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New music chair excited about broadening program's offerings, community reach

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By **SHANNON O. WELLS**

Many talented musicians with aspirations in more traditional careers often find a way to play music "on the side" while their financial bread and butter comes courtesy of their office-based employment.



Aaron Johnson

Aaron Johnson, who has taught music at Pitt since 2015, initially took this route, but ultimately chose to upend the tried-and-true day-job concept.

A Washington, D.C., native, Johnson earned degrees in electrical engineering and economics from Carnegie Mellon University, a master's degree from the Georgia Institute of Technology, and a doctorate in historical musicology at Columbia University.

For about 20 years, Johnson worked in telecommunications research involving optical-fiber measurements, optical communications networks, DSL and video distribution networks.

At the same time, he was an active jazz musician in the New York City area, playing trombone and bass trombone with the likes of Charles Tolliver, Jimmy Heath, Frank Lacy, Steve Turre, Wallace Roney and Aretha Franklin. He's also recorded with contemporary music luminaries, including Jay-Z, among many others.

"I just had parallel careers for many years," he explained. "I was very active as a musician in high school, grade school and junior high. When I went off to college, I had to figure out how to keep playing while working on a degree in electrical engineering. It's a choice a lot of

people have to learn to make. And it could be a tough one.”

While an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon, Johnson joined the school's jazz band, but said he quickly became “disgusted” with the ensemble's “fast, high and loud” playing, as he shared in a 2013 profile by Massachusetts-based music writer Abby Wood. He found a more nurturing environment just down the road, in Pitt's Jazz Band, which he's credited as the source of his core jazz education.

In the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences, Johnson has served as associate professor in the music department, as part of the Cultural Studies and Film Studies affiliated faculty, as well as on the diversity, equity, and inclusion committee. With his recent appointment as chair of Pitt's Department of Music, Johnson — the first African American in the role — said his primary goal is to keep the department on a dynamic, flexible path and respond to what students are looking for.

“We're constantly updating and revising our curriculum to keep it relevant to providing the students what they need,” he said. “We have a unique blend of students in the music department. We have a lot of people who are studying other things at Pitt, and they're taking double majors or minors in music.”

The department's offerings include everything from traditional Western European/classical music-centered education to what Johnson calls “music education that prepares them for the kind of music they want to play, (including) making beats or playing in rock bands or playing jazz or doing folk music.”

“We're always trying to shake up our curriculum,” he said.

A stabilizing force

Deane Root, professor emeritus in the Department of Music since his 2018 retirement, said Johnson brings “a combination of experience and knowledge within and beyond music,” including his engineering background, performing as a professional trombonist and earning a Ph.D. at Columbia University, which Root called “one of the most challenging graduate musicology programs in the country.”

Among the qualities Root said he admires about Johnson's work as a teacher, mentor and chair include his “empathy and compassion for others.”

“We invited him to interview as a finalist for the Pitt jazz faculty positions because of his impressive resume of teaching, research and life experience,” he said. “What became immediately clear during the on-campus interview was his ability to comprehend and relate to the challenges we faced in creating a new Ph.D. track: to maintain and strengthen bonds between the department, the rest of the University and the wider jazz community in Pittsburgh.”

Root said he also values Johnson's knack for nurturing students, “including first-generation college students and young people from throughout the region, as well as senior members of the public, many of them colleagues or family members of renowned jazz musicians.”

Root, who joined Pitt's Music Department in 1984 and served as department chair off and on between 2002 and 2018, said he believes Johnson will work to bring “stability” to the Jazz Studies program. He said this is something he tried himself, “but ultimately fell short of

doing.”

A series of setbacks, including the retirement of the late Nathan Davis in 2013, the sudden death of his successor, Geri Allen, in 2017, the short tenure of her successor, Nicole Mitchell Gantt, and the more recent departure Associate Professor Michael Heller, left the program with what Root called “an aura of instability.”

Johnson comes to the department chair’s position with a “combination of experiences and accomplishments that will serve him well,” Root noted.

“And he has already been working to establish stable leadership for years to come beginning with the faculty search and appointment of Chad Taylor, new artistic director of the Jazz Studies program. (Johnson) has a strong commitment not only to the students and faculty within the undergraduate program as mentor for the jazz track ... and as a fellow musician who understands the concerns of the part-time teaching faculty in performing arts.”

Making yourself excellent

While it’s commonly assumed that university-level music programs exist somewhere beyond the standard academic curriculum — and tend to nurture mostly part-time working musicians — Johnson finds that the brain-stimulating study of music brings a unique knowledge base and perspective to most career paths — as well as other aspects of adult life.

“There are lots of people who aspire to play (jazz) music, and what they do with the music in the long run? Do they necessarily play jazz their whole lives? Maybe not,” he said. “But you know, jazz talks to us about living. Jazz talks to us about coping. Jazz talks us about maximizing ourselves in the middle of an economy that’s all built on exchange and wages and ‘What can you do for me?’ Jazz is about making yourself good and excellent and speaking your mind.”

Studying and playing jazz also provides solid training for those pursuing careers in more commercially oriented music genres, including soul/R&B and hip hop.

“One thing in my own research I write about is how jazz has functioned as the training pedagogy for American music outside of classrooms,” Johnson said, noting the stable of session musicians behind the legendary Motown Records hits “were all aspiring jazz players.

“And people with jazz abilities learn abilities to improvise, abilities to create parts out of (suggestions), to make music out of an idea. Those people’s skills have always been welcomed in more commercial forms of music, whether that’s a Springsteen fan, backing up Beyonce or being involved with Taylor Swift.

“I’m not saying those are jazz musicians, but I’m saying you look under the hood, you’ll find a lot of jazz training in a lot of those,” he added. “So even to this day, musicians are coming out of Berkeley and Juilliard jazz programs, and they’re finding themselves very useful people in hip-hop production and in music that the public doesn’t think of as jazz or see the connection.”

Pitt music in the air

In addition to jazz, Pitt's music program includes performance ensembles dedicated to classical/orchestra, bluegrass, African music and dance, chamber and choral music, among others.

The fall 2024 semester will provide ample opportunities to hear Pitt musicians work their magic, including the Jazz Wednesdays on the Hill series, including a fall performance saluting local jazz legends, and the 54th Annual Pitt Jazz Seminar Concert, held Oct. 28-Nov. 2.

"And during Jazz Week on Oct. 29, we'll be celebrating the Pitt Library's acquisition of the archives of the great musician Sam Rivers," Johnson noted. A concert highlighting Rivers' music will take place at Ebenezer Baptist Church in the Hill District and feature what Johnson calls "some of Pittsburgh's finest jazz musicians, along with world-famous jazz musicians Steve Coleman, Craig Harris, Joe Daley and Doug Mathews.

Deane Root said Johnson, as chair, has the opportunity to revive the department's graduate program after a suspension in admissions during the COVID pandemic.

"I hope he can help identify new sources of financial support for graduate students, as well as productive ways for faculty and students to engage with the wider community beyond academic courses and activities," he noted, through the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, "with which we had developed a Memorandum of Understanding," and the Afro-American Musical Institute in Homewood.

He also praises Johnson's efforts in organizing community and campus collaborations, including the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra's concerts featuring new music by area composers.

"I hope the department can continue to build its community collaborations," Root said.

While looking forward to a busy and vibrant fall semester, Johnson said he's excited by the opportunity for Pitt's music programs to continue expanding their reach, scope and influence.

"I am convinced that the University of Pittsburgh can be a real force in the entire community," he said, "and not just limited to local families and the students and staff that we serve."

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