

Changing the Landscape for Music



By Susan G. Lichtman

Shelton (“Shelly”) Berg has been fully entrenched in nearly every facet of the music industry his entire professional life – from classical and jazz, to country, rock, heavy metal, pop, film and television, and more – and is keenly aware of the challenges and the reality facing today’s music school graduates.

Preparing them for that reality is something he feels passionate about – so much so that he’s devoted the past 30 years of his life to teaching, nurturing, and mentoring music students through his previous roles as a music professor, music department chair, and president of the International Association for Jazz Education (IAJE).

“It’s very important that a music school affects the landscape for music,” Berg said, during a recent interview in his new office in UM’s Maurice Gusman Concert Hall. “Is everything our students are learning and doing relevant to changing the landscape for music? How can a music school improve the profession and make it better for music?”

Berg’s goal not only will be to answer those questions, but essentially, to redefine what a great university music school can be.

“The Frost School of Music is not only a great music school, but also a very broad and diverse one. It’s one of the few places in the country that has all the resources, where, if you really want to show the rest of the country ‘how it’s done,’ you can come here and actually do it,” he continued. “I became very excited about the opportunity to come here and work with the School’s outstanding faculty and alumni to bring about some really bold change.”

Shelton G. Berg, the new dean of the Frost School of Music, looks forward to redefining what the music school of the 21st century should be.

One exciting change is already in the works for the upcoming academic year. Thanks to an endowment created by Frost School alumnus Bruce Hornsby, music students will now have the opportunity to choose a minor in American songwriting through the new Bruce Hornsby Creative American Music Program.

“This paradigm-shifting gift, from Frost School alumnus Bruce Hornsby, will benefit every student in the school,” Berg stated. “Not all students may go on to write a symphony, but they all can learn to write songs. Composing offers a more internal connection to the music than simply playing. By offering this new discipline, we are creating an additional outlet for creativity for all musicians.”

He continued, “What is relevant that we’re *not* teaching every one of our students? What is irrelevant that we *are* teaching them? Believe me, there are answers on both sides. We need to provide comprehensive answers to these questions and then re-craft our curricula, making them more experiential and relevant to our students.”

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Facilities are essential in laying the foundation for education in music, and Dean Berg agrees that they must continue to be a top priority of the Frost School. The desperately-needed renovation of the school’s rehearsal halls is already underway, and when students return in the fall, they will notice huge improvements to the jazz rehearsal halls in the Foster Building, as well as to Broby, Nancy Greene, and Fillmore Halls. Dean Berg has moved quickly to initiate the renovation project because, “while the rehearsal halls were the right size, they were in bad shape. We will make them smell, look, and sound great again. Everyone will feel the impact of this from day one.”

“I am deeply indebted to (UM) President Shalala and Provost LeBlanc, who understood the tremendous need for these renovations,” he added. “They have been extremely supportive and have energized a lot of people to accomplish over the summer something that normally would take a year.”

Berg’s top priority, though, will continue to be securing funding for a new 60,000-square-foot facility that will unite and transform the Frost School. The new Center for Music Learning and Leadership will include technologically advanced classrooms and lecture halls, faculty teaching studios, program suites for many of the school’s programs, and

the school’s administrative offices.

Connecting with alumni is another top priority for Dean Berg, who will be traveling to several cities in the coming year – Tampa, Orlando, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago – to meet with alumni, parents, donors, and other members of the school’s “extended family.”

“I believe alumni are proud of the school and I think they’ll be even more proud to know that there’s a lot of new energy here and this is the dawning of the next great phase of the University of Miami,” Berg said. “I’m excited to get to know them, because they have a history with this school that I don’t have yet.”

Community outreach is also high on Berg’s list of priorities for the Frost School. At USC Thornton, he introduced JazzReach, Live-Pod, Freshman-to-Freshman Mentoring, and other innovative programs designed to spread the magic of music throughout the community.

“We started band programs in schools that didn’t have them and created after-school chorus programs. We secured instruments for students, gave lessons, and held rehearsals, reaching more than 1,000 youngsters a year. Our students and faculty all were involved,” said Berg, who suggested that he would like to start similar programs in the Greater Miami area.

Berg earned B.M. and M.M. degrees in piano performance, *summa cum laude*, from the University of Houston, where he was named a “Top Ten” Student (out of 40,000). He began his teaching career at San Jacinto College North in Northshore, Texas, and served as its chair of Instrumental Music before taking a similar position at San Jacinto College in Pasadena, Texas. He joined the University of Southern California (USC) Thornton School of Music in 1991 and was promoted several times, eventually serving as Chair of Jazz Studies and being named the McCoy/Sample Endowed Professor of Jazz.

In addition to his active involvement with IAJE, Berg serves on ASCAP’s (American Society of Composers and Publishers) Awards Advisory Panel and on the Grammy/NARAS Board of Governors, Los Angeles Chapter. He received the USC Thornton School of Music’s Dean’s 2005 Award for Scholarship and Research and IAJE’s prestigious Lawrence Berk Leadership Award in 2000. He was named the 2003 Educator of the Year by the Los Angeles Jazz Society, and was honored in 1999 as one of three “Educators for the Millennium” by the *Los Angeles Times*. His groundbreaking book, *Jazz Improvisation: The Goal-Note Method*, is considered one of the seminal texts on the subject.

An active composer and orchestrator, Berg has composed for network television series including HBO's *Dennis Miller Live*, ABC's *Fudge*, and CBS's *A League of Their Own*, among others. He has orchestrated for rock superstars, composed for the Royal Philharmonic and the American Symphony, and wrote the official theme song for the 1986 U.S. Olympic Festival, *Turn It On*.

Berg has performed with some of the best known names in the industry – Sonny Stitt, Bill Watrous, the Steve Miller Band, Jimmy Buffet, Branford Marsalis, Monica Mancini, Bobby McFerrin, Al Jarreau, Bonnie Raitt, Barry Manilow, Randy Newman, to name but a few – and has recorded extensively. His latest recording, *Blackbird* (Concord Records), was Number One in US Jazz Radio; *XO* (Dreamworks), which he recorded with Elliott Smith, was named Number Two Record of the Year by *Spin Magazine*; and several of his recordings, including *Psycho Circus* (EMI), with KISS, have been nominated for GRAMMY awards.

Recently, Berg was the musical director and conductor of an all-star tribute concert to the late Ella Fitzgerald, the beloved “First Lady of Song” and jazz powerhouse who packed houses around the world for more than a half a century with her incomparable voice and unparalleled renditions of pop, ballads, and jazz favorites. This PBS “Great Performance,” which aired throughout June and July, featured the USC Thornton Jazz Orchestra and such well-known musicians and singers as Stevie Wonder, Patti Austin, Natalie Cole, Quincy Jones, Ruben Studdard, Dave Koz, Take Six, Monica Mancini, and Wynonna, among others.

Currently, he's working on a new CD project with his trio that is scheduled for release in early 2008. Tentatively called, “The Essence,” the new CD (Concord Records) will feature well-known singers with whom he has

collaborated: Steve Miller, Tierney Sutton, Kurt Elling, Patti Austin, and possibly Nancy Wilson.

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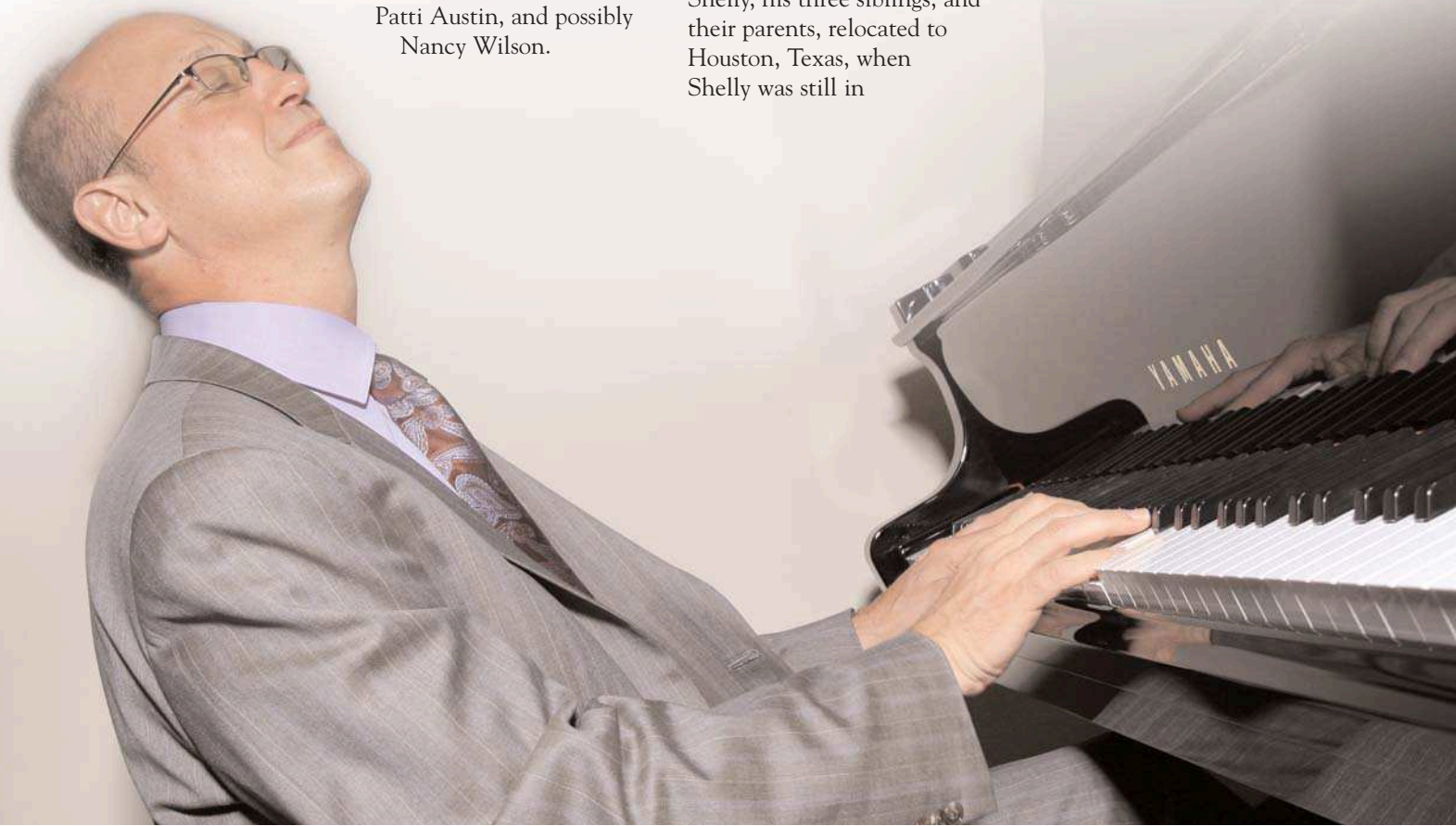
“Performing is the absolute core of who I am,” commented Berg, a classically trained pianist who has made an international name for himself as a jazz pianist, composer, orchestrator, and recording artist, as well as an educator. “Performing is, for me, a renewing opportunity to get in touch with all the subtle nuances of what human beings can feel and express. It’s a way to connect with people in expressing those things that are human and universal. When I’m performing, I’m more creative, alert, and connected to my fellow human beings... all qualities I need to do my job.”

How Berg has found time to maintain such an active performing career while teaching full-time is truly admirable. This summer alone, he’s playing eight concerts at the Elkhart Jazz Festival in the Midwest, performing in a 12-day tour of Australia, and will be the featured soloist in a concert with the Pacific Symphony in southern California’s Verizon Amphitheatre, a venue that holds 10,000 people.

He has been performing for so long, it’s clearly an essential part of his identity. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Berg was just six when he began studying classical piano through the Cleveland Institute of Music’s gifted program. His father, trumpet player Jay Berg, recognized the seeds of talent in his young son and nurtured his musical abilities, spending countless hours with him listening to and analyzing recordings. His father also was responsible for exposing him to jazz at age 10, and soon thereafter, the younger Berg began attending jam sessions and parties with his dad.

“It was not unusual for me to be out on school nights until midnight or even later,” he recalled. “My dad was always inviting musicians to the house, so I had tremendous access and one-on-one mentoring in music.”

The Berg family, consisting of Shelly, his three siblings, and their parents, relocated to Houston, Texas, when Shelly was still in



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Donna E. Shalala, President, University of Miami

high school. Although it was traumatic at first, “those early years in Houston ended up being the most significant, formative part of my life,” Berg recalled. He studied with Albert Hirsch, one of the great classical piano teachers in the history of pedagogy, and at the same time, his father met Arnett Cobb and Jimmy Ford, well-known saxophonists in Houston.

“These guys became my dad’s best friends, and so, from the time I was 15, I was constantly playing and learning with these living legends. Arnett Cobb would hold a jam session every Sunday night in a motel called The White House, and anyone who was in town would come by to play,” he explained. “By the time I had graduated from high school, I had played with everyone in Buddy Rich’s band, Count Basie’s band, Woody Herman’s band – you name it, I’ve played with them all.”

Festival Miami audiences will get a glimpse of Berg’s stunning talent as he makes his Frost School debut in a special Festival Miami performance on **Thursday, Oct. 11**, at 8 p.m. with Frost faculty artists. For more information and tickets, please call 305-284-4940, or visit www.festivalmiami.com.

Delighted with Berg’s hire, UM President Donna E. Shalala stated, “We are incredibly fortunate to have Shelly Berg join the University community as our new dean of the Frost School of Music. Not only is he a world-class jazz pianist, but he has the administrative experience and the vision necessary to lead the Frost School as it meets the challenges of the 21st century.”

Frost School of Music benefactor and UM Trustee Phillip Frost said Berg’s appointment represents another turning point for the music school that will elevate it to new heights.

“Pat and I are pleased with the search committee’s choice of Shelly Berg from an extremely robust pool of candidates. Having Shelly as part of Miami’s music scene will add another dimension to our top talent

in the area of jazz. I know our faculty and students will enjoy working with Shelly, and we all welcome him and his wife, Julia, with extreme warmth and enthusiasm,” Dr. Frost said.

Berg also has three grown children, Lindsay, 30; Kyle, 28; and Ashlyn, 26; a stepson, Dylan, 17; and two grandchildren, all of whom look forward to visiting him in his new Miami home.

The Reverend Marta S. Weeks, the new chairman of the UM Board of Trustees and a long-time Frost School benefactor, also anticipates Berg’s valuable contributions to the school. “It’s wonderful that Dean Berg is as talented a performer as he is an administrator. There still is much work to be done to build up the physical structure of the school, and I’m delighted that he shares our commitment to creating world-class facilities for this world-class school.”

Clearly excited about the challenges ahead of him, Berg believes Miami is fast becoming the next great center of this country. “Over the next decade, Miami is going to be the hot place and the eyes of the world will be on us. There are so many musical influences here and so much possibility.

“Everyone knows that Miami is an international city, but they often think that this only translates to Latin America. I’ve been amazed at how many people I’ve heard on the streets speaking French, for example, or other European languages. There’s a tremendous sense that all cultures are a part of it,” he continued.

Berg pointed out that jazz music is “the product of a melting pot, a cauldron, a ‘gumbo’ that was New Orleans, with African-American, European, Spanish, French and even Celtic influences. It never would have existed if it were not because of that particular place and time.

“Miami is now a place like that, but in a different century. We have an opportunity to create something unique to our place and time, by combining all these diverse cultural elements together and see how they react to each other. Our job is to serve as the catalyst for that change.” ♦

