



Trumpeter Ralph Alessi is the director of the School for Improvisational Music in New York City.

JOHN GUILLEMIN

SIM MENTORS YOUNG PLAYERS

By Bradley Bambarger

The gulf between being a trained instrumentalist and being a creative jazz musician can be wide. That's why trumpeter Ralph Alessi founded the New York-based School for Improvisational Music (SIM) in 2001 as means of inspiring and mentoring young musicians. A partial roll call of alumni attests to the school's success over the past decade-and-a-half: Aaron Parks, Jon Irabagon, Nate Wooley, Brian Landrus, Amir ElSaffar, Matana Roberts—all skillful improvisers who have made a mark on the jazz scene.

"The goal of SIM is to help give young players the means for putting their fears aside, so that they can deal with the music and collaborate with other musicians in the moment," Alessi said. "Part of that is empathy, acknowledging that they're going through what we went through—the good, the bad and the ugly. We focus on the creative process, from composition to rehearsing and performing. We challenge students right off, having them play a concert at the end of their first day with musicians they often just met, and who are likely from the other side of the world. SIM is very much a New York workshop. Music here is made on the edge; that's what we embrace and impart."

The heart of SIM is a two-week workshop that has been held each August in various Manhattan and Brooklyn locations—starting at the Knitting Factory in Tribeca and moving on to other venues and colleges around the city, including New York University, where Alessi is on the faculty. Most recently, SIM's base has been the community-oriented Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, with a concert finale at ShapeShifter Lab. With tuition of \$650 for the two-week workshop, SIM includes two master classes per day, ensemble coaching and two private lessons each week, as well as multiple weekly concert performances by faculty and usually 30–35 students in various configurations. Then there are the after-hours benefits of New York City, with students' post-SIM nights spent seeing shows around town and participating in jam sessions—then feeding on that inspiration in the days ahead.

Last August the core SIM faculty included an exceptional cast of progressive New York jazz musicians: Tim Berne, Gerald Cleaver, Kris Davis, Michael Formanek, Mark Helias and Tom Rainey, with Alessi as director and Andy Milne as assistant director. Andrew Cyrille, Tyshawn Sorey, Art Lande, J. Granelli, Peter Apfelbaum and vocalist Kokayi also came in to lead master classes, while Fred Hersch, Tony Malaby and Brad Shepik gave private lessons along with the core faculty.

"Most students are used to a vision of jazz education that's more about pristine technique, and that has its time and place," said Alessi, 52. "But we're about the principles, skills and aesthetics of improvisation, dealing with the nitty-gritty beyond any particular style or idiom. Although a lot of us on the faculty were deeply influenced by the late-'50s, '60s and early '70s avant-garde, we're not strictly a 'downtown,' free-jazz workshop. Most faculty members were formed by the full range of the jazz tradition, and a wide spectrum of other music inevitably gets touched upon, from contemporary classical to other world traditions, even rock. Most important is that the workshop vibe is generous and cooperative. It's not a cutting competition. Students learn from each other."

Drummer Kate Gentile first attended SIM in 2007 at age 21, returning to go through the workshop again in 2011. With various summer workshops to choose from, she was drawn to SIM for its faculty. "It was as simple as, 'These guys are on my favorite records more than the faculty at any other program, so I want to go here,'" Gentile said. "I remember Jim Black—whose concepts as a drummer have influenced my exploration of time and rhythm more than anyone—indulged a barrage of questions from me the first time I was at SIM, often about what he was thinking on records that were, at the time, at least a decade old. I had a multi-page list of questions ready to go, which is hilarious in retrospect. The curriculum covered a lot of ground, whether it was J. Granelli giving master classes about how to practice improvising or Steve Coleman teaching a tune by ear and working on rhythmic cycles.

"But with many of the teachers—like Tim Berne, Michael Formanek, Marc Ducret—I learned so much just from playing with them in lessons or in groups," Gentile said. "I got to play their music with them, which is an experience you can't get unless you're a member of their bands. Little bits of wisdom and guidance in the course of an informal rehearsal or

epiphany about how truly creative music can go beyond the parameters of what we think of as jazz. It can turn sharp corners and doesn't have to be one thing all the time."

SIM has reached beyond New York to conduct workshops at the California Institute of the Arts (Alessi's alma mater), as well as in Norway and Poland. The next step is for SIM to establish its own communal, multi-purpose space, "something that's on the drawing board," Alessi said, "with small, but significant, steps being made."

Pianist Milne has been Alessi's co-director since 2007, with his feel for logistics complementing the trumpeter's big dreams. The two met at Banff in 1990 and subsequently played in bands together. (Milne has also forged ongoing affiliations with younger musicians via SIM; the saxophonist in his group Dapp Theory, Aaron Kruziki, is an alumnus of the workshop.) According to Milne, the SIM method has been fluid by both necessity and design, the pair always learning, adjusting and evolving, revamping the organization and curriculum.

"We added classes on the Alexander Technique last summer, to help musicians be aware of how to use their bodies more effectively," Milne said. "We experimented with a communal repertoire, so that all the groups could explore the same music—faculty compositions and standards—and compare the differing approaches. And it's important that we convey the reality of being a musician today, when you have to have more than one skill to thrive. You have to be prepared to adapt."

For Gentile the lessons of SIM have been enduring, and all-encompassing: "Anytime I play any music anywhere, I'm more aware and in the moment than I was before SIM," she said. "I feel more unlimited and fearless as an improviser. I'm wary of habits and tendencies that can get in the way of real improvising. I'm constantly brainstorming, trying to expand my approach."

"Ralph also gave me the composing bug," Gentile added. "When I took a lesson with him in 2007, I had just written the first tune of mine that wasn't a class assignment. I hadn't tried to play it with anyone yet. I was young and didn't know how to approach improvising on it because there weren't chord symbols. I didn't even know what I would do playing drums on it. Ralph had me play the bass line on piano, while he started improvising these beautiful lines on it. It blew my mind how easy it was for him, and how good it sounded. It was powerful hearing something I wrote played for the first time by someone like Ralph. I became addicted to composing, so now I have more music than I can afford to record, more than I have enough bands and rehearsal time for. It's all Ralph's fault."