

# Reviving Joe Brazil's vision for jazz, mutual aid and collective joy

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JOE BRAZIL AND EDDIE HARRIS AT GARFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

*Courtesy Of Seattle Municipal Archives*

Joe Brazil, left, and Eddie Harris at Garfield High School in 1974.

In September 1965, John Coltrane came to Seattle for the first time to play a week at The Penthouse. The trip was intensely creative, and ultimately resulted in three recordings: *Live in Seattle*, *A Love Supreme: Live in Seattle*, and *Om*, an often overlooked 29-minute work recorded in Lynnwood, Washington.

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While many jazz fans know about these records, fewer are familiar with Joe Brazil, a saxophonist and community activist who lived in Seattle and was a key reason this local jazz history was documented. On reel-to-reel tape, Brazil recorded the 1965 performance at The Penthouse that would later become *Live in Seattle: A Love Supreme*, and he also played flute with Coltrane on *Om*.

This was just the beginning of Brazil's influence in Seattle. Over the next decade, Brazil would go on to teach jazz at [Garfield High School](#), develop the jazz curriculum at University of Washington (UW), and found the Black Academy of Music (BAM), a community music school geared toward making jazz education and camaraderie more accessible.

Today, Tana Yasu, Brazil's great niece and the executive director of [Joe Brazil Legacy](#), dedicates her time to carrying forward her great uncle's work. She's particularly focused on reviving aspects of BAM, which, during its time, was a lifeline for local musicians and a generation of underserved kids in Seattle's Central District.

"Uncle Joe was quoted saying, 'I teach young Black men bars to keep them from behind bars,'" Yasu said.

## From a basement in Detroit

Originally from Detroit, Brazil studied saxophone at the Detroit Institute of Music and Conservatory of Music. During the 1950s, a vibrant time for the Motor City's jazz scene, Brazil worked at an auto factory by day and hosted star-studded jam sessions in [his basement](#) by night.

Brazil befriended Coltrane, and notable jazzmen like trumpeter Donald Byrd, saxophonist Sonny Red, and jazz icon Miles Davis in his basement, which Brazil had renovated into a bar with a baby grand piano.

"Of course, my great aunt had that piano, and she would not let people smoke cigarettes in the house, but John Coltrane burnt one of the keys," Yasu said.

By 1961, the Detroit scene had fizzled some, sending Brazil to Seattle to take a job at Boeing. He immersed himself in Seattle's music scene. By the late '60s, he'd become a

“He had lived a full life in that [jazz] arena, I feel, but he chose family and community, and he loved it here,” Yasu said.



JOE BRAZIL AND FREDDIE HUBBARD AT UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

*Courtesy Of Seattle Municipal Archives*

Joe Brazil and Freddie Hubbard performing at University of Washington, 1974.

## Black Academy of Music

While [the controversy](#) over UW denying Brazil tenure and his proximity to jazz superstars are what often catch the light, founding the Black Academy of Music, later renamed the Brazil Academy of Music, is what those close to him consider to be one of his greatest legacies.

“Well, basically, he felt that everybody deserves a second chance,” said Lonnie Williams, a saxophonist who began working with BAM as a performer and teacher in 1973. “It wasn’t so much just about music, it was also about life.”

Brazil founded BAM in 1969 as “an educational institution dedicated to uplifting the consciousness of people through music,” according to an official BAM brochure provided to KNKX by Yasu. Students learned music basics, like sightreading and harmony, as well as more advanced topics, like improvisation and the history of jazz, from local musicians including saxophonist Jabo Ward, guitarist George Hurst, trumpeter Floyd Standifer, and Brazil himself.

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Faculty also participated in the BAM community orchestra, a performing big band led by Brazil that offered musicians a regular chance to play, network, and learn from each other on the bandstand. KNKX spoke with Williams, trumpeter and former Meany Middle School music teacher Wadie Ervin, and saxophonist Dan Greenblatt, who all met in the community orchestra in the '70s.

“Joe is a representative of the old school way of doing things, a tradition where the music is seen in the context of a community, rather than the music being this thing that you take out of the community and put into school, which becomes a different environment,” Greenblatt said.



THE COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY JOE BRAZIL

*Courtesy Seattle Municipal Archives / Courtesy Of The Seattle Municipal Archives*

Joe Brazil directing the Black Academy of Music Community Orchestra in 1974.

Brazil also brought in touring stars he knew personally, like McCoy Tyner, Archie Shepp, [Cannonball Adderley](#), and Dizzy Gillespie, to give free clinics and to sit in with the BAM orchestra. At one point, Brazil flew in saxophonist Joe Henderson, a key figure in the 1960s Blue Note Records era, at the request of Darryl Barber, a saxophonist who'd joined the BAM community orchestra after returning home from the Vietnam War.

“I found myself on stage at a prison playing Joe Henderson's music, sitting next to him and taking solos and [then] leaving Seattle to go down and study with [Henderson] in San Francisco,” said Barber, adding later that meeting Brazil “saved his life” and put him

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## BAM in the Central District

With BAM, which operated out of a few different locations in Seattle's Central District during its time, Brazil also created a vehicle for community service and mentorship.

Similar to modern day nonprofits like Seattle JazzED, BAM centered racial and economic equity by offering free and low-cost classes and events for students. According to a 1976 article in the University of Washington *Daily*, BAM even helped some Black musicians gain admission to UW's School of Music, where Brazil taught.

The BAM community orchestra performed frequently for the community at churches, elder care homes, outdoor events, and at correctional facilities across Washington. Williams recalled working closely with troubled kids, including those inside the nearby youth detention center, now called Judge Patricia H. Clark Children and Family Justice Center.

"We started bringing in street kids to be part of the program, to get them to go to school and get their GEDs," said Williams, adding that he still sees many of these now-adults out in the community today.

BAM's efforts were made possible through grants. The now-defunct Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) federal grant was a significant funder.

"Part of the CETA grant was that Joe specified that a certain number of his faculty members were going to be formerly-incarcerated. These were guys like [saxophonist] Melvin [Peterson], who had been arrested on minor drug charges," Greenblatt said. "But it was a felony at that time, and they had to do hard time and then come out with a prison record, which made them unemployable to most people."



*Lisa Hagen Glynn*

Members of the Joe Brazil Legacy Tribute Band perform at the 2025 Jackson Street Jazz Walk.

While Brazil was focused on giving back, Williams, Ervin, and Greenblatt stress that BAM never turned anyone away because of their background. Still, to keep his grant funding, Brazil was eventually asked to remove “Black” from BAM’s name. By 1975, the organization was renamed the Brazil Academy of Music.

“If you lived in the community, you in the community. It ain't about color,” Williams said.

## Joe Brazil Legacy

By the 1980s, BAM’s funding dried up and the organization ceased operation. Half a century later, Yasu is working to revive BAM’s spirit and some of its programs through [Joe Brazil Legacy](#), the nonprofit she launched in 2016.

“It became very important to me that Uncle Joe's legacy be told and represented from the people that actually knew him, shared space and time with him,” Yasu said.

Through her organization, Yasu is working on digitizing artifacts to create a Joe Brazil archive, and she’s put together a Joe Brazil Legacy Band, made up of musicians who were students and faculty of BAM, to play events for the community.

“[BAM faculty] were very interested in having you keep the jazz idiom alive, you know. They shared a lot of stuff, to try and keep the interest there. And that’s the same thing

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member of the Joe Brazil Legacy Band who studied with Brazil at UW and was involved in BAM.

Most recently, Joe Brazil Legacy received a sizable grant from 4Culture to bring some of BAM's work back to Seattle Public Schools. While Yasu is still in talks with the district, she and Brazil's longtime musician friends hope it will help a new generation soak in what Brazil was about: Music as a vehicle for collective joy and mutual aid.

"He was top-tier, and he came here and started pouring all that into this community," Yasu said. "It was more than just music. It was community activism and advocacy."



### Alexa Peters

Alexa Peters is a Seattle-based journalist and editor with a focus in music, arts, and culture. Her journalism has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *The Washington Post*, *DownBeat Magazine*, and *The Seattle Times*, among others.

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