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The Full Spectrum

A hallmark of jazz is the way it both absorbs and reflects the sounds and styles of places, attitudes and times in which it is played. So diverse, yet all distinctly jazz, from the iconic works of Count Basie and Duke Ellington, to the more recent music of Bob Brookmeyer and Maria Schneider.

This range — the full spectrum of jazz — is at the heart of the [UC Santa Barbara Jazz Ensemble](#), whose 40 members have chops with instrumental, vocal, small- and large-group pieces that demonstrate the history, repertoire and conventions of jazz. What to the listeners may sound like freewheeling flights of jazz fancy — as they should — are in many cases highly disciplined musical forays that often set the stage for true improvisation.

That full spectrum doesn't refer only the music, however. In longtime director [Jon Nathan](#)'s group the players, drawn together by a shared love of jazz, come from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities. Only a small minority are actually pursuing a music degree; the rest run the gamut across campus — physics, psychology, geology, political science, engineering, to name just a few. They are freshmen from high schools with exceptional jazz programs, grad students who've played jazz all their lives, relative newcomers who show promise, professionals who have a thing or two to teach and learn, and all shades in between.

"As soon as I got here I started looking for an outlet for jazz," said Josh Sheltzer, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at who has been playing alto sax since he was in grade school in the Central Valley. Someone pointed him in Nathan's

direction and one audition later he was playing in the ensemble's smaller combos.

"For me it's a great self-care thing, just to integrate some music, because things can get kind of grueling," Sheltzer said. He's even managed to meld music with his research by evaluating the effects of a local after-school music program.

Meanwhile, Sinan Isak, a political science graduate student, has an undergraduate degree in jazz piano, which he uses to great effect with the ensemble by lending his experience as a player, leader and composer.

"When other pianists hear him, they're like, 'Wow, that's what I could sound like,' so just setting an example is a really important thing," Nathan said.

Another grad student, Evan Monroe from the Department of Geology, has already hit the Santa Barbara jazz scene as a professional drummer but returned to lend his expertise and help the ensemble hit new heights. He'll be keeping the ensemble — and the audience — on their toes by playing on a couple of the advanced tunes, Nathan said.

Still, for all the talent, Nathan said, success as a jazz musician isn't about how well one can play. There are certain expectations of course, such as knowledge of the styles and conventions of the music and technical prowess, but progress in the jazz world comes from a place you wouldn't necessarily expect.

"One of the major things — and I keep saying this to people and either they don't believe me or they just haven't experienced it themselves — but the real world of music is not about how you play, generally," Nathan said. "Anyone who's playing in my groups can play." In fact, the true test of a professional jazz musician often comes down to the "soft skills" of the working world, he said.

"A lot of times when you're playing jazz you're playing with people that you've never played with before in your life, and there are expectations and understandings that we all have for that to be successful," Nathan said. "It's more about showing up on time, being prepared, being a good bandmate — those are more important to me than whether somebody can play or not, because those are skills that are going to affect everything that person does in their life, not just in music."

To that end, the diverse makeup of the UCSB Jazz Ensemble is a benefit. As a microcosm of the larger jazz world, its array of experience and talent ensures that

its members keep listening and learning.

“In this band I have 10 people who can solo really well — and several of them are freshmen — so it’s a pretty exciting time,” Nathan said.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.