

## Richmond Times-Dispatch

# Hot times

At jazz camp, Richmond-area kids express themselves through music

## Cool tunes



Credit: TIMES-DISPATCH

Ashby Anderson (right) works with William McCollum, 10, at the Jazz Boot Camp offered by the Richmond Youth Jazz Guild.

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Alone microphone stood in the middle of the circle of musicians. Serenity Anthony stepped to it, lifted her flute to her lips and began to play. Tentative at first, her notes gained confidence as chords and riffs from the other players buoyed her up. The tune she played was hers alone, and she made it up as she went along. Serenity, 10, was learning to be [a jazz musician](#).

Serenity and a dozen other students were attending a 12-day [Jazz Boot Camp](#), one of several summer sessions offered by the [Richmond Youth Jazz Guild](#), an organization created in 2008 by [local jazz pianist and composer Ashby Anderson](#) and his wife, [Terri](#). During the school year, the [guild](#) provides jazz instruction through three performing ensembles and a mentoring program. Students ages 7 and older who have at least several months of experience on their instruments can enroll. Auditions are not required. [Richmond Youth Jazz Guild](#) meets at [Muse Creative Workspace](#), a Shockoe Bottom warehouse that the [Andersons](#) remodeled into an open studio.

Jazz isn't the sort of music you typically find on a kid's [iPod](#). It doesn't get much play-time in the school music curriculum. And when a kid says he has band practice, "marching" or "garage" are probably the adjectives that come to mind before "jazz."

What is it that gets these students in their seats, day after day, to play jazz?

"It makes me feel good inside," said [Kwabena Hopkins](#), 11. He has been playing piano for about 10 months and wanted to learn even more about music. His [piano teacher](#) told [him](#) about [Jazz Boot Camp](#), so he signed up. He lingered after camp one day with a big smile, eager to talk.

"Doing stuff together is the most fun," he said, but when it comes time to improvise a solo, "at first I don't want to do it, but [once I get started] I could play forever."

[Guitarist Morgan Burrs](#), 13, attended [Jazz Boot Camp](#) last year. His father only listens to jazz in the car and said [Morgan](#) used to ask [him](#) to turn it off. But after his first day of camp last year, [Morgan](#) came home saying, "That was the best day of my life!"

[Morgan](#) plays with an advanced ensemble that continues to rehearse during the summer. He said that playing with other people is his favorite aspect of jazz.

Although [Anderson](#) frequently steps to a student's side to give him or her specific direction or advice, his method is to emphasize group work. As players learn to listen to each other, especially in improvisatory situations, they become better musicians. Also, said [Anderson](#), working only in a traditional one-on-one, teacher-student way becomes monotonous for some kids.

A table outside the practice circle at camp was filled with sheet music, scales and musical exercises for "developing tone and strengthening lips." During breaks, [Anderson](#) has the students work on chord and scale worksheets. Serenity explained that working with scales has helped her learn how to improvise her flute solos.

As important as these musical building blocks are, however, there's something even more basic.

"First I try to teach them that the person makes the music. The page is the guide we use," [Anderson](#) said. Music is a universal language precisely because it contains elements of a performer's personality.

"Children have a lot to express. They have a lot of ideas," [Anderson](#) said. "When you perform at 150 percent like these kids do, there's an exchange of joy and happiness with the audience."

[Ayinde Williams](#), 13, has the long, confident fingers of [a piano player](#). He's in an ensemble with [Morgan](#) and performs frequently in public, which no longer makes [him](#) nervous so much as excited to show off his skills. But that's not even what he likes best about playing jazz.

"You can express yourself," he said. "We talk through our instruments."