

WHERE ARE THEY NOW? *Up close with Akiba alumni*

In the most recent issue of *All About Jazz NY*, Akiba-Schechter alumnus Jonah Parzen-Johnson ('02) was described as “a 30-something baritonist from Chicago ... whose [jazz trio, Reed’s Bass Drum,] applies a constructivist process: their grazing passes over what’s on the usual jazz buffet; they sample judiciously, tasting their way from track to track, taking small bites, chewing well, savoring and digesting with discrimination.”

Jonah’s music has been featured in many publications, including *TimeOut NY* and the *Chicago Tribune*, but this article received a bigger response than usual. In fact, the day after it appeared, Jonah’s parents found several messages on their voicemail. “We didn’t know you were old enough to have 30-year-old children!”

They’re not. Jonah, a 22-year old graduate from New York University, recently received his Bachelor’s Degree in Music and Jazz Performance and will begin his Master’s in the fall. But much of his time has actually been spent outside of school, carving out a name for himself and his band, Reed’s Bass Drum. The group recently released their second CD, *Which Is Which*, and has several Chicago performances planned. Jonah performs about twice a week.

It was in middle school that Jonah began playing in a formal jazz combo at Akiba. “We met during lunch. Yoel [Furman] played trumpet, I played sax, Gideon [Klionsky] played piano, and [then science teacher] Mr. Basa played bass. It was a great opportunity to play serious music in a



Reed’s Bass Drum’s newest CD is available on iTunes as well as on Jonah’s website, www.jonahparzen-johnson.com.

small, private school setting. I appreciated that.”

That wasn’t the only thing that propelled Jonah toward music. “Akiba made me a very active learner,” he says. “It created an environment where students were allowed to shape their own development around questions they had.” It’s no wonder that, when Jonah arrived at Lincoln Park High School’s IB Program, one of his first moves was to start a jazz combo. “At Akiba, we were active in the trajectory of our education,” says Jonah. “It’s something that can be dangerous in the rest of the world—I mean, it drove my high school teachers crazy—but ultimately, direct dialogue between teachers and students is crucial. In a lot of elementary school settings, you’re given, at most, the opportunity to discuss what’s being taught. But what’s important is learning *how* to learn. Akiba taught me *how* to learn.”

So where does he see himself in five years? Performing. Teaching. Composing. “It’s important not to lock yourself into one thing,” says Jonah. “In your focus, you miss the real opportunities. It’s really easy to get onto a road and continue on it. But there aren’t actually any roads without turns. And if you can learn to make the turns you want, that’s a powerful thing.” ✨