

DOWN BEAT

Jazz, Blues & Beyond

March 1997 \$3.50
U.K. £2.50 Can. \$4.30

Jazz Sports Brings Watson, Celebrities To D.C. Junior High

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Kareem Abdul-Jabbar knows a good jam when he sees one, and also when he hears one. As national chairman of the Jazz Sports program, launched in South Central Los Angeles in 1995, the retired L.A. Laker is on a mission to help America's inner-city kids by encouraging them to choose rim shots over gun shots.

Last November, during the Thelonious Monk Institute's International Jazz Competition, Jazz Sports visited Washington's Shaw Junior High School, where saxophonist Bobby Watson performed with members of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at New England Conservatory before an assembly of youngsters.

The goal of Jazz Sports D.C. is to bring "jazz masters" into the schools, where they'll rehearse with students on a biweekly basis and eventually lead them in performances at Washington Bullets games during pregame and halftime breaks.

Watson, with a little help from Abdul-Jabbar and actor Billy Dee Williams, stirred up a little excitement in the assembly room, leading the Monk Institute at NEC septet through such numbers as "Jeanine," "Minority" and "It Don't Mean A Thing."

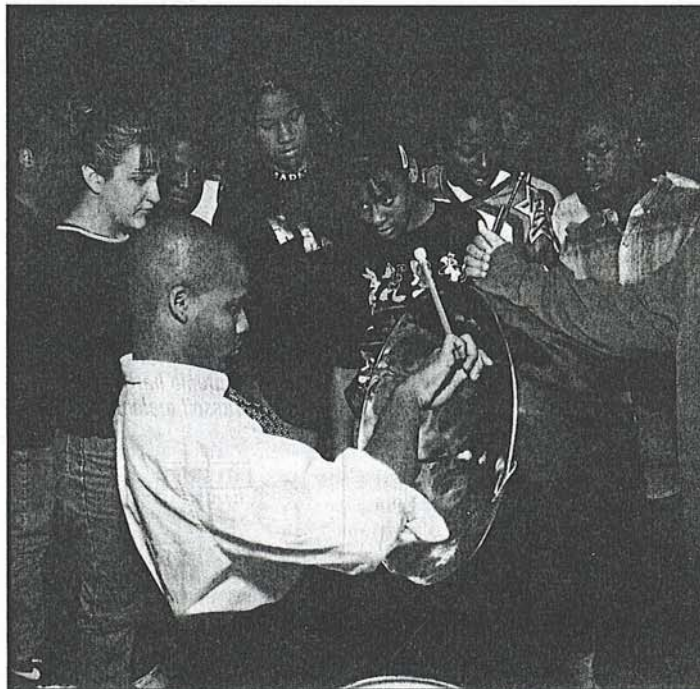
Between tunes, Watson offered some light educational fare. "What we're doing up here is making riffs," he explained. "That's stuff we put together behind the soloist to make him feel good." After an extended drum solo, Watson tipped off the audience to the non-verbal cue the drummer used to signal the band to come back in on the head. "He had a little secret code that only the band knows that tells us when to come back in. In jazz, we've got our own signals, just like in sports." Watson also ran through a humorous medley of the *Beverly Hillbillies* theme, the theme from *Star Trek* and "Happy Birthday" to demonstrate how any song can be played in a jazzy style.

Students also heard a performance of a Watson tune (written for the 29th Street Saxophone Quartet) by Washington's Ellington High School Saxophone Quartet, whom Watson joined for a short reprise.

After the musical portion, Abdul-Jabbar spoke of his love for jazz and stressed the importance of getting at-risk kids off the streets and into music. "Jazz is America's classical art form," he said. "It is so related to the African American experience that any inner-city kid will be able to relate if they're pointed in the right direction."

Jazz Sports D.C. is a public-private venture involving the NBA, the NEA, the Fannie Mae Foundation, Nissan Motor Corp., Washington Gas Light Co. and Black Entertainment Television.

—Ed Enright



Top: Bobby Watson plays one of his tunes with Washington's Ellington High School Saxophone Quartet. Bottom: Sean Thomas, drummer with the Monk Institute at NEC, plays steel drums for curious students.