



## Jazz piano: the next generation

2011 University of Idaho Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival

By Jennifer K. Bauer  
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Jazz pianist Josh Nelson has been hailed as someone to hear and see in the new generation of jazz musicians.

Now 32, the Los Angeles-bred musician has four albums to his credit and is on tour with vocalist Natalie Cole. Next week he'll return to the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival for the fourth time.

Nelson's earliest memories of music and jazz come from his grandfather who introduced him to artists like Andre Previn, Oscar Peterson, Nat King Cole and Ella Fitzgerald. His parents contributed Joni Mitchell, James Taylor and Paul Simon to his ears. Add to that a love for film scores and musical theater and you have the major influences behind Nelson's original music.

Nelson took a break from his tour with Cole to answer some questions for the Tribune before appearing at next week's festival events.

**Tribune: This will be your fourth time at the UI Jazz Festival. What keeps bringing you back?**

Nelson: I feel truly honored to have been asked to return yet again to the festival. To put it simply: It is a wonderful and always-memorable week of stellar performances, workshops, and happy reunions with old and new friends. Artistic director John Clayton continues to inspire me with his tireless dedication to jazz education, and that is a big reason why I come back every year. ... I love the "a ha" moment when a student has a flash of realization while learning something new. And there are always lots of those moments at this festival.

**You've done some work writing film and TV compositions and I see you've worked with Eric Idle, Jon Lovitz and Clint Eastwood. Could you tell us a little about some of those projects?**

One of the benefits of living in Los Angeles is that sometimes opportunities come along that one wouldn't necessarily find elsewhere, specifically in the movie industry. I have performed with the people you mentioned at various music award shows and dinners, private home concerts and other celebrity functions. In addition to my jazz endeavors, I also have a dream of scoring films. I plan to focus on that more in the years to come, as well as continue the jazz tradition.

**How old were you when you started to play the piano and what drew you to jazz music? Are your jazz compositions ever inspired by other musical genres?**

I was about 8 years old when I began to play piano. I started with the fundamentals, then moved on to classical studies, and discovered jazz while in middle school. I was also playing trumpet from age 11-20 or so, and I find that my time with that instrument helped me in countless ways with my piano playing.

**In a review for your 2007 album, "Let it Go," George Harris of "All About Jazz" said, "The entire disc is full of wondrous ideas, expertly delivered. Stimulating and fresh; this is the work of a man who could easily represent the future of jazz." In your opinion, what new directions are young artists like yourself leading jazz?**

That was some compliment! I hope I live up to it. That's a tough question, because I really just strive to create melodies that move people and linger in their hearts and minds. That's my main goal. I'm not as concerned with trying to forge a "new direction" in jazz per se, but instead want to focus on bringing the listener something fresh and original, but also somehow familiar, and maybe even nostalgic. There are lots of artists nowadays experimenting with mixing jazz with classical, electronic, hip hop, which is great. I too intend to experiment with those kinds of mash-ups in the future, but for now, I'm still learning and exploring the straight-ahead jazz idiom. I still have so much to learn in that area.

**What's up next for you?**

Well, I recently finished recording my fifth studio album, called "Discoveries." It features new original music and a three-horn/wind section comprised of trumpet/flugel, trombone, and bass clarinet. I am deeply influenced by Herbie Hancock's late 1960s' Blue Note records, and wanted to channel those wonderful sounds he created into some new compositions. That project should be out in spring 2011. I also continue to tour the world with Natalie Cole, which is a great gig. She's a wonderful and vibrant performer, and I feel lucky to share the stage with her!

**You released your first album when you were 19. What advice would you give your young self now?**

Ha! Great question. I would say: "Josh, keep the original music flowing! But don't forget the Great American standards, they are the backbone of this genre. And back off on the reverb effect, it's generally too much, on the whole record." Hey I was 19, you're not supposed to have all the answers when you're that young!

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