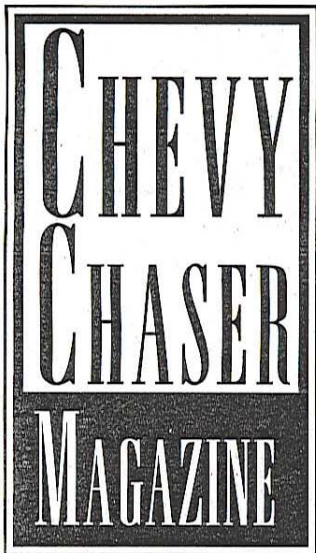


Passing on the Jazz



JUNE 2005

Lexington

by **Blake Hannon**

In the first half of the 20th century swing was king, but that doesn't mean there aren't people trying to spread the good word on jazz to today's youth. Lexington high school students got a good sample of what jazz was all about when the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz brought its "Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum" to Lafayette High School in May.

The Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz is a non-profit organization for jazz education. Thelonius S. Monk Jr. founded it in 1986 in memory of his father, the legendary jazz pianist and composer. The institute offers young jazz musicians college-level training from legendary American jazz players like Herbie Hancock and Clark Terry. Monk, an accomplished jazz drummer and bandleader of his own septet, is chairman of the board of trustees for the institute. He was lucky to benefit from his constant exposure to jazz through his father's career and frequent visits from Monk Sr.'s notable friends (Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie), yet he realizes that many of today's youth aren't aware of the cultural impact that jazz has had on our country.

"The history of jazz in a lot of ways reflects a lot of the social change in America," Monk said. "My belief is that that part of musical history is as much a part of American culture as the flag."

This belief about the impact of jazz on our nation's music and history led to developing the institute's many educational programs, including Jazz in America. The program, conceived in February 2000 as an Internet-based jazz curriculum for students in 5th, 8th, and 11th grades, is sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the U.S. Department of Education. It travels to public schools across the country and has made stops in nearly 20 states so far. Its first trip to the Bluegrass came on May 9 at Lafayette High School. Lafayette's music program has won numerous awards over the years, so it was an ideal match.

"People kept directing me to this school," said Sarah Andrew Wilson, special projects coordinator for the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz.

The first portion of the program involved personal interaction and instruction between the performers and the music classes. Bobby Watson, an alto saxophonist who is best known as a former member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, lent a master's touch to the school's jazz band.

For a person who has released over 50 jazz recordings, and established as he is in the jazz world, Watson had no problem mixing it up with the students, learning their names and giving note-for-note instruction. Being an instructor is nothing new to Watson. He has taught at the Manhattan

School of Music and is currently the Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He immediately created a fun and open atmosphere while dropping the occasional, "That was swingin'," or, "Hit'em with that thing!" as the band played a number by Count Basie.

While Watson took the wheel as musical director for the class, the touring rhythm section—Danny Grissett on piano, Derek Nievergelt on bass, and Otis Brown III on drums—sat in giving hands-on instruction to students and playing along with the tunes. All three have benefited from or are direct products of the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz. Grissett and Nievergelt are graduates and Brown was selected to attend the Thelonius Monk Institute Summer Jazz Colony in Aspen, Colo.

Although Watson and the other musicians only spent an hour with the jazz band, the students gained immediate benefit from their presence.

"I really enjoy it. Anytime I can get help, I love it," said Jake Reber, a junior bass guitar player who got special instruction from Nievergelt. "It's refreshing, and you get to see another person's point of view."

Michael Westneat, a sophomore alto saxophone player, could hear the difference made by the musicians' input.

"It was fun. I learned a lot," Westneat said. "I thought we sounded better after he worked with us."

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- JAKE REBER, LAFAYETTE JUNIOR



Musician Leonard Brown shares tips with a student.

PHOTO BY RACHEL FRENCH

John Richardson, Lafayette's Jazz Band director, said both hearing and seeing the sound of jazz was a good lesson for his students.

"They're not just listening, they can see what goes on as well," Richardson said. "Sometimes there is a connection, physically and aurally, at the same time."

"It's not often you have world-class musicians come to your town like this," said Jonathan Willmarth, assistant jazz band director at Lafayette. "I think it's a once in a lifetime opportunity for students to interact with Bobby Watson. He's a jazz icon."

The high school jazz band wasn't the only group that got special instruction. Lisa Brown, winner of the 1994 Thelonius Jazz International Jazz Vocals Competition, treated one of the school's vocal classes to a few lessons in improvisation and the art of jazz scat. Even with her limited exposure to the students, she noted the progress that has already been made by the school's instructors.

"Those teachers have obviously put in lots of incredible time with those kids," Brown said. "I just applaud them so much."

The highlight of Jazz in America's visit came when Watson, Henry, and the other musicians put on an hour-long concert in the auditorium for the entire school. Although the students were looking forward to time away from the classroom, they greeted the assembly with uncertainty, something that Watson has noticed while touring public schools with Jazz in America.

"At first, they don't know what to expect," Watson said. "They're always a little apprehensive."

It didn't take long for the apprehension to wear off as Watson, Henry, and the band grabbed the crowd's attention with songs by Victor Lewis and Herbie Hancock, on which Watson delivered lightning fast and melodic saxophone solos. During the assembly, the performers capitalized on the students' enthusiasm for the music to educate them about jazz. J.B. Dyas, project director for Jazz in America, incorporated a learning session, "What is Jazz?"

Dyas, with a piece of jazz sheet music projected on the wall and assistance from the musicians onstage, dissected the anatomy of a jazz song into something music students could understand and appreciate. After a question-and-answer session with Watson and the band, they closed with a rousing interpretation of "The Flintstones" theme that earned a standing ovation from the students.

"We'll have young people come up to us and say, 'Well, I didn't think I liked jazz, but jazz is pretty cool,'" Brown said. "They're just always very pleasantly surprised at what they thought jazz was versus what it is, and it is this very wonderful, moving, evolving thing."

The aspects of jazz that appeal most to students are improvisation and the idea that a person can say whatever they want through their instrument and be accepted because of the creative freedom that jazz allows.

"Jazz is the one place where you get to make your own personal Picasso," Brown said.

While jazz allows its players to create their own masterpieces, jazz itself is a unique musical art that got its start in the U.S., a fact that Watson believes makes the Jazz in America program vital to today's youth.

"It's America's only original art form and it is something that should be taught in schools along with American history because it's part of American culture," Watson said.

As Jazz in America continues to tour public schools, its principals are confident that jazz outreach has just begun to hit its stride.

"I think that we have entered an era of appreciation of jazz in this country," Monk said. "Jazz education is here to stay, and it has never been here before."

Even after the music stopped at Lafayette High School and students filed out of the auditorium to head back to class, Watson said he hopes they take a piece of what he and his band gave to them onstage beyond the high school and into the real world.

"If you're going to be a member of society, a thinking member of this America, you got to have some jazz in your life," Watson said. "Even if you don't understand it, you've got to be able to appreciate it." 🎷

For more information on the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz or Jazz in America, go www.monkinstitute.org or www.jazzin-america.org.