



## JAZZ CULTURE AND SWING RHYTHM BY ELI YAMIN



Eli Yamin leads a class at Jazz at Lincoln Center's middle school academy.

**T**he missing link in jazz education today is an emphasis on culture and rhythm. Everybody knows jazz grew out of African American experience, but what does that mean to us in 2010? How do we translate culture into an educational experience, regardless of our own ethnicity and/or that of students we work with?

My experience has been that we must make the cultural connection in order to present the art form authentically. To make sure that kids connect rhythm with culture from the outset, I begin with a series of straightforward exercises that put the participants in direct contact with the music and the story of its development. I introduce the stomp/clap, an ancient tool

**PRESENTATION:** Jazz Workshop, integrating social studies and history

**MUSIC USED:** "Wade in the Water" (or other spiritual) and blues

**LEVEL:** Upper Elementary or Middle School (adaptable for all ages)

**LEARNING VENUE:** Classroom

from African American culture, used to get through hard times as well as occasions of great celebration. I ask all participants to alternately stomp and clap in a 4/4 rhythm, not just tentatively, but with enough vigor, consistency and steadiness to make the floor really resonate. And all the beats are important, not just 2 and 4. Stomp always goes first!

Some of the kids can't sort out the stomp/clap physically or coordinate it right away (and even adults with quite a bit of music training may have the same difficulty). I work with the group until all participants start to internalize this underlying rhythmic character and their bodies are engaged with the 4/4 stomp/clap beat.

Step 2 is to add a song—an African American spiritual, like "Wade in the Water." I feel we should never skirt the issue of slavery because jazz is rooted in the slave experience. Spirituals helped African Americans endure the horror of slavery, and through these songs anyone can dive into the deep well of African American culture. The learning of a spiritual brings in the cultural context, letting the kids learn some of the concrete circumstances of slavery (e.g., that slaves weren't allowed to speak their native languages, that families were ripped apart, and that they were forced to work six long days

a week, with church on Sunday the only respite).

Singing the spiritual is the doorway to the soul of the music, and it also connects us with the roots of music in its most universally human and elemental form: rhythm, call-and-response, protest, and healing through communal emotional expression.

Vocal quality is not of concern; sincerity and conviction is what matters. The late Dr. Horace Clarence Boyer wrote in performance notes for *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, the African American hymnal: “A full, free, and sonorous tone is the hallmark of African American singing; therefore, the singer is encouraged to sing with a fully opened throat.”

With all this in mind, the participants sing and stomp with real spirit.

Step 3 is absorbing the duple/triple concept—sometimes referred to as “poly-rhythm.” One of the distinctive features of African American music is the constant and simultaneous presence of double and triple rhythm. I get half the room stomp/clapping the 4/4 rhythm, with the other half singing 6/8 eighth notes—1-2-3, 4-5-6—on top. Then we switch sides doing each rhythm. At this point a participant may emerge with African dance experience. Of course, I encourage spirited movement by all participants. It is often said that our music is “dance music.” This exercise, when carried out to its fullest, can take on the character of a great ceremony.

With this great rhythm in place, the song “Wade In the Water” can be further developed with call-and-response variations and different people taking turns on the lead.

Next—if the class plays instruments—we are ready to break out the violin, cello, piano, saxophone or trumpet, whatever the kids play. After they’ve sung “Wade in

the Water” so many times, they’re ready to find the notes of the melody by ear—and only by ear—and then to try it on different starting notes, e.g., F, or E-flat, or C. This is not easy for students who are accustomed to playing from notated music. But learning to play “Wade in the Water” by ear has multiple benefits. The kids access their ability to play music they hear in their heads, develop fluency with intervals, and without extra effort, become intimately familiar with all the notes of the minor pentatonic scale. These are the notes we use as a starting point for improvising on the blues.

That leads to a potential Step 4: Introducing a blues tune, like “Bag’s Groove,” by Milt Jackson, or “Sonny Moon for Two,” by Sonny Rollins, is advisable at this point. The main thing is to keep in mind all the things just experienced with the spiritual. When great master players like trumpeter Clark Terry or saxophonist Gene Ammons play the blues, no notes are wasted; each phrase is played with great intention and authority. This is what must be developed to become convincing improvisers in the jazz language. All the standard-bearers of jazz have been inspired by the blues in infinite ways. Just think of saxophonists Ornette Coleman, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Paul Desmond. Each differs significantly from the other, but the blues is their underlying foundation. If the masters carry this, so must our pedagogy. And as the great bluesman Willie Dixon said, “The blues is the roots. Everything else is the fruits.”

Of course there are many kinds of jazz, many kinds of American music. We can argue all day long what is jazz and what’s not. A lot of musicians today are creating music that emphasizes straight eighth notes, mixed meter, Indian, and Central or Eastern European influences. This is all

well and good, but the one thing we all agree on in jazz is that numerous geniuses active between about 1900 and 1965 laid the foundation for everything that came later. This period was our “classical era.” Just as every serious curriculum of European Classical music deals with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, we in the U.S. must regard Ellington, Basie, Monk, Holiday and Coltrane in the same light. That means continuing to develop, support and disseminate a pedagogy that gives students the tools to get the feeling these masters created.

My main influences in this approach to jazz teaching are Ronald Carter of the University of Northern Illinois, who trains teachers through Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Band Director Academy; the great trumpeter Clark Terry, who played with Basie and Ellington and who influenced Carter; and two leading scholars, teachers, and practitioners of African American sacred music—Bernice Johnson Reagon and the late Dr. Boyer.

Being able to improvise and project one’s individual creative voice in the context of a group is critical as well, of course. But a foundation in swing rhythm, taught in the historical context of spirituals and the blues, provides the renewable energy needed for a rich, exciting discovery of the miraculous, infinite, and magical world of jazz.

*Eli Yamin is artistic director of the Jazz Drama Program and training specialist and head of instruction for the Middle School Jazz Academy at Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City. He records, performs, and teaches worldwide with his blues band and jazz quartet. [www.eliyamin.com](http://www.eliyamin.com), [www.thejazzdramaprogram.org](http://www.thejazzdramaprogram.org)*