

Lonnie Davis and the Future of Charlotte's Jazz Scene

In the heart of Charlotte, the vibrant sound of jazz is an essential part in cultivating culture and bringing community in the music and arts scene. Amid the generations of true jazz in Charlotte, one person works hard to continue the authenticity of jazz for the future: Lonnie Davis.

As the founder of JazzArts Charlotte, Davis has been a pivotal figure in the local jazz community, shaping its future and upholding the deep roots that lie within the arts. Under her leadership, the organization has expanded its programming, reaching a broader audience and nurturing young talent. But how did Davis, a lifelong music lover and talented arts administrator, come to lead Charlotte's jazz renaissance?

Lonnie Davis had a significant background in all things music. From drum major to band captain, Davis always had an ear for the right note. She was driven by a passion for music that started in childhood. After being told that she could play jazz with the flute, she was encouraged to work for the jazz department at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts.

When Davis started working with local arts organizations, her path to jazz became more clear. She brought a unique skill set to the organizations. Davis used her background in music and nonprofit to focus on education and community outreach to enhance the local jazz scene.

When Davis founded JazzArts Charlotte in 2009, the main goal was to make jazz an identity of Charlotte. However, the pandemic created a major set back in the attendance and the way that jazz always was.

“After the pandemic, we’ve had to work harder to get the seats filled,” Davis admits, “but our audiences are open to new things, more so now than they were earlier.”

Davis has a clear vision for the organization’s brand. A specific audience is expected in attendees, which is a major part in the identity of jazz.

“We have a sophisticated jazz audience, and we’ve worked very hard over 15 years to create that audience,” Davis says.

Under Davis’s leadership, JazzArts Charlotte launched ways to expand beyond its normal audience. Jazz camps, school residencies, and partnerships with local universities are a few examples of what led JazzArts to its continued success.

The future of jazz lies within the future generation. Davis believes in the importance of educating the youth so there is knowledge in the importance of jazz as a whole.

“We can’t just rely on the history of jazz. We have to keep pushing forward,” she says. “And that means creating spaces where young people can not only learn about jazz but also experience it in its raw, creative form.”

One signature program that JazzArts Charlotte implemented is the Youth Ensembles Education Program. This gives young musicians the opportunity to play at a professional level in a jazz ensemble. Students learn how to collaborate with others, giving them real-world experience in the industry. They learn how to improvise and express themselves through music. This allows young musicians to show their true, raw talent and express their love for jazz.

“They’re leaving our program with college skills,” Davis explains. “We’re giving them exposure not only to learn the music but to perform to captive audiences—hundreds or thousands of people, onstage at the Knight Theater or at an earnings meeting at Bank of America.”

Musicians who perform for JazzArts Charlotte are integral pieces to the organization.

Saxophonist Adrian Crutchfield is a Charlotte native who performs for JazzArts on occasion. He plans to play with his band on February 14 at Jazz Room Charlotte.

“Lonnie has done something rare in this field—she’s created an environment where musicians are truly valued,” Crutchfield Says.

Crutchfield values Davis’ efforts to keep the passion alive for jazz. He emphasizes the dedication it takes to plan and direct an organization like JazzArts Charlotte.

As Charlotte’s jazz scene continues to evolve, so does Davis’s vision for JazzArts. With new projects on the horizon, Davis does not plan to stop anytime soon. An impressive implementation has been JazzArts international programming. They are holding a Charlotte exclusive cultural journey to Cuba in January 2025. As the jazz scene continues to evolve, the future seems bright for Lonnie Davis and her efforts to uphold a jazz culture in Charlotte.