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JOHN BROWN

RAISING THE BAR FOR BASSISTS



In just a few years, John Brown of Local 500 (Raleigh, NC) has started a miniature musical empire. He's the bassist and bandleader of The John Brown Quintet and the head of the jazz studies program at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, with sidelines of entertainment law and concert promotion.

A law degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, on top of his degree in music from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has parlayed his love of music and his skills in leadership and organization into an active and wide-ranging career.

Now in his fourth year at Duke, Brown is busier than ever, leading ensembles at the university, teaching bass, directing an all-star high school group, and setting up visits and performances by major jazz artists. "They keep me busy here," Brown says, referring to Duke, "but they're really committed to my ideas. I can maintain a healthy career as an educator."

Brown speaks of his two lifelong loves—music and law—with equal passion, and it's clear that each has driven the other in his career. "I'm committed to both, and one thing helps the other," he says. He still takes on what he calls "piecemeal projects" involving musicians and contract disputes.

Brown started playing and teaching full-time while studying for the North Carolina bar exam in 1996, and it was then that he transferred his membership from Local 342 (Charlotte, NC) to Local 500. "That was a part of my commitment," Brown says. "It's a first step for a professional."

He has since gone on to serve on the executive board for Local 500, and he promotes the AFM in all of his interactions with musicians. "I say, 'This is what's in it for you; this is evidence of your career,'" Brown says. "I think our local has done really well for that—musicians are starting to realize it's important, and we have a mission to say it's important."

To the students in his ensembles and his teaching studio at Duke, he emphasizes the importance of union membership and the message it sends about a commitment to a career in music. "That's one of my soapbox items," Brown says. "I keep the flyers in my briefcase, and I let them know there are resources in place, and I let them know the benefits. It's not a hard sell, and they can appreciate that."

During college, Brown took every playing opportunity that came his way—orchestra, jazz bands, musical theater, and even a tour accompanying a show choir. He studied bass with Jack Budrow of Local 500 and began playing as a substitute for the North Carolina Symphony.

Performances with members of the Marsalis family—Wynton of Local 802 (New York City) and Ellis and Delfeayo of Local 147-496 (New Orleans, LA)—moved Brown toward starting and leading his own band. "Soon after I started taking jazz seriously, I met Wynton Marsalis and played spot performances with him here and there," Brown says. "Through that association, I began playing with Delfeayo and his dad [Ellis]. I got a taste of that lifestyle. I loved it and I never let it go."

Brown would keep Marsalis' group in mind as a model for his own quintet, which he would finally assemble years later.

Brown's mastery of both the performing and business sides of music is most clear in his handling of the independent label that releases the quintet's albums. He sets up studio time and pays his musicians union scale, even though North Carolina is a right-to-work state. He has been able to oversee all the aspects of production for a bevy of recording projects.

"You can maintain artistic control over artwork, mixing, and mastering," he says. "I hope people will take a cue from my choices."

The first volume of *Terms of Art*, a tribute to the late Art Blakey and his band, the Jazz Messengers, went up to number 15 on *Jazz Week's* album charts in only its fourth week—an outstanding achievement for a recording on an independent label. Brown hopes to capitalize on this initial success with a second volume of *Terms of Art*, a collection of ballads called *Quiet Time*, and support of a recently released holiday album, *Merry Christmas, Baby*.

"I've got a really good group in place," Brown says. "There's some magic happening here."