



by Rick Van Horn

**I**f you're a high school drummer who's considering your future educational options, the choices can be daunting. On the one hand, hundreds of traditional colleges and universities offer majors in music. But their programs can sometimes be conservative when it comes to drumset study. On the other hand, there are several fine conservatories and "vocational" music schools. But by their very nature they focus on music alone, and as such don't offer a broad educational experience.

The fact is, if you're looking for a full-scale university education that still allows you total dedication to drumming as your chosen field, there's just one choice: The University Of The Arts (hereafter referred to as UTA). It's the only university in the nation dedicated exclusively to the study of the performing arts, fine art & design, and media & communication.

And what a choice it is. The school is located on downtown Philadelphia's Avenue Of The Arts, in the heart of one of the most active performing-arts scenes in the country. Along the street are the Pennsylvania Ballet, the Philadelphia Orchestra, The Academy Of Music, the Wilma Theater, and the new Kimmel Performing Arts Center. Zanzibar Blue, one of the city's leading jazz clubs, is a neighbor, as are dozens of smaller pop and jazz clubs.

The University itself owns the classic Merriam Theater, a hub of this artistic community. The theater presents performances by university students and professional touring companies alike—and also houses the School Of Music. High-rise dorms and student apartments are within a few blocks, helping to give a "campus" character to this downtown district.

## The School Of Music

The UTA School Of Music is dedicated to the preparation of musicians for a career in performance, composition, and education. The program's emphasis is on American music idioms including jazz and contemporary music, as well as European and world traditions. Bachelor of music degrees are offered in jazz studies in instrumental performance, vocal performance, and composition. Graduate programs offer a master of music degree in jazz studies and a master of arts in teaching (MAT) in music education.

The intense undergraduate program includes private lessons, a comprehensive study curriculum, and ensembles. In addition, course work includes jazz improvisation, theory and ear training, arranging, orchestration, traditional and jazz piano, transcription and analysis, music and computer technology, recording, music business, and music history. Average class size is eleven, giving about a 6-to-1 student-teacher ratio.



In order to broaden each student's overall education, undergraduate students are required to complete about a third of their studies in the liberal arts, outside their major field. These studies provide a common ground for students from all the specific arts areas to meet and interact. A wide variety of courses are offered, including classes in writing and literature, history, social science, science/math, and humanities.

## The Drumset Major

For drummers, the most important aspect of UTA's music department is the fact that, unlike many other university music programs, it offers a drumset major. "The drumset is a separate, legitimate instrument," says School Of Music director Marc Dicciani. "There's over a hundred years of drumset literature, and there's a lineage of important players that is every bit as valuable as that of any other instrument."

"Many music programs require drummers to be 'percussion majors,'" Marc continues, "studying mallets and orchestral percussion in addition to drumset. Our philosophy is: What difference does it make what instrument someone is playing? Let them be creative. Steve Gadd doesn't do mallets. Elvin Jones doesn't play vibes. If you *want* to study mallet percussion as well as drumset, you can do that in our program. If you *just* want to do mallets, you can do that, too. But you can also just study drumset."

Those who do study drumset will do so

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# School Of Music

with a faculty of working professionals. Marc Dicciani is himself a talented and accomplished jazz drummer with extensive touring and recording credits. (It never hurts to have one of your own at the top.) The chairman of the percussion/drumset department is Joe Nero, a multi-percussionist who's performed with Bette Midler, Eddie Gomez, and the Philly Pops. He also plays in the pit for many of the Broadway musicals that come to Philadelphia. Other members of the drum/percussion faculty include Carl Allen, Bob Brosh, Orlando Haddad, Jimmy Paxson, and Marlon Simon—all highly credited professionals who offer an extensive range of playing styles and experience.

The regular faculty is augmented by visiting artists who perform sixty clinics and classes per year. A partial list of those who've appeared recently includes Dave Weckl, Max Roach, David Garibaldi, Jack DeJohnette, Marvin "Smitty" Smith, Ignacio Berroa, Dennis Chambers, Peter Erskine, Gregg Field, Giovanni Hidalgo, Bill Stewart, and Gerry Brown (who is himself a graduate of the school).

## Facilities And Equipment

The School Of Music's facilities include fully equipped percussion studios, a 32-channel recording studio, and MIDI and computer labs. The music library contains books, manuscripts, journals, scores, records, tapes, CDs and DVDs, as well as listening and viewing facilities and a music-education information center. Two drumset teaching rooms are outfitted with dual kits, along with stereo/CD systems and a collection of more than one hundred drum study texts and CDs. The school provides forty-six practice rooms, with over 4,600 hours of practice time available each week.

The drumset program provides over twenty drumkits for student use. Drumheads are changed at least twice a semester, to keep the kits sounding good despite the amount of play they endure. A variety of drumhead models are used, in order to give students the opportunity to hear how those heads sound on different types and sizes of drums. The study of mallets, orchestral percussion, and Latin and world percussion is likewise supported with high-quality equipment.



The Merriam Theater houses the University's School Of Music.



Drumset majors periodically record their playing for evaluation by teachers and other students.

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## Getting In

Getting into the UTA music program is a challenge. "We accept about one out of five applicants," says Marc Dicciani. "First, we look at academics. The average SAT score is about 1,000, so we generally get applicants from the top 15–20% of a graduating class. Then we consider musical skills. This involves more than just technical ability. We try to assess passion. In some cases, an applicant will have had ten years of private lessons. If our first impression is that he's not at a very high level for ten years of study, we'll ask him who he listens to, and what he's doing with his drumming now. We'll also ask him to demonstrate certain things. If we still feel that he's marginal, we may not accept him.

"On the other hand, some of our applicants come from places where school music programs have been eliminated, and from families that can't afford private lessons. They can't read. They don't know what a bebop swing pattern is. If we ask them to play a samba, they play a song, because they don't know the difference. But they have a passion, a love, and an innate skill. We can put such a student with a tutor to provide the knowledge that he or she lacks. We would rather err on the side of accepting someone like that, knowing that they're going to be coached, nurtured, and directed—all in a supportive environment with other students who are enthusiastic about what they're doing. As a university, we have a social responsibility to provide educational opportunities. If a student can demonstrate that he or she has potential and is deserving of that opportunity, we'll provide the chance."

## The Course Of Study

At the beginning of each school year, each drumset major receives a book of study materials created by the faculty. Topics covered include technique, independence, improvisation development, musicianship, and sight reading. Each student also receives play-along CDs containing over sixty recordings in a wide range of styles, including jazz, Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, funk, and big band. These CDs serve as practice aids to help the students develop their musical awareness and technical skills.

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Drumset students take weekly private lessons with faculty members for all four years in which they're enrolled. Students are encouraged to study Latin percussion, mallets, and timpani, but are not required to do so. Freshman students also attend one year of drum class, which covers styles and improvisations.

But remember, this is a *music* school, whose aim is to produce complete, knowledgeable musicians. So drumset majors will also take the same piano, the-

ory, improvisation, and music history classes that all other instrumental and vocal majors must. It's a lot of work, and students are challenged each year to prove that they're up to the task. That determination is made each May, when students perform in a series of evaluations called juries. It's a tough process that takes a hard look at each student's development.

"Sometimes," Marc admits, "we find we've made a mistake. Someone we've

accepted and believed would flourish ultimately doesn't. As a result, about 10% of each freshman class gets dismissed. That's the most compassionate thing for us to do. Tuition here is \$20,000 a year, with another \$5,000 for housing. So we don't want to string anybody along.

Sometimes the students apply for readmittance after a year or so. Some will have taken private lessons or attended community college. Others will have spent that year doing professional gigs. "At that point," says Marc, "we'll give them another chance. In the final analysis, our program is selective, but not exclusive. We're not elitist. We're drummers ourselves, playing gigs in bars or playing in shows. We're just trying to make sure that we're honest with students."

At the time this story was written, the UTA program had twenty-eight drumset majors. But that number is flexible. As Marc explains, "Some music schools limit or boost acceptance of various instrumental majors in order to balance out their ensemble classes. But I'd rather have sixty great drummers than a more 'balanced' student body where the top ten on any instrument are actually mediocre. If you put ten students of equal ability in an ensemble with an eleventh who's very much behind—but happens to play the right instrument—that student is going to hold everybody else back. I'd rather create an equally matched ensemble with six saxophones, two drummers, and two guitars. Let's do something creative and musical."

Doing things that are creative includes providing additional opportunities for students. To that end, the UTA School Of Music has established an exchange program with the Liverpool School Of Performing Arts in England. Says Marc, "Their students learn a little more about jazz and American music, and our students get more of a European jazz and British rock feel going."

## The Spice Of Life

In addition to the "tracked" courses that students are required to study every year, they also take elective courses, like world music, careers in music, studio engineering, and MIDI. And while week-

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ly ensemble classes are mandatory, the choice of ensembles is largely elective. And there are *lots* of choices—forty-two, to be exact, ranging from ethnic styles like Afro-Cuban and Brazilian, to groups playing the music of specific artists like Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, and The Yellowjackets, to ensembles based on famous record labels like Blue Note and GRP.

Even private study stresses variety. Marc explains, “We have roughly eighty faculty members in the music program. Each has a different focus, methodology, and approach to playing. We think it’s important that everybody gets a sampling of that. So we have a policy that says you can’t study with any major teacher for more than two years. A lot of our students will teach privately after they graduate—if they’re not already doing it. And like any teacher, they’re going to teach largely by passing on what they were taught. We want to give them a varied background by having them study with different teachers.”

## Workshops

In addition to all other classes and activities, the school holds once-a-month workshops for all the players in a given major. These cover topics best done in a group setting—like tuning and instrument maintenance. Students might also listen to recordings within a specific style, or to a guest lecturer.

Once each year, all the drummers go into the studio to record with a live bass player or a play-along CD. “They listen to the playbacks together,” says Marc. “Then a teacher will critique each student in front of the others. The student who did the playing gets good feedback, and the others can relate that feedback to their own playing. That way, students can get an idea of where they stand amid their peer group. Generally, students all support each other, and they’re not afraid to perform in front of on another. There’s a group dynamic here.”



School Of Music director Marc Dicciani (left) and drum/percussion department chairman Joe Nero (center) observe a student’s recording session from the booth.



Students support each other in classes and practice sessions to develop their skills.



# School Of Music

## Maintaining Perspective

That group dynamic extends beyond the music building. “One of the neat things about this university,” says Marc, “is that we don’t have a marching band, we don’t have a football team—we don’t have anything other than arts. Our music students basically go through the day with other music students, except for when they go to liberal arts classes. And even in those liberal arts classes, they talk about the nature of creativity. Putting drummers in that kind of a class is different from putting them in Accounting 101.

“We think the liberal arts component of what the students are doing here informs and enhances their art,” Marc continues. “But it’s not geared *exclusively* towards becoming an artist. Students have to learn basic literacy, which can’t be compromised simply because they’re a drummer or because it’s an art school. It must be taught at the same level you’d find in any other top university liberal arts program. It’s just that the *focus* of what’s being discussed in class is a little different.”

## The Local Music Scene

With the exception of big band ensembles, which rehearse in an acoustically wonderful auditorium down the street a few blocks, all music classes, lessons, and practice sessions take place in the Merriam Theater building. This creates a sense of community among the student body. But eventually, they do leave the building. “And when they do,” says Marc, “there are over twenty-five professional performance halls within three blocks of the school, along with several jazz and pop clubs. There’s a tremendous amount of musical performance for students to see and hear.”

Students do more than see and hear the performances. In many instances, they take part. Bands made up of student musicians frequently play local clubs, while individual students take advantage of other opportunities. Says Marc, “Joe Nero brings his advanced students into the pit with him to watch a couple of shows—and then has them sub for a night. Other students are playing on recording sessions and jazz gigs. That’s

the level some of them have achieved.”

Of course, gigging success can create a problem when it comes to schoolwork. “Our program is very demanding,” says Marc. “Freshmen can have a problem if they’ve come from a high-school environment where they played their instrument only when they wanted to. Here they *have* to play three or four hours a day, just in their major. And they have to play piano, and they have to do a lot of work for their classes in music history, theory, and so forth. It’s a time-management challenge. But most of them get through it just fine.”

## The Library

Speaking of time management, students can expect to spend a good deal of time in the school’s library. Several different music history classes draw heavily on the printed resources available there. Drumset majors have to do a research paper every year, and must also transcribe material from the library’s extensive body of recorded material for their private lessons. Says Marc, “We have two semesters

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Drummers and percussionists participate in a variety of ensembles, including a big band, a Freddie Hubbard small group (left), and a world beat ensemble (top right).

mindset. We don't think about how things have traditionally been done. We try to think about the *right* way or the *best* way to do it. We ask ourselves what we owe to our students, to the music community, and to our art form. Another school might do things differently, for their reasons. But we don't want to just follow in somebody else's footsteps. We have eighty great artists on this faculty who can put their heads together and figure something else out. So that's how we do things."

*Further information may be obtained from the University Of The Arts School Of Music, 250 South Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102, (215) 717-6342, [www.uarts.edu](http://www.uarts.edu).*

of transcription classes, in which students are required to view videos and listen to CDs and then transcribe from them. In addition, my music business class requires students to research copyrights and contracts. So we try to incorporate the incredible assets that the library offers into every single component of the curriculum."

## A Singular Approach

The University Of The Arts is different from any other university in the country simply by virtue of its arts focus. But the School Of Music goes even farther toward uniqueness. Marc Dicciani sums up the school's philosophy by saying, "We do everything with a little different