about, and even contribute to, Japan's thriving jazz scene. While visiting the country this summer, the students not only attended performances and spoke with musicians and others about the tradition, which the project is chronicling, but performed as well. Above, Larry Figueroa, Zach Pedigo, David Webster and Nate Roberts play a gig at "Live Inn Magic" in Tokyo.

sophomore Zach Pedigo of Chippewa Falls, Wis., junior Nate Roberts of Milton, Pa., and sophomore David Webster of Troy, Mich., attended approximately 20 jazz performances; spoke with several jazz musicians, club owners and audience members; visited a wide assortment of clubs, ranging from large, expensive clubs to small, relatively unknown clubs throughout the downtown Tokyo area; and even performed themselves.

Their experiences also included opportunities to gather with Hope alumni in the area and to connect with students and friends from a number of the institutions in Japan with which Hope has on-going relationships, including not only Meiji Gakuin

University but also Ferris University, Technos College, Waseda University and Seigakuin University. They performed jazz jam sessions at both Meiji Gakuin and Ferris, which is located in Yokohama, and conducted a jam session with the Waseda University (Tokyo) Modern Jazz Club, an unofficial jazz program in which upper-level university students teach younger students about jazz.

The experiences have helped Dr. Hodson realize that jazz's influence on the Japanese culture was even greater than he had previously thought.

"The students and I found that jazz in Japan, as well as the Tokyo jazz scene, are both surprisingly developed and thriving. There are so

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many clubs and musicians throughout the area and the quality of the performers are top-notch," he said.

Dr. Hodson is not satisfied with only having his small group of students learn about the rich tradition of jazz in Japan. He wants to extend the knowledge and experiences of his students to other people, in all four corners of the world.

"One outcome that I hope arises from this project is that information on the Tokyo jazz scene will be made available for the rest of the world," he said. "Because of the language barrier between Japan and other countries, the fantastic Tokyo jazz scene seems like a somewhat closed or self-contained environment, and we would like to help others learn about it and to experience it."

To accomplish their goals, Dr. Hodson and his student team are planning multiple presentations and performances to share what they have learned.

For example, they are designing a website that will fully describe their experiences throughout their three weeks in Japan, as well as the jazz clubs they visited and the musicians they met.

"The website will assist anyone who is planning on visiting Tokyo and is interested in its jazz scene. Our team will compile the reviews we completed for each performance we attended, as well as links to YouTube videos to assist those who wish to learn more about the personnel of each of the jazz groups we heard," Figueroa said. "We hope that our reviews will make it a bit easier for people to navigate through the variety of highly talented jazz musicians that perform throughout Japan."

In the coming months, the students will also bring music composed specifically by Japanese jazz musicians to U.S. audiences directly. They're planning concert performances at Hope and at the ASIANetwork conference in April.

In addition, Dr. Hodson and his students are also going to be presenting their findings during the ASIANetwork conference, as well as to the campus through the Hope Global Coffee Hour and the college's department of music.

Even as the follow-up activities will dramatically extend the reach of the trip, they are also expanding the students' learning experience, building upon the already considerable lessons of the three weeks they spent abroad. It's an opportunity for which they are grateful.

"Our trip to Japan was a 'once in a lifetime' experience," Figueroa said. "I am very thankful for this amazing experience and I hope that others will not only benefit from our research, but will also feel motivated to travel and to see and hear jazz performances in Japan for themselves." 🐦



The research visit included an opportunity to connect with some of the many Hope alumni and friends in Japan. Nate Roberts, Zach Pedigo, David Webster and Larry Figueroa are pictured outside the "Miles' Café" in Tokyo shortly before a Hope event.

