

Musician expands experience, career with degree from CCRI

Every jazz musician knows that her craft is as much about improvisation as it is practice. It's in the improv where the most unexpected, delightful surprises can come out of all of that skill. For Lois (Eberhard) Vaughan, jazz pianist and graduate of CCRI (Jazz Studies, '99), the notion means as much in her personal life as it does her professional experience.

"I'm from western New York," said Vaughan, who grew up in Youngstown and earned a bachelor's degree in biology from Cornell University. She had been living and

working outside of Boston, studying jazz in her spare time, when she decided to make a change. "That's when I moved to Newport to try making my living as a jazz musician," she said.

The transition was quite a change of pace for Vaughan, who had saved up money and lined up a housesitting job so that she could live as frugally as possible while looking for work as a musician. Supplementing her income by driving school buses, she began to teach piano as quickly as she could – and, although

looking to expand her horizons after playing solo for a few years, she decided to come to the college in 1997.

"I spent a couple years looking around trying to find a school where I could learn to play with other people," she said. Although she considered conservatories in Boston, proximity and affordability meant the choice was clear.

Although she already had amassed experience as a musician, Vaughan said she found being surrounded by fresh-faced students straight out of high school – as well as by the diverse student body represented at the college – to be exhilarating. "The fact that I was back in a learning situation was very exciting. It was a real melting pot and the classes were wonderful; I learned a lot and had a lot of great experiences," she said, recalling being able to participate in national adjudications and playing alongside community college students from around the country.

She recalled in particular the influence of Professor Stephen Lajoie, who she called "the driving force" in expanding her knowledge of harmony and theory as well as her ability to collaborate with others. "There were a lot of very rich experiences," she said. "And teachers can make an incredible difference."

While the impact on her personal income has been a positive one now that she has expanded her skill set, Vaughan said it was the artistic growth and networking opportunities that came with learning to play with other people that ultimately made her feel more at home in what can be an uncertain field.

And despite Rhode Island's small size, Vaughan said that the state remains a creative force to be reckoned with and a wonderful place to be practicing as a full-time performing and teaching artist. "To have the arts brings people a lot of joy," she said. "Rhode Island draws a lot of people from New York, Boston, all over the country and all over the world. The arts are a big part of what makes our state vibrant."

"The fact that I was back in a learning situation was very exciting. It was a real melting pot, and the classes were wonderful; I learned a lot, and had a lot of great experiences."

— LOIS VAUGHAN '99



it was a far cry from the environmental education work she had been doing in Boston, that skill set was certainly helpful. "It was incredibly difficult," said Vaughan. She always had been interested in environmental issues, owing to her parents' interest in flora and fauna, but knew that making a life as a musician was her true calling.

"But I learned how to play the church organ, so I got a job at a church, and then I started trying to get gigs playing jazz. My first real breakthrough came when I got a job at what was then the Sheraton, now the Hyatt, on Goat Island in Newport. But in this business, there's no job security; it can go from one extreme to the other very quickly," she said.

It was the search for a closer approximation of that job security that brought Vaughan to CCRI. After joining a musician's union and networking,