Thelonious Monk graduates join jazz greats to make music for a good cause

PASSING THE TORCH

Nicholas Payton is among the local jazz greats playing Wednesday for a concert to benefit the Old Algiers Riverfest.

By Keith Spera

As Davy Mooney’s two-year tenure in the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance draws to a close, the guitarist is looking forward to sleeping again.

Mooney landed one of seven slots in the prestigious graduate-level jazz education program in 2007, the year the Institute moved from the University of California, Los Angeles to Loyola University in New Orleans. It’s been a whirlwind ever since.

On March 6, a weekend. Mooney and his classmates returned from a seven-day trip to India, sponsored by the State Department, with Herbie Hancock, George Duke and several legislators. Days later, he took part in a midnight jam session at Snug Harbor. Hours after that, he caught an early morning flight to New York to audition for the doctoral program at the Manhattan School of Music.

“What was crucial,” Mooney said, “is that I got a lot of sleep. We went from India, jet lag right into Marigold.”

The rest of the semester is equally hectic. On Saturday and Sunday, the Monk students will appear at Soul Fest at the Audubon Zoo (see Page 26). This spring they’ll play the French Quarter Festival, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and a festival in Ukraine.

And for Wednesday’s “Jazz for the Ages” concert at Rousseau Hall on the Loyola campus, they’re paired with a succession of local jazz luminaries, including pianist Ellis Marsalis, vocalist Leah Chase, trumpeter Nicholas Payton, drummer Herlin Riley and percussionist Bill Summers. Proceeds benefit the Old Algiers Riverfest, a free festival of traditional jazz April 4-5.

Mooney has a history with the concert’s featured guests. He studied with Marsalis and Chase at the University of New Orleans. He recorded with Riley on an upcoming album by trumpeter Clyde Kerr Jr. He jammed with Summers during pianist Danielle Pappas’ teaching stint at the Institute.

“Kathy Anderson / The Times-Picayune

The first class to graduate from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance in New Orleans is composed of, from left, Jake Saslow, Gordon Au, Colin Stranahan, Vadim Neslovsky, Davy Mooney, Johnaye Kendrick and Joe Johnson.

A

JAZZ FOR THE AGES

What: A concert featuring Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance students and Ellis Marsalis, Leah Chase, Nicholas Payton, Herlin Riley and Bill Summers.

Where: Wednesday, 7 p.m.

Rousseau Performance Hall, Loyola University campus.

Tickets: $25 adults, $15 students. For more information and to purchase, call 504.861.2818 or 504.861.2813.

See JAZZ, Page 17
Institute’s artistic director, encouraged Mooney’s tendency to write music reminiscent of famed theatrical composer Stephen Sondheim.

“I’m a big Sondheim fan, and Terence heard that,” Mooney said. “In the past, I’ve been like, ‘I don’t know if that is respected in the jazz world.’ Which is a silly way to think. With Terence’s encouragement, I feel much more comfortable with it.”

Overall, Mooney said: “I’ve made so much progress as a musician and compositionally and in my confidence by interacting with these amazing people. Having to play on that level consistently, I can now exist in any playing situation. I feel better equipped to go out there. I have my own sound down.

“Now the question is, what do you do with it? How do you make a living with it?”

If he is admitted to the Manhattan School of Music, he and his wife will move back to New York. If not, they’ll probably stay in New Orleans, where the Monk Institute will audition players for its next class March 21.

“I wish I could apply again under a different name,” Mooney said. “It was an amazing experience.”