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Jazz tribute shows great beat goes on

Nissan Presents:
A Celebration
of America's Music
ABC, Saturday, 9 p.m. ET/PT
★★★ (out of four)

By Steve Jones
USA TODAY

It's not often you see a music show where the emphasis is on playing instead of preening and on collaboration instead of competition.

But that's what you get on this second annual program benefiting the Thelonious Monk Institute: great musicians and singers paying tribute to the jazz masters who inspired them.

A Celebration of America's Music, taped in October at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts with Vice President Al Gore and wife Tipper in attendance, has been edited into a fast-moving hour that minimizes the chitchat and lets the artists jam.

Elastic-voiced Al Jarreau, who has long made Dave Brubeck's monster hit *Take 5* a staple of his concerts, joins the legendary pianist on stage for the first time. Together they give an electrifying performance of jazz's first million-selling song.

In addition to Brubeck, musical props are given to Monk,

TV Preview

Dizzy Gillespie, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Wes Montgomery, Wayne Shorter and Ella Fitzgerald. Each tribute offers ample opportunities for exciting combinations of players.

Vocalists Diana Krall (on piano) and Nnenna Freelon trade lines on Monk's bopping *In Walked Bud*, backed by a band that includes fluegelhornist Clark Terry, pianist Jacky Terrasson, bassist Ron Carter and Monk's son T.S. Monk on drums.

Solos by George Benson (*Tequila*) and Lee Ritenour (*Four on Six*) honor Montgomery, whose unique style of playing (with his thumb instead of a pick) is spotlighted by deft camera work focused on Benson's fingers.

But the program's highlight comes during the tribute to Fitzgerald: Aretha Franklin energizes *How High the Moon*, after which the unfailingly elegant Nancy Wilson turns in a dreamy reading of Johnny Mercer's *Midnight Sun*.

Host Bill Cosby, assisted by assorted stars, introduces and gives historical perspective to the various segments. But the celebrities simply serve to bridge the gaps between performances; they always step quickly aside to let the music play.