

## Memphis Jazz Workshop keeps kids upbeat with online music instruction

By [Jared Boyd](#)

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**In a makeshift studio, music instructor Steve Lee with the Memphis Jazz Workshop leads a virtual piano lesson on Friday, June 26, 2020. (Mark Weber/Daily Memphian)**

Since the summer of 2017, Memphis-bred pianist Steve Lee and his Memphis Jazz Workshop have been mentoring local pupils in one of the city's oldest music traditions.

In just three years, the workshop has seen students find spots in the All-West Senior Band, while one student even worked her way to a full scholarship to Berklee College of Music in Boston. Struggling to decide how to continue the program in an age of

social distancing, Lee found an answer in one of the music form's pillars: improvisation.

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### What Ellis Marsalis did for Memphis jazz

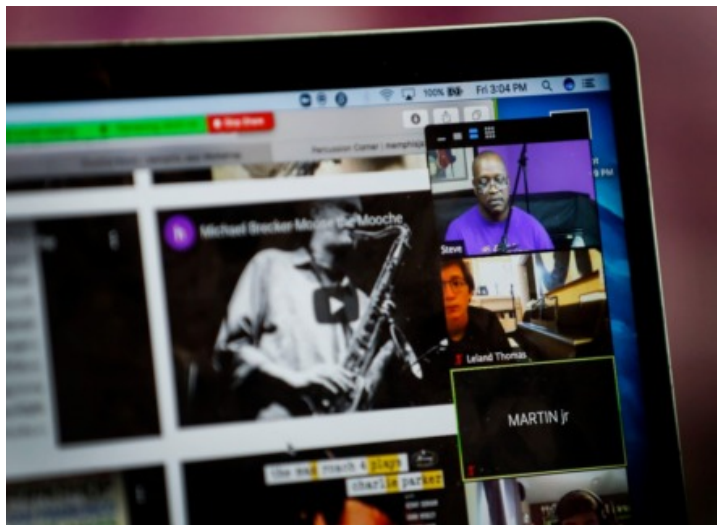
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“That’s what the music is, improvisation,” Lee said. “And that’s what we’re doing man, we’re improvising through all this.”

This summer, 34 students are enrolled in a two-week intensive course held online through video conferencing. For Lee, the adjustment was necessary. Seeing that the students didn’t want to give up on the music, he decided he wouldn’t give up, either.

“At first, honestly, I was like, ‘Let me close shop and go get unemployment. Because we can’t do nothin,’” Lee said.

“But I prayed about it, and I decided that’s probably not a good idea. These kids are wanting something to do. They enjoy the program, and they want to play music.”



**Jazz pianist Steve Lee (right top) uses zoom to lead a virtual piano lesson on Friday, June 26, 2020. Regarding the move to Zoom: “That’s what the music is, improvisation,” Lee said. “And that’s what we’re doing man, we’re improvising through all this.”**  
(Mark Weber/Daily Memphian)

years,” Lee said.

Last year, Lee was able to connect with approximately 80 of them with the help of the City of Memphis Youth Services MPLOY summer program. Each student received a monetary stipend for their participation. But Lee maintains that jazz resonates with young Memphis musicians, whether you pay them or not.

“Memphis has gospel, hip-hop and R&B scenes, but there are a lot of kids who are eager to learn this music, who are searching for this music. I’ve identified hundreds of them, over the last three

As a young man in South Memphis, Lee blended his training playing gospel in church with the blues-style piano that, decades earlier, was pioneered just blocks away from his home by world-renowned pianist Phineas Newborn Jr.

As Lee grew older, he cut his teeth in New York City, waiting tables all night and practicing in clubs early mornings, just to earn his shot. His efforts would earn him numerous roles in ensembles at home and abroad. Wherever he went, he heard the tales of Memphis' jazz legends, such as Charles Lloyd, Hank Crawford, Harold Mabern and George Coleman, all of them better known away from home than they are in the Mid-South.

Laid off from a regular gig in 2008, Lee returned to Memphis with \$200 to his name and a young family to provide for. He'd eventually turn to music education, standing in the legacy of another musical Memphian.

"It's keeping with the history of Jimmie Lunceford," Lee said, nodding to the former Manassas High School teacher, credited widely as the conductor of the world's first high school jazz band.



**Jazz musician Steve Lee left the stage in 2008 and returned to Memphis, his hometown, to become a music instructor. He ultimately founded the Memphis Jazz Workshop, which has gone online during the pandemic.**  
(Mark Weber/Daily Memphian)

For a city with more jazz legends than most music fans could count, Lee, 51, founded Memphis Jazz Workshop so that students in the Mid-South wouldn't have to make the sacrifices he did to keep competitive with jazz-faithful cities such as New York, Chicago, New Orleans and Paris.

With such a large legacy behind him and an enclave of eager students he didn't want to disappoint, Lee overcame his own apprehensions of the tech space to make this summer's camp possible. Once he learned how to teach on Zoom, he got his team of teachers on board. Before lessons began, the staff spent much of the spring just checking in with the students to let them know they were still in mind.

"We weren't teaching them," Lee said.

“We just wanted to see how they were doing. This (pandemic) has been dramatic. It’s crazy for us (adults). But for the kids, they really don’t understand what’s going on.”

On June 22, the students were welcomed back with lessons on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, when they could be broken out into sections to practice in rooms according to their instrument. And, similarly to past summers, Lee invited some of his famous friends from the road to sign in and offer the students wisdom.

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Nelson: ‘Music Through the Night’ host is a proud Memphian

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Parent Patrice Dixon said her daughter Andrea, a percussionist, singer and rising senior at Memphis Business Academy, is learning as much as she has in her previous summers with the workshop, even while homebound.

“You want your child to be involved in things she loves. Every session, she talks about how much she learns, how much it’s helpful on a daily basis for her,” Dixon said.

Having Andrea learning from home hasn’t just improved her playing. It’s kept the entire house upbeat.

“(Andrea) has two brothers with autism,” Dixon said. “When she plays the instrument, it helps them, too. They get to dance and have fun.

“It’s big in our household. It’s almost like they are having a music class along with her.”

Lee says the workshop may continue its online format beyond its two-week camp in lieu of its year-round teaching schedule, performances and fundraisers. But he laments that the students won’t be able to spend time together as they did before the pandemic.

“Because it’s not just students coming together to play music,” Lee said. “These kids have become friends. They look forward to seeing each other. These kids like learning together, and they like learning from each other.”





**Jared Boyd**

Jared Boyd is a general assignment reporter with The Daily Memphian who can be found covering just about anything people in the Mid-South might find interesting. His friends call him "Jay B.," and you can, too.

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