

its Art of the Cool Jazz Festival, and has performed with everyone from Branford Marsalis and Aretha Franklin to Clay Aiken and The Foreign Exchange. He is also a recording artist and plans to release a new album later this year.

"My mom was really adamant about me attending an HBCU and NCCU, specifically, because she was an alumna," Strong said by phone. "I was playing in the Duke Ellington School of the Arts Jazz Band at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1996, and Dr. Wiggins heard me and several other students in the band, and

offered us the opportunity to come to NCCU and study. My experience here was great. And the impact that it had on me is that it gave me a grounding in what jazz is when it swings. ... I grew great respect for the tradition of the music, and its historical significance to Black people in America."

That significance spills over to vocal jazz, too. The college's Vocal Jazz Ensemble is led by Lenora Helm Hammonds, who also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in vocal jazz performance, ear training and songwriting.

A Chicago-born artist and a graduate of Berklee College of Music, Hammonds came to NCCU in 2005 after working as a vocalist in New York.

"I was recruited by Dr. Wiggins," Hammonds said by phone. "He asked me to help build the vocal component of the program ... and today, we're still the only one in the state where there's a full-time vocal jazz teacher. And the degrees have components where the vocalists are integrated [with the jazz ensemble], not on a separate track where they learn classical music, and then they can do cameos with the big band. But they work as integrated members of all of the combos, big bands and the classes, and that so this is crucial."

In 2018, NCCU's Vocal Ensemble won the Best Choir 2018–2019 award from HBCU Digest, and was the first vocal ensemble invited to perform at the Notre Dame Collegiate Jazz Festival. The school's dedication to vocal jazz runs deep as the only HBCU currently offering an Ella Fitzgerald Scholarship in vocal jazz.

For Hammonds, the addition of having critically acclaimed, locally based artists-in-residence like pianist Joey Calderazzo and saxophonist Branford Marsalis have become another crucial component of the program.

"Branford doesn't have a doctorate degree from a university. He has a PhD from the bandstand," Hammonds said. "He has honorary doctorate degrees from two different universities. But he has half a dozen Grammy awards in classical and jazz. To be able to sit across the room from him and learn from him means that you can ask him practical questions instead of theoretical questions."

In addition to being practical, NCCU is taking a proactive approach, adding an online master's degrees in jazz performance, composition and arranging beginning in summer of 2022.

With NCCU as a model, HBCUs could provide a template for the shape of jazz education to come. The school is part of the HBCU Jazz Education Initiative, created to augment jazz education, programs, ensembles and curriculum at Black institutions of higher learning.

In addition, "We bring with us the information from the experience of being on the road, and being in bands touring and recording," Hammonds said. "We're not textbook faculty. So, when students are looking for the kind of faculty that have tried-and-true experience, that's what we have to offer at an HBCU." **DB**

Editor's Note: NCCU will present two groups at the 13th Annual Jazz Education Network (JEN) Conference to be held Jan. 5–8, 2022, in Dallas. Both the Jazz Vocal Ensemble and the Jazz Ensemble will perform. In addition, Lenora Helm Hammonds will conduct a research presentation at the conference titled, *A Jazz Orientation of the Three-Dimensional Developmental Trajectory of the Intercultural Maturity Model*.

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