

# Student Becomes Teacher

After learning from his musical mentors and playing with Stan Kenton, Jim Widner has been paying it forward for 25 years.

BY TERRY PERKINS

**IT'S A TUESDAY NIGHT** in St. Louis, and after a full day working as the director of jazz studies and artist in residence at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, Jim Widner is still in jazz mode—playing bass at his regular gig at the intimate Fox and Hounds Tavern at the Cheshire Inn.

For Widner, jazz is an all-consuming passion—one that propelled him from his initial musical training on cello and sousaphone in high school in the rural environment of Lebanon, Mo., to a distinguished career as a bassist in the big bands of Stan Kenton, Woody Herman and Glenn Miller, and eventually his own Jim Widner Big Band.

Though Widner has gained acclaim for his musicianship, it's his work as an educator that has earned him recognition over his lengthy career, one that has garnered him a membership in the Statesmen Of Jazz (2006) and the Jazz Education Network (2008–2010), not to mention a DownBeat Jazz Education Achievement Award (2008). After nine years, he has taken the University of Missouri—St. Louis jazz program from a single student jazz combo to a half-dozen student combos and two big bands, and established the Greater St. Louis Jazz Festival on campus in 2004.

Widner said it's his own jazz education—with emphasis on his early music teachers and particularly his experience with Kenton—that profoundly influenced his decision to run his own jazz camp, which celebrated its 25th anniversary last year.

"I got my real start as a jazz musician in the Kenton jazz clinics in the 1960s," he recalled. "Before I attended my first Kenton clinic in 1963 at Indiana University, our high school band teacher, Jerry Hoover, took us on a bus from Lebanon, Mo., to Ft. Leonard Wood to hear the Kenton band in concert.

"After the concert, Mr. Hoover made me go to the front of the stage and introduce myself to Kenton's bass player, John Worster. John went out of his way to talk with me, and when I told him I was coming to the Kenton camp that summer, he told me he was looking forward to working with me. That made a huge impression."

Widner would begin teaching jazz at the famed Stan Kenton Clinics in 1967 while still a student at the University of Missouri—Columbia, and even managed the classes through the 1970s. He developed a strong relationship with Worster and ended up coming back to the clinics every summer for the next few years. Worster eventually called Widner to ask if he would be interested in taking his place in the Stan Kenton Band.

"It ended up that Stan didn't take the band out much that summer, so I



ended up playing with them at two summer clinics—but also working as an instructor," Widner said.

After brief stints touring with the Woody Herman Band in 1968 and then the Glenn Miller Orchestra, Widner graduated and returned to the Kenton clinics in the early 1970s. But after Kenton's death in 1979, the Kenton band ended, as did the annual camps. Though Widner focused on his own music education efforts for several years, his thoughts kept returning to the possibility of reviving the Kenton clinic legacy.

"If there couldn't be a Kenton band, why did what [Stan] really believed in—jazz education—have to die as well?" Widner said. "I kept thinking that someone in a stronger position than I would step up and recreate that, but after nine years, no one did. Finally, I said to myself, 'By golly, I know how he did it. I worked in setting them up.' If I crash and burn, so be it, but at least I'll go to that big band in the sky knowing that I tried. Lo and behold, 25 years later, we're still here."

Widner was determined to stick with the formula that had made the Kenton clinics a success. As part of that effort, he focused on getting as many Kenton band veterans involved in the new camps as possible.

"The first thing I did was call Kenton band alums who had taught at the camps and knew what it was about," he explained. "I thought it would be easier to get off the ground with the help of experienced people. I don't think I got a single no. I had ex-Kentonites Marvin Stamm, Ed Soph on drums, Bill Fritz, who was the bari sax player and did arrangements for Stan, Steve Weist, who's now director of the jazz program at the University of North Texas, and Roger England on trumpet. I had a pretty high-profile band."

For Widner, having a real big band at his camp was an essential element to success. He saw it as the capstone to a curriculum that also included classes in improvisation, sectional work, and theory classes and master classes for specific instruments.

"All of those elements are important," Widner said. "Master classes enable students to reach new levels of technique on their instruments, but the frosting on the cake is that students get to hear a professional big band every day at the camps. They get to hear what they've been studying and talking about and what we've been demonstrating to the best of our ability. They get to actually hear what a powerful brass section can do."

Saxophonist Chip McNeill, director of jazz studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and part of the Widner Jazz Camps for the last several years, also emphasizes the positive impact of classes and live performances. But McNeill also notes Widner's dedication and commitment as key ingredients in the overall impact of the camp experience on students.

"As an instructor at Jim's camps, I've seen wonderful musical results in the students via the camp experience," he said. "Jim's unwavering commitment to students, his giving nature as a musician and his willingness to share his experiences in jazz with them are key to developing future generations of jazz musicians."

There has been another benefit to the instructors and members of Widner's big band through the annual camps. Widner has used the big band performances at the annual camps as a foundation for recording projects.

"We released the first recording, *Yesterdays And Today's*, back in 1995," says Widner. "And we're going to be releasing our sixth recording, *The Beat Goes On*, early in 2013. It's been a way to make things creative for all the musicians—and have some fun as well."

Now that Widner is at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, one of the two camps he holds each summer is conducted there and is scheduled for June 9–14 this year. The other camp will be held at the University of Nebraska-Omaha from June 16–21.

"I've been doing this for 25 years on my own, and for 10 years before that with the Kenton organization," Widner said. "I'm going to keep doing it until I get it right."

"People ask me all the time why I keep doing this year after year. When you see those kids at camps get excited about this music, that's the reason. If they were there to see the magic going on with these kids, they would understand."

Widner paused, then pulled out a piece of paper and placed it on the table.

"Here's an example of what I mean. An email from a young trombone player named Joe Hatamaya. He came to our camps at Sacramento State from 2006 to 2008. He's now studying at the Manhattan School of Music, and he wrote to tell me that he recently got called to play a Kenton centennial concert with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

"Here's just a little of what he wrote: 'I'd like to thank you for everything you and your camps have done for me and for countless other people. Whether they ended up as musicians or just music lovers, I am sure that everyone who has gone through your camps has left with something positive.'"

"That's what it's all about, right there. That's why I'll keep doing this as long as I have the energy and the passion. It's a way to pay it forward—and hope the students learn from us and pay it forward as well."

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