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Radiohead Reimagined: jazz for a new generation

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Members of the Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra in rehearsal in 2015.

By **RAY COOKLIS**

Rob Parton is on a bus ride to Louisville. The noted jazz trumpeter, bandleader, touring artist and educator – and now artistic director of the [Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra](#) (CCJO) – is taking a group of his students from Capital University in Columbus to a jazz conference.

In other words, he's helping to prime the pump to get a new generation interested in jazz –

both as potential performers and as loyal listeners.

“Education is key, both for training new players and for getting young people to concerts,” says Parton by phone during his bus trip. “Nowadays, kids don’t know what it’s like to hear a full professional band. We need to develop a culture to support live entertainment and performers.”

Turns out, that’s exactly what the 17-member CCJO is all about these days: finding new ways to help advance jazz into the future.

That includes educational efforts such as CCJO’s continuing “Let Freedom Swing!” series of in-school and community performances, partnering with the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) and New York’s Jazz at Lincoln Center.

And it also includes innovative, even head-turning programs such as a Feb. 18 concert at CCJO’s new home, The Redmoor in Mount Lookout, featuring the music of Radiohead.

Yes, *Radiohead*, the visionary, experimental British rock band founded in the 1990s. The band’s trail-blazing, multi-faceted music has strong elements that mesh well with the instincts of jazz players. It’s a natural, and long overdue, say CCJO leaders.

“I’ve always really loved their music. I had an opportunity to listen to some band arrangements of it and thought, wow, to do a whole program of their music would be really cool,” says Matt Anklan, a CCJO founding member, lead trumpet and education chair who suggested the Radiohead concert. He also coordinates the “Let Freedom Swing!” outreach program.

“Radiohead has always been a band that cross-cultivated jazz and rock,” Parton says. “More kids these days are interested in that kind of musical blend.”

“Hopefully it will attract an audience we wouldn’t get otherwise. And hopefully we can do more Radiohead programs and pack the house for them.”



CCJO alto saxophonist Jeremy Long soloing at the orchestra’s original home, the Blue Wisp Jazz Club.

Photo: Aaron Jesse

Parton has packed plenty of houses during his career as one of the most in-demand jazz trumpeters in Chicago. He's led a big band, had a long-standing jazz trio, played studio sessions for a variety of top artists, toured with numerous theater productions, and ventured increasingly into classical music and orchestral pops. He's taught jazz and trumpet at the college level for many years in Chicago and, since 2010, Columbus.

But when the call came to lead the CCJO, it was a call from home – Parton grew up and got his jazz start in Cincinnati, playing with the Blue Wisp Jazz Band and learning from great local jazz players.

CCJO founding director Scott Belck, a CCM professor, persuaded Parton to take on the job.

“I have known Scott for many years. When he found out he was going to have additional duties at CCM, he talked to me to see if I would be interested in taking over CCJO,” Parton says.

Even with a busy career in Chicago and Columbus? “It was kind of nutty, but I wanted to help out,” Parton says. “The fact that I grew up in the Cincinnati area” (he's an Erlanger native) “and could come back to see my parents and my son, who's a freshman at CCM, was great. And I know I can help the band. I love the city and its jazz scene.”

One aspect of CCJO's concerts this season that Parton particularly likes is a practice he's seen in Chicago for many years as well.

“We have a high school jazz ensemble open for every concert at the Redmoor. They play at 7:30 p.m. and our concert starts at 8, so right after they play they get to hear CCJO – and it's amazing to see the look on their faces.”

Parton's plans for CCJO include more stability and visibility for the organization. The biggest challenge he sees for CCJO? “We need to start getting some donors to support us, not just rely on grants.”

“Ultimately the goal is to turn this into an orchestra offering a consistent subscription series similar to Jazz at Lincoln Center, not just one or three concerts,” he says. “That to me is the goal. Cultivating the crowd and audience is really important.”

When Parton signed on with CCJO, “they gave me two weeks to create a subscription series.