

music man

# *Jazzed about Jazz*

Kris Berg shares his passion

BY HOLLY HARVEY





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Growing up, Kris Berg was a child who was content playing in the youth symphony.

After moving to a rural area outside of St. Louis, Mo., he faced the realization that there was no youth symphony available. Berg made the life-changing decision to play in the only musical band available – the jazz band.

“I had always wanted to be different, so I took up the big string bass that no one else played,” said Berg, director of jazz studies at Collin College. “I was hooked immediately. The energy, the expression and the variety in jazz is incredible. Jazz is like a sponge in that it soaks up so many musical styles.”

From the kid in St. Louis thumping away on a string bass, Berg has become one of the top-selling jazz composers and arrangers in the world. Along with the Metroplexity Big Band, he was on four ballots for a Grammy Award. He has recorded several CDs, directs three jazz bands, started the Collin Jazz Fest and the Texas All-Star Jazz Camp. The Texas All-Star Jazz Camp is a program started at Collin College for stu-

dents 13 years and older to supplement their big band jazz education.

“I went to jazz camps as a kid, and it really spurred me on to pursue jazz,” said Berg. “Through camps like this, you’re able to make music fun and educational at the same time. When I work with the students, it’s absolutely amazing.”

At Collin College, Berg directs Latin Jazz, Big Band and Jaztet. Under his direction, the ensembles have performed multiple times in Europe, the Bahamas and across the United States.

Juli Royster began taking string bass lessons with Berg in high school and later took several of his music classes at Collin College.

“Professor Berg’s instruction was so much more than, ‘Here, this is how you

play a chord,’” Royster said. “He really cared about each student as a person and was dedicated to teaching. Through the jazz ensembles, I got to be part of a bigger experience that was interpersonal and connected.”

Collin College Professor and Theatre Chair Brad Baker has worked with Berg for 20 years and says he can see the influence on students without even having to enter one of Berg’s jazz courses.



Kris Berg performing on his string bass in the Collin Cabaret

"I've shared office space with Kris for years, and daily I see students stream in and out to talk with him and be encouraged," Baker said. "Kris has an extraordinary rapport with those that he instructs, even if he's being challenged."

Berg constantly points out the value of music in society and tries to steer students towards becoming better people. In addition to working with students, Berg composes and arranges for the Metroplexity Big Band, a group of jazz musicians from all over the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex.

***"It's a rush to go on YouTube and hear a band from Japan playing one of my charts," Berg said. "To know that what I write is affecting lives on the other side of the globe really shows the power of music."***

"Watching Kris perform a composition on his string bass is mind-blowing," Baker said. "He's one of the best bass players I've ever seen in my life."

Whether directing a band of seasoned professionals or instructing a beginning student, it's more than just jazz for Berg.

"What I really get out of music are the relationships," he said. "When I'm playing with people, we all have different views and outlooks on life but when we start playing together, we're all on the same page. We get to work toward the same goal."

When he's not playing with bands himself, Berg is furiously busy arranging jazz charts to create something unique.

The challenge of transforming a much-beloved jazz tune into something fresh for the ears of today is a hurdle all arrangers face. Immersing himself into the original and letting the melody captivate creativity is how Berg transforms jazz classics into new pieces.

Composing new music is another of Berg's passions. A more creative outlet with fewer limitations than arranging, "I start out just writing a simple tune and then I build a tune above that and then compose another tune to complement it," he said. "Inspiration can really come from anywhere."

A composer with bands all over the world playing his charts can find inspiration in seemingly small moments. One of Berg's favorite charts he composed is "Narnian Dance," which was inspired by reading The Chronicles of Narnia series of seven books to his sons before bed. The personal connections made through melodies are what most touch him.

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For more information on the music program at Collin College, visit [collin.edu/music](http://collin.edu/music).

*About the author: Holly Harvey is a public relations writer at Collin College.*