

# Jazz composers are on the move in Richmond

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**M**uch like the jazz that he composes and performs, Ashby Anderson is constantly in motion.

One minute he's reading e-mails on his laptop at his unofficial office in the Starbucks at Broad and Lombardy streets. Minutes later he's fielding calls on his cell while driving through rush-hour traffic to Shockoe Bottom.

There, in a former produce warehouse on 19th Street, Anderson greets four more musicians who

are equally intense about all things jazz. They welcome the carton of steaming coffee that Anderson totes into the bare, chilly space to carefully place on a well-worn table.

For the next hour or so, Anderson stands in one place as he and the other assembled members of The Jazz Composers Alliance Inc. sip

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** Premiere of "The Historic Richmond Jazz Suite"

**WHEN:** 7 p.m. Wednesday

**WHERE:** Hyperlink Café, 814 W. Grace St.

**TICKETS:** \$10-\$15; available at Plan 9 Music

**INFO:** (804) 221-9404 or [www.jazzcomposersalliance.com](http://www.jazzcomposersalliance.com)

coffee and discuss the myriad directions in which they intend to take jazz in Richmond.

A major step for the 5-year-old nonprofit organization came a year ago when Anderson received a \$7,500 grant from Meet the Composer/Commissioning Music USA to create a four-part suite as part of a national series of works.

The next step is the debut of "The Historic Richmond Jazz Suite," which will be Wednesday at Hyperlink Café.

A third, but hardly final, step will be turning the vast 19th Street space into a place where local jazz musicians can showcase their talent.

Anderson, who attended Morehouse College in Atlanta before returning to Richmond and graduating from Virginia Union University, explains why each step is important to his hometown.

The compositions, says Anderson, "paint an aural portrait" of Richmond's past. Two works salute two sources of pride stemming from Richmond's black community.

"Steppin'" honors dancer and actor Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. "Soul of 2nd" hails Jackson Ward, once a strong center of finance, commerce and social activities.



LINDY KEAST RODMANTIMES-DISPATCH

**Ashby Anderson (center) will premiere his "Historic Richmond Jazz Suite" on Wednesday, accompanied by musicians Mark Ingraham (from left), Kelli Strawbridge, Sam Savage and Donald Crawford.**

Rounding out the suite are works that highlight Richmond's less-heralded history.

The tone poem "Devils Half Acre" is about a former slave jail in Shockoe Bottom. "Locomotive 231" symbolizes the 1925 Church Hill tunnel collapse.

Anderson says the Bojangles statue on Leigh Street was his primary inspiration in composing the original suite. Although Richmond has several monuments, he felt that many young people and newcomers aren't always knowledgeable about their significance. Thus, he says, the suite was created to bring attention to Richmond's history in a new form.

"Although many signs and words are posted around the city about these subjects, few really know or embrace the history and knowledge," he says in the suite's promotional material.

Performing with Anderson (on piano) will be Kevin Davis (percussion), Mike Hawkins (acoustic bass), Mark Ingraham (trumpet), Sam Savage (trombone), Kevin Simpson (tenor sax), Kelli Strawbridge (drums) and Donald Crawford (piano).

While much of Anderson's time lately has been

consumed by concert planning and promotion, he remains focused on the alliance's most ambitious goal — creating a space for jazz in Richmond.

Plans include creating a nonprofit space to present jazz, sound exhibitions and oral poetry.

"Jazz is about going forward with the music," says Anderson. "We want to showcase the local, everyday artist. We want to present music for local performances at the highest level possible."

Surveying the alliance's new home, Anderson says the group is awaiting permits to begin some repair work.

"We hope to do some things here," he says. "It's a space you can develop and be comfortable."

The level of comfort in the alliance is obvious as well.

Anderson, 41, is somewhat of a father figure for the organization's younger members. While all are either members of or lead their own bands, Strawbridge credits Anderson for "making things happen around town.

"Ashby is one of the best writers in Richmond," he

says. "Since 2004, when I started gigging with more, I've been able to play with a lot of people in about seven groups and freelancing. He's on the smoothest cats."

Anderson returns the compliment.

"Kelli's got a real, unique style," he says about 26-year-old drummer who hails from Harrisonb Strawbridge, who studied music at Virginia Commonwealth University, says he got hooked on drums while "playing on some crappy electric drums" in sixth grade.

"I just, like, tried to play it," he said, grinning the memory.

Other alliance members tell similar stories at their ascension to jazz.

Crawford, 28, went from spinning tunes in his school to teaching himself piano at age 19. He is playing at Emilio's restaurant and in jam session throughout Richmond. He's now in his third year at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he's joring in jazz performance and piano.

Savage, 26, who started playing piano at age 7, says he was "tricked" into playing trombone while in high school. The Newport News native also came to Richmond to attend VCU, where he began writing music. He recently formed the Savage Funk Band and Savage Jazz.

"I put all my creativity into my music," he says regarding his tendency to brand bands with his last name.

Ingraham, 26, discovered his creativity while growing up in New Jersey. He started playing trumpet because it was "the cheapest instrument in the store."

He graduated from VCU in 2003 with a degree in jazz studies and lots of experience playing with other jazz artists. The same year, he placed third in a national trumpet competition. He currently leads a funk band, Bunfalo.

As the group prepares to leave — some to teach aspiring musicians, others to play a gig or tend to family matters — Anderson whips out not a tool of technology but an old-fashioned legal pad. He methodically checks his list of talking points.

"Our focus is original music," he says. "We war to bring original, cutting-edge works to life and encourage experimentation. On a local level, people use jazz for aural sophistication or as a vibe or backdrop in a restaurant.

"When you're doing original music, it becomes more," he says. "Everybody has to show up, rehearse and participate."