

A BIG, BEAUTIFUL SOUND

Founded by trumpeter Pancho Romero, the 18-piece Albuquerque Jazz Orchestra, or AJO, has been a fixture in the city for more than 25 years. Romero is no longer associated with the band—he's now director of jazz studies at NMSU in Las Cruces—but the seed he planted has grown into a formidable aggregation of professionals, semiprofessionals, and music educators that has developed a strong following with its professionalism and musicality.

It wasn't always that way, according to saxophonist Glenn Kostur, who heads jazz studies at UNM. He joined the orchestra upon arriving in Albuquerque in 1995. "For the first 10 years or so that I lived here, things were pretty sporadic," he says. The band would play only two or three gigs a year, getting together to rehearse briefly before each one, but go dormant for months at a time between gigs. That arrangement made it all but impossible

for the orchestra to grow its repertoire and improve its performance.

With the return to his native Albuquerque of renowned trumpeter Bobby Shew, things began to move in an upward trajectory for the band. "We invited him to be the musical director of the band," says Kostur. Although trombonist John Sanks had taken on many of the logistical responsibilities, the band had not had a musical director to whip it into shape. Shew served in that role from 2007 to 2010 and reinvigorated the orchestra by injecting a sense of professionalism and pride. "He actually rehearsed the band and would give us feedback," says Kostur, "and he was choosing interesting music and challenging us." Shew set up a regular, twice-monthly rehearsal schedule and required band members to supply a sub if they could not make the rehearsal. When he decided to leave the position, he recommended that the band select Kostur as its musical director, and the members did so.

With an impressive professional résumé—just for openers, he was composer/arranger and musical director for jazz

trumpeter Maynard Ferguson's band—Kostur continued the upward trajectory. "For a long time, I had been trying to figure out a way to get some sort of regular performance venue opportunity to happen," says Kostur. He notes that most cities the size of Albuquerque have a big band that performs regularly at a home base. That regularity helps sharpen the band and build an audience. The AJO found a home at The Cooperage, where it performs to an enthusiastic audience on the first Tuesday of the month.

Another important element in the band's growth is the selection of music that Kostur, who has numerous connections in the world of big band jazz, brought to the band. "One of the challenges about leading any kind of jazz big band is finding repertoire that is interesting to play and listen to, and challenging enough to keep the band working and growing musically," says Kostur. Equally important is finding charts that fit the band and play to its strengths.

Apparently, Kostur's been successful in that search because the band has never sounded better, and the joyful commitment of its members is palpable. Over time, the band has developed a core repertoire that it knows extremely well after years of twice-monthly rehearsals and regular performances. "It allows us to be more expressive," says Kostur. The musicians' familiarity with the challenging music "frees up RAM" in their heads, he says, so that they can be more available to what's happening around them.

About a year ago, the orchestra became a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization, which allows it to conduct business in a more businesslike way—like being able to cash checks made out to "Albuquerque Jazz Orchestra," just for starters. It is also now regularly featuring a vocalist in its performances—the inimitable Hillary Smith, who adds a new dimension musically and has helped expand the band's following. Kostur notes that some folks can relate to a big band more easily when there is a vocalist out in front.

Swing over to albuquerquejazzorchestra.org to get a full list of personnel, check the performance schedule, and make contact or a donation.



The Albuquerque Jazz Orchestra has been a fixture of the local music scene for 25 years.

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Mel's online music journal, at www.melminter.com.

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