

# The Beat

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## White House Jam

**First Lady Michelle Obama welcomes jazz musicians, students as arts education funding takes on new urgency**

As First Lady Michelle Obama concluded her four-minute speech about the significance of jazz in the East Room of the White House on June 15, she gave a knowing nod to her daughters, Malia and Sasha, as they sat next to their grandmother. "I want to keep them alive and aware of all kinds of music other than hip-hop," Obama said.

"It so important that you are here," the First Lady continued, as she welcomed the 150 students from Washington, D.C., New Orleans and New York City performance schools to the kickoff of the White House Music Series. "So I brought them here as well." Then she recalled her own childhood in Chicago, where her grandfather used to play jazz in the house nearly 24 hours a day.

"Jazz has been a part of life since I was a little girl," Obama said. "Before there were room-to-room speakers, my grandfather had a speaker in every room in the house and played jazz at the highest volume that he could. That's how I grew up in my household."

Launched in the middle of Black Music Month, the series' one-time "jazz studios" were coordinated in partnership with the White House by Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Duke Ellington Jazz Festival and the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Later in the year, the White House will continue its Music Series by focusing on classical and country music.

An hour prior to Obama's speech, the stately rooms of the East Wing blared with sounds of young jazz hopefuls honing their crafts. The wing was transformed into four separate music clinics—"American History and Jazz," "Syntax of Jazz," "The Blues and Jazz" and "Duke Ellington and Swing"—as students gleaned technical and anecdotal advice from the Marsalises family (Wynton, Branford, Ellis, Dafeayo and Jason), members of Jazz at Lincoln Center



Michelle Obama and Zach Brown

Orchestra and Paquito D'Rivera.

In the East Room, the Marsalises, along with reedman D'Rivera and bassist Eric Revis, held court as they taught "The Blues and Jazz," with Wynton and Ellis doing most of talking.

"I always say, 'Put your hard hat on when you start playing jazz,' because it takes stamina and dedication to really do this work properly," Ellis said. Picking up on his father's avuncular demeanor, Wynton advised youngsters, "Never slink off looking mad at yourself after your solo."

As the clinic progressed, Wynton invited students to join the band on stage and improvise eight bars during a blues number. "When you play a chorus, I want you to concentrate on feeling where you are at that time," he said, before the band engaged in a swaggering mid-tempo piece that lured a parade of students to step up and show off their talents.

Ivan Rosenberg, a 17-year-old trumpeter from LaGuardia Arts High School in New York, was one of those who dared to take the stage; he even traded some high-register blasts with Wynton.

"Playing here is crazy—I couldn't have imagined doing something like this," Rosenberg said. "I was definitely nervous about being in the

White House, but Wynton made it very comfortable for people to come up on stage and just express themselves."

Ever since President Barack Obama revealed that his iPod contained Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Charlie Parker tracks, the American jazz scene has set hopes high that his endorsement will help boost jazz's audience and economic well being. It's an uphill battle. On the same day as the White House event, the National Endowment for the Arts published *Arts Participation: Highlights from a National Survey*, which revealed declining audience numbers for all performing arts, including jazz, ballet, classical music and museum attendance.

While some critics say that repairing the global economy takes higher priority than supporting the arts, Kyle Wedberg, interim president of New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, cited the importance of the arts in education.

"It's in the arts is where you bring those things together—thinking about building a stage set, thinking about sound design, thinking about music scores," Wedberg said. "Those rhythms that Wynton was teaching at the beginning about 6/4, 3/4, 4/4 swing—that's math. Those are the integrative steps of the arts. We need more of that, not less, in this country." —John Murph

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