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Muse Creative Workspace: Vision for Richmond

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by Cesca Janece Waterfield

Jazz musicians just do things differently.

Arguably this nation’s greatest cultural contribution to the world, jazz is inseparably rooted in African American culture. Even jazz composed and performed today proudly celebrates deep-rooted traditions. But its power can reach right into your life when a skilled visionary strays from them.

In August of 2006, well-known jazz musician Ashby Anderson and his wife Terri made a wrong turn on a one-way street, and found themselves parked in front of an old produce warehouse at 6 N. 19th St. They were on an excursion to find studio space. So as the car idled, they got out, and peeked inside. In a few moments, they realized that behind the bay doors – under all that dust, rust, and peeling paint – their dream slept.

“Here we are, we’re looking at this garage,” Terri remembers. “We were trying to look into the windows. All the windows were really grimy and kind of busted. We [knew], this raw space is just perfect.”

Fast forward almost two years later to a bustling morning. Ashby is explaining the origins of his latest and largest-scale project: “I originally needed a rehearsal and performance space. I was also looking for a place to work my non-profit. Something other than my normal office at Starbuck’s,” he quips. He admired the Jazz Loft Era of the ‘70s, during which many major cities were creatively nourished by innovative use of warehouse spaces for the purpose of live music and art. A longtime pianist who began musical training at age 8, music composition and performance are mainstays of Ashby Anderson’s life and livelihood. He was growing frustrated with the attitudes of some clubs touting themselves as music venues. Most didn’t own an acoustic piano, and one offered only a poor-quality electronic one. In such environments, Ashby says, “The focus becomes the food and alcohol, not the music.”

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An ambitious social entrepreneur, Ashby decided to find a site for his own “jazz loft.” The Andersons moved in a month after that “wrong turn” in historic Shockoe Bottom.

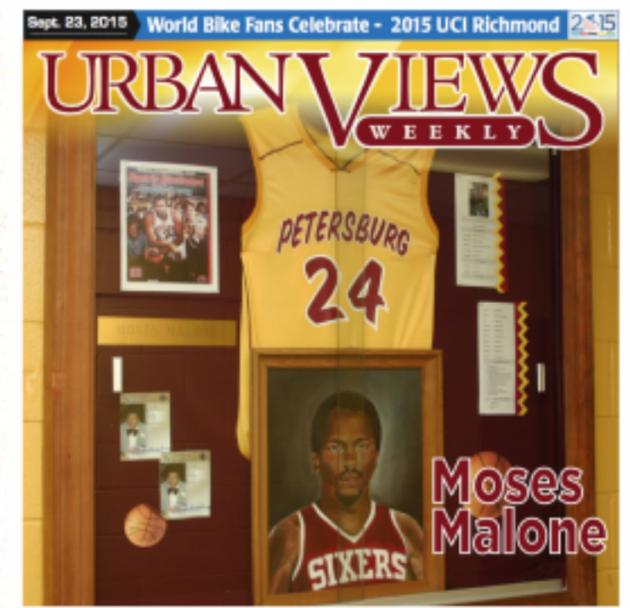
Today, Muse Creative Workspace comprises more than 2200 square feet and sparkles with color and vivacity, with music and conversation. Still shy of its second anniversary, Muse Creative Workspace is helping cultivate culture and community in Richmond. Available for rent to non-profits, business organizations, corporations, and artists, Muse Creative Workspace is one of several of projects Ashby has initiated to promote jazz, art, and culture in Richmond. He is Co-founder, Executive Director, and Composer-in-Residence of Jazz Composer’s Alliance, a non-profit organization that commissions and presents original jazz compositions that in some way challenge musical boundaries.

He graduated Virginia Union University with a degree in Jazz Studies and Music Education. His own compositions are noted for their inventiveness, and for drawing on a breadth of influences while retaining a unique identity. “Culture of a City” is the title of one of his compositions that’s been recognized at the International Song Competition. His 2006 “Historic Richmond Jazz Suite,” a four part series, was commissioned by an organization supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. Though he’s been recognized as a Ronald E. McNair Scholar for his academic research on Ornette Coleman, it was research on Charles Mingus that may have strengthened his entrepreneurial drive, as well as his focus on original composition. He admits that after studying Mingus’ manuscripts, he realized that the only thing one can leave behind is what he’s created.

His family and wife are deeply involved in the growth of Muse. The striking couple has been together for nearly twenty years, and lives in Bellevue with their three daughters. Although they lived in Atlanta briefly while Ashby attended Morehouse, both are longtime Richmond residents, and enjoy a large family here. They’re working on purchasing the building.



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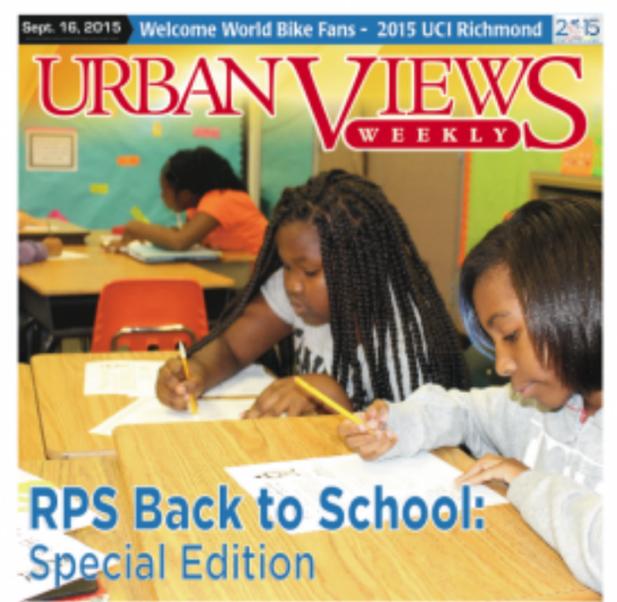
“Here is what we’ve always dreamed about,” Terri says. “When we lived in Atlanta, we wanted to move into a warehouse, a living space-slash-studio space.” As dramatic as the beautification of the area’s “curb appeal” is, it’s eclipsed by the transformation inside. Ashby jokes that the most memorable day in their extensive work on the space was the first day they got air conditioning. After a hot summer of work painting, sanding, and refinishing the floors, Ashby says, “The day they hit that button was amazing.” His goal is to provide space and inspiration to artists in every medium to discover and exercise their own clout.

“The main point of going through all of this [is], this is where you empower yourself. Our main focus is to get the word out to musicians to put out their own events,” Ashby says. Original art hangs throughout the spacious loft space and its original wood floors gleam. Currently showing is “Moods of Monk,” by artist Nicole Elise Black. The two floors feature a working studio and gallery, and performance space features state-of-the-art performance gear, theatrical lighting, a large movie screen, and PA system. As with anything Ashby is involved in, education is key, and there’s a classroom. Terri and Ashby are busy preparing for their Summer Jazz Boot Camp.



Ashby says, “People need to understand the word, ‘jazz,’ Ashby says. “The word has been pimped a bit. People are used to getting a watered-down version of jazz.” While he’s opinionated, Ashby’s experience and list of accomplishments make such assertions hard to dispute. What the space most seems to offer is room for growth of community and Richmond’s future.

So is there anything you won’t find at Muse Creative Workspace? Yes. There are



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no poor quality electronic pianos in sight. “We have a real piano,” Ashby says emphatically.

Muse Creative Workspace has community events nearly every night. Each Wednesday is “The Jam Session” with Larri Branch, beginning at 9 pm. Musicians are encouraged to call ahead for the lively and improvisational gathering.

The Wine and Cheese Fundraiser for 3rd District Council Candidate Jonathan Davis takes place July 18 from 6:30 – 8:30.



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