As a teenager growing up in New Haven, Conn., Wayne Escoffery ’97 spent hours studying the music of jazz greats Thelonius Monk, Dexter Gordon, and John Coltrane.

This year, Escoffery, one of the jazz world’s hottest young tenor saxophonists, is touring the United States and Europe with Monk’s drummer, Ben Riley, in a group that plays Monk’s quirky compositions.

“It’s like a dream,” Escoffery says about playing with Riley, chatting between sets at Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola in Manhattan. “I can still remember the first Monk album I owned. I listened to it over and over.”

Like many up-and-coming jazz musicians, Escoffery can’t yet rely solely on his own band. On weeknights this past winter, he played with the Mingus Big Band or the Mingus Orchestra at clubs in Greenwich Village and midtown Manhattan, interpreting the music of composer Charles Mingus. He also appeared at an intimate Upper West Side club, leading his own quartet featuring his wife, jazz singer Carolyn Leonhart. Escoffery also hit the road with bands put together by Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) to play the music of jazz giants Dexter Gordon and Miles Davis.

In March the JALC sextet played a concert at Fairfield University in Connecticut. On stage that night, the six-foot-four-inch Escoffery was an imposing figure in a finely tailored suit, shaved head, and silver earrings. Among the band members was bassist Rufus Reid, who played on many of those Dexter Gordon albums Escoffery studied in high school.

“Wayne has a good toehold on the lineage, and he has a real passion for the music,” says Reid. “The music is in good hands with him, for sure.”

Also on stage that night was tenor sax player Jimmy Greene ’97, a member of the Hartt School’s board of trustees and Escoffery’s college roommate. The performance harkened back to their college days, when Escoffery played with the similarly physically imposing Greene in a Hartt School ensemble called The Twin Towers, a nickname they were given at Hartt due to their size.

“That group was a baptism of fire for me,” says Escoffery. “I hadn’t played that much jazz, but it gave me the chance to struggle, and learn.”

Escoffery picked up the saxophone in high school, and by his senior year was playing in local clubs. While attending a workshop at the Artists Collective, Inc., in Hartford, he met Jackie McLean,
founder of both the Artists Collective (with his wife, Dolly) and the Hartt School’s Jackie McLean Institute of Jazz. McLean, a renowned alto sax player, saw promise in the lanky tenor player.

“Jackie gave me a path to follow, providing me with a real understanding of the history of the music and a way to find my own sound,” says Escoffery.

As Escoffery neared graduation, McLean encouraged him to audition for the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance at New England Conservatory in Boston. A prestigious two-year program, it takes a handful of the nation’s top young players on a world tour accompanied by top jazz artists as advisors. Musicians can also earn a master’s degree along the way.

Escoffery, who graduated summa cum laude from the university, was selected. Two years later, he hit the New York scene with an advanced degree and connections to all the musicians he’d met at the Monk Institute. One gig led to another, and, before long, he was playing with pianist Eric Reed at Jazz at Lincoln Center. There, he met JALC artistic director Wynton Marsalis (Hon. ’03), who hired Escoffery to work with the Lincoln Center bands.

Escoffery’s Lincoln Center work has given him the opportunity to perform regularly and develop his sound, which is deeply connected to the roots of jazz. But he’s also chafing to break out on his own and play his own compositions.

“If you want the music to grow, at some point you need to give way to younger artists,” he says. “Until people take risks and trust their ears, the music is going to dwindle away.”

Escoffery has appeared as a sideman on recordings with David Gibson, the Mingus Big Band, and other artists. He has also recorded two CDs with his own group—Times Change (2001) and Intuition (2004). To find out where he will be appearing next, check out his itinerary at www.escofferymusic.com.

* "Round Midnight" is the title of a Thelonius Monk song that quickly became a jazz standard after its release in 1968. It has been recorded by Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, and many other artists.

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Opera Diva Is Hartt Alumna of the Year

The Hartt School honored opera singer Ai-Lan Zhu as its Alumna of the Year at the Hartt Commencement ceremony in Lincoln Theater on May 15.

Zhu, who graduated from The Hartt School in 1986 with an Artist Diploma, is one of America’s most sought-after interpreters of the lyric repertoire. Coming to the United States from her native Beijing in 1984 for graduate work at Hartt, she stayed in this country after graduation but has made the entire opera world her stage, appearing in Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, Glasgow, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Madrid, Vienna, and Zurich, and at the Glyndebourne Festival in England.

This past season Zhu made her debut with the Nationale Reisopera in the Netherlands as Cio-Cio-San in Madama Butterfly, an opera that she avoided at the start of her career due to warnings that she would be typecast. After performing diverse roles that proved the depth of her talent, she sang the title role of Butterfly to rave reviews. Lloyd Dykk of The Vancouver Sun wrote, “A fine actress, she endows this Butterfly with enormous dignity and a prescient, bittersweet wisdom. In ‘Un Bel Di’ … the audience hung on every syllable, like a butterfly drunk on nectar.”

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Dean Malcolm Morrison (left) with Hartt’s Alumna of the Year Ai-Lan Zhu at Commencement 2005.