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12/15/13 [By Mick Carlon](#)

Eli Yamin: The Whirlwind of Jazz

The ultimate multitasker wants peace and millions of jazz fans

“Jazz is a relevant, vital life force,” says Eli Yamin. “Jazz makes a better life—full of joy and friendship. Let’s make millions of jazz fans and a world full of peace.”

Does Eli Yamin sleep like mortal men? Father, husband, gigging musician, composer, recording artist, director of the ultra-gifted young musicians of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Middle School Jazz Academy (MSJA), and co-composer/writer (with Clifford Carlson) of the superlative works of the Jazz Drama Program, Yamin seems to be living the lives of at least four people.



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Eli Yamin at Avatar
By Carolyn Appel



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Eli Yamin at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola
By Frank Stewart

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I saw the Middle School Jazz Academy band in action in October at Manhattan's Bank Street Books, at an event for my novel *Riding on Duke's Train*. Joined by Ellington trombonist Art Baron and JALC Director of Education (and fine trumpeter) Todd Stoll, the youthful band played with vigor, sophistication, subtlety and sheer joy. The young musicians were Jeremy Espinal on bass; Ahlenne Abreu and Alyssa Bailey on saxophones; Amaya Cheek on clarinet; and Michael Goldstein and Oswaldo Perez on trombones. Driving this cooking engine was the great drummer and bandleader (13th Amendment) LaFrae Sci. From his piano bench, Yamin beamed like a proud papa.

What exactly is the Middle School Jazz Academy? According to the MSJA teaching manual (co-authored by Ms. Sci): "Founded in 2005 as Jazz at Lincoln Center's firsthand instructional program, MSJA began as a laboratory for 13 dedicated students and faculty to discover the best way to serve the needs of underserved New York City Youth with high quality jazz instruction in group classes and private lessons. A restructure in 2012 has put the Academy on a path of exponential growth with an expanded Manhattan program of 25 students and a Brooklyn satellite program of 25 more. (The Academy will create) rigorous, joyful and effective learning environments in the spirit of MSJA where students develop musical, social, intellectual and emotional skills while falling in love with jazz and becoming articulate advocates for the music with their peers and families."

Says Yamin, "Next year we hope to start a third branch of the program in the Bronx with 25 more kids. We find the best teaching artists around to work with the kids—that magical combination of great artist and great teacher. [Teachers who] care about communicating and who listen to the kids."

For nine years Yamin worked at the Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education with philosopher-in-residence Maxine Greene. Says Dr. Greene, “For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving...” Obviously, the outstandingly inventive and creative young musicians I heard in October at Bank Street Books are examples of the Middle School Jazz Academy’s success.

For most of us, the MSJA would be the crowning achievement of a life’s work, but not for Eli Yamin. I am holding in my hands two CDs produced for the Jazz Drama Program: *Holding The Torch for Liberty* and *Nora’s Ark* . Written by Yamin and New York City teacher Clifford Carlson, the music is swinging, witty, ridiculously catchy, and beautiful—in other words, true jazz. *Holding The Torch For Liberty* , says its liner notes, “tells the story of the culmination of the women’s suffrage movement in the United States, circa 1920. Through ragtime, classic blues, New Orleans and Cuban infused original music, [the musical] traces how courageous working women joined forces to fight for and win final passage of the 19th Amendment.” Set on a cruise ship, *Nora’s Ark* retells the Biblical story with a young lady, Nora, rescuing animals from the Bronx Zoo! With musicians such as Evan Christopher, Chris Byars, Mark McGowan, Pat O’Leary, Stefan Schatz, Sara Caswell, Chris Washburne and Nicki Parrot, these albums are as truly unique as they are exceptional.

So how did the Jazz Drama Program come to be? Says Yamin, “In 1991 I was hired to musically direct the spring musical at the Louis Armstrong Middle School in East Elmhurst, near the Armstrong House. We did *Snoopy* . The kids knew virtually nothing about jazz and got little exposure to it at the Armstrong school save for a great mural on the wall. There was a good band and orchestra program—but no jazz. After several years of producing the regular musicals— *Guys and Dolls* , *Pajama Game* , *Joseph* , even *West Side Story* —we realized, ‘This ain’t it.’ (When Tony got shot, the kids cheered.)

“I had been talking to the kids about jazz but they didn’t seem interested in a historical approach. The teacher I was working with, Clifford Carlson, and I decided we should create stories that would engage the kids and, like our hero Billy Taylor said, use the language of jazz to tell the story. This way the kids would feel the immediacy and relevance of the music. In 1998 with a modest grant from Meet the Composer and the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation, we wrote our first original jazz musical, *When Malindy Swings* , based on an African American folk tale and poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar. We knew it from the Abbey Lincoln Song, ‘When Malindy Sings,’ where Malindy is a singer. We made her into a dancer and things really took off. JazzSet with Branford Marsalis covered our first year where we had over 50 kids on stage performing with more kids in the pit orchestra playing alongside pros and tech crew. We performed the show five times for the student body of over 1700 fifth-eighth graders. They *loved* it!”

From this auspicious beginning, the Jazz Drama Program took flight. “Over the next nine years,” says Yamin, “We workshopped five musicals in all and made nine productions. About halfway through we realized we needed to start an organization to support this work. Every year we did a show I thought, ‘This is a *miracle* —an original jazz musical performed by kids for kids in a public school in New York City!’ Now the shows are licensed through Theatrical Rights Worldwide and we’ve seen productions in 10 states and soon to be four countries with upcoming productions in Kansas and Poland. Doing jazz musicals gets a whole community involved in jazz and not just the instrumental part, but the dance, the theatre, the look, the story. And when you think about it, that’s how jazz used

to be. It permeated the culture. We want to make that available to young people. It is such a rich world, a dynamic tradition.”

Honoring this “dynamic tradition” is a new album, *Louie’s Dream*, by Yamin on piano and Evan Christopher on clarinet, which has been receiving plaudits far and wide. With songs by the masters (Mary Lou Williams’ “What’s Your Story, Morning Glory”; Duke’s “Azalea,” “Dancers In Love” and “The Mooche”; Pops and Marty Napoleon’s “Louie’s Dream”), along with fine originals such as Evan Christopher’s “Impromptu” and Yamin’s “Baraka 75,” the album is a bounty of delights. (There’s even a spoken poem by Yamin, “My Jazz Hero”). Among my favorites are Yamin and Christopher’s stirring piece for Mahalia Jackson, “Let His Love Take Me Higher,” as well as two beauties from *Holding The Torch For Liberty*: “It’s The Way That You Talk” and “Don’t Go Back On Your Raisin’.”

How did this partnership begin? “Evan and I met about 10 years ago at a jam session at Clem Meadmore’s, who was a terrific visionary sculptor. We instantly connected and began a friendship and musical partnership that continues to expand each year. We have done many residencies for teachers in Mississippi and at Doane College in Nebraska.” Christopher and Yamin even played the White House several times in 2009. “We played at holiday parties, while the president greeted guests. We swung the blues, Duke and Abdullah Ibrahim in the East Room under the portrait of George Washington with his sword. It’s amazing how good jazz feels in that house. There was a butler there named Ramses who was retiring after 50 years of service. We made up a blues riff for him on ‘Ramses, Ramses, Ram (ba-boom) BAM!’”

(If you find yourself anywhere near JALC’s headquarters on Columbus Circle this week, you’re in for a treat. “Evan and I are very excited to be playing at Dizzy’s on December 17 and 18 with a webcast on the 18th. It will be a gas.”)

How did music begin for Eli Yamin? “I started messing around on the piano as soon as I could reach the keyboard. Next to our piano was a window overlooking a driveway and then the next house. It had a window with a piano next to it as well. Every night the man next door would sit at his piano and play Scott Joplin rags. I was mesmerized and thought to myself, ‘I want to be able to make that magic.’

“My parents loved Mozart and Bach like it was their religion. They also played me recordings by Elizabeth Cotten, Josh White, Jr. and Paul Robeson. Very importantly, I went to see Pete Seeger. In middle school I found my way to the blues through Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King and Taj Mahal.” It was in high school that Yamin dove into the endless ocean that is jazz. “I really got into jazz: Duke, Monk, Benny Goodman, Basie, Sonny Rollins—and I kept diggin’ the singers like Ella, Sarah, Bobby McFerrin. I always kept the spirituals and songs of social justice in my ears: Elizabeth Cotten, Sweet Honey in the Rock. I saw Abbey Lincoln live many times.”

Yamin is keeping the tradition alive with his own daughter, Manika. “She’s in third grade and plays the recorder. She likes math and swimming. Every night I put her to sleep with Elizabeth Cotten’s music and we wake up to Indian chants and Etta Jones’ ‘Don’t Go to Strangers.’ You are what you eat, you know?”

Like Duke Ellington, Yamin dove deep into the piano in his mid-teens. “I studied some with Harry

Pickens (pianist with OTB and Johnny Griffin). This led me to Fred Hersch, Kenny Barron and Jaki Byard. I went to Rutgers and collaborated with a great artistic community, including dancers and actors. Studying with drummer Keith Copeland taught me *a lot*. After college I really got schooled when I met my mentor, Walter Perkins, the great drummer from Chicago. I played in his band every weekend for three years at the Skylark Lounge in Jamaica, Queens. All kinds of legends would roll through, including cats who played with Basie like Illinois Jacquet, Roy Haynes, Etta Jones, Gwen Cleveland and the great pianist Bross Townsend, who taught me a heap about playing the blues.”

At Bank Street Books, Yamin, swinging away, looked like happiness personified. “Playing jazz is a gas. There’s really nothing like it—the swing, the sound, the interaction. I wish all life could be like that! As a matter of fact, that’s the hardest thing about being a jazz musician—when you are *not* on the bandstand.”

Like his past and his present, Eli Yamin’s future is busy, busy, busy: “After many years of touring with the Blues Band with Bob Stewart, Kate McGarry and LaFrae Sci, I think I’m going to start focusing on a new quartet. I’d like to see if I can have a band that integrates it all—the bebop, blues and folk music I love. I need to simplify and focus. With the Jazz Drama Program, we are raising money and recording *Message from Saturn*, a musical about the healing power of the blues. We are also beginning some new partnerships and looking for a home base both in the school year and in the summer.”

Let’s pick up the needle on our interview and gently place it down on the revolving grooves. Once again we hear the voice of Eli Yamin: “Let’s make millions of jazz fans and a world full of peace.”

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