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Jazzing around

Music tour strikes chord with local students

By **MOLLY WILLIAMSON**

State Journal Staff Writer

Jazz saxophonist Bobby Watson could not believe his ears.

After performing for Franklin County High School Tuesday morning, a young man approached him and asked to play with Watson and his crew from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz that afternoon for Elkhorn Middle School.

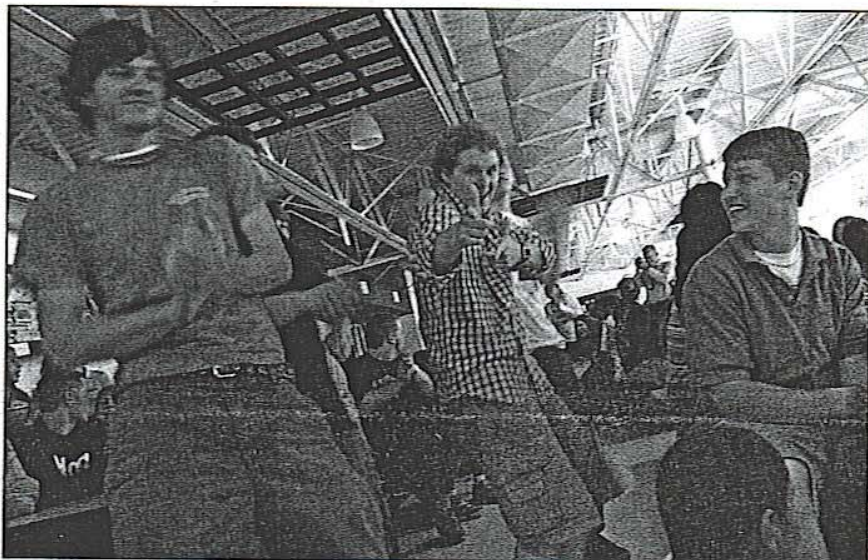
"I thought he was kidding, but after the master class and playing a couple of songs with him, I thought, 'He's not bad,'" Watson said.

So, juniors Christopher Monsanto and Claude Smith brought their dance moves and instruments to Elkhorn to jam with the professional. See **JAZZ**, A7



State Journal/Suzanne Feliciano

Jazz saxophonist Bobby Watson was named #1 Alto Sax Player and Musician of the Year in *Downbeat* magazine's Critic's Poll and headlined appearances at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. Watson directed Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers early in his career as well as played with the likes of Maynard Ferguson, Lou Rawls, Rufus and Chaka Khan, Sam Rivers, Max Roach, Wynton Marsalis, Joe Williams over the past 25 years. He also wrote the musical score for Robert DeNiro's film "A Bronx Tale."



Franklin County High School Jazz Band students Sam Kessler, left, Derek Hughes, center, both 17, and Michael Watson, 16, seated right, clapped and danced to jazz played Tuesday during a presentation of Jazz in America at Elkhorn Middle School.

FCHS music students Chris Monsanto, right, and Claude Smith, both 17, jammed Tuesday with jazz saxophonist Bobby Watson, center left, and jazz vocalist Lisa Henry, left, during the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz presentation of Jazz in America at Elkhorn Middle School.



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musicians. They were only the second group of high school students to play with the musicians in Watson's seven years touring.

"They had the right spirit," Watson said. "They weren't shy. It was so awesome. I thought it was nice to be able to inspire someone and give them an experience they'll never forget."

As for the boys, they called the opportunity "random." The only instructions they received were the scale and encouragement to wail.

"It was a lot of fun," Monsanto said. "I thought it would be cool to get up and play in front of everyone with professional musicians."

The concerts were only part of the day's events. The Thelonious Monk Institute for Jazz came into central Kentucky this week to travel to Lexington, Frankfort and Louisville schools teaching students about jazz. With its Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum program. The tour was underwritten by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Franklin County and Elkhorn each received a schoolwide assembly where Jazz in America Program Director J.B. Dyas told them how jazz is America's only truly art form, born and raised here. He said it is a "perfect democracy" because jazz allows musicians the freedom to play whatever they want as long as it makes the whole group sound better.

During the day the musicians visited Franklin County music classrooms, helping high-schoolers improve their technique and expression.

Watson, bassist Derek Nievergelt, pianist Danny Grissett and drummer Otis Brown III taught the jazz band class.

"We are all new to jazz, so they gave us a strong foundation," said junior Derek Hughes, a jazz band member. "They taught us how a good jazz band should sound."

Some of their tips included tonguing and slurring to give the music a more jazzy feel, Smith said.

They worked semi-individually with each student or each section, giving them little ways to improve, said Jason Carroll, junior.

"They basically told us everything we were doing wrong – they weren't mean about it or anything – and by the time they left, we sounded like a totally different jazz band," Carroll said.

The musicians also taught the students how to give songs "more life," and how to play with more feeling, said Natalie Brown, senior.

That was the same message Lisa Henry, jazz singer, was giving to the Franklin County chorus. She told them to not always focus on the notes, but to work on conveying the emotion of the song, said Leslie Renfrow, senior.

After that, the choir "came alive," said Danielle Fetter, junior. She said instead of just standing there singing with their arms at their sides, they were moving and clapping.

Henry also talked about how it is often difficult to balance a music career with family and spiritual life, but if the students truly wanted to make it, they needed to conquer their fears and go for it.

"There was a quote I like," Fetter said. "It was something like, 'Don't get used to doing what you're used to.' It kind of inspired me because I need to get out of my comfort zone when I sing, because when I perform, I get nervous. She told me to focus on entertaining the audience because when they leave, they will not be talking about your technique, they will be talking about how you made them feel."

After Henry's presentation, Renfrow felt like she was going to cry. That is because Henry really made the senior think about how her dream of becoming a country music artist could be a reality. It also was because the singer encouraged Renfrow to examine the solo she plans to sing at the concert next Thursday and see what it means to her.

She will sing "This Little Light of Mine" in the concert and said it means a lot to her because she grew up singing in church and when she thinks of the song, she thinks of "littie bitty" kids. It will be her last solo in her last high school concert.

Henry also told Renfrow to "belt it out."

"She said she could see it in my eyes, that I have it in me to belt it out," Renfrow said. "It helped because now I'm not afraid. I was scared at first, but now I am like, 'If you don't like it, oh well, OK.' I am not there to impress anyone. I am there to do my job and sing."

Renfrow said Henry is "amazing."

"If I could sing like that, I would not have a problem singing in front of people," Renfrow said.

Elkhorn eighth-grader Natalee Cleveland also was moved by Henry's performance at the concert. She stood up and yelled, "Go girl," as Henry sang.

"I don't really get to hear this stuff that often and she can sing," Cleveland said.

The audience got into the songs, some got up and danced and each soloist received hearty applause and cheers.

"I'm loving it," said William Leach, eighth-grader. "This is a new thing to me and it has a really upbeat feeling. It makes you want to get up and dance or do something. I never knew I liked jazz."

He was pounding out the rhythm on the table in front of him and others watched in amazement.

"So many of us are used to hip-hop, rap or pop and this is something new, a chance to have some fun," Leach said. "You usually don't get to hear music in the middle of school."

That is exactly what the musicians want to see and hear, said Nievergelt. He said the reason the musicians tour and work with high school students is because they love to see students' "eyes light up" and they want to pass on a love of jazz.

Franklin County freshman Lawryn Breckel said she thinks many more people will join the jazz band following the concert because now they know how good jazz can sound.



State Journal/Suzanne Feliciano

Jazz is a “musical conversation,” an improvisation, conveying emotions about thoughts and ideas so deep there are no words to express them, stated J.B. Dyas, project director, Jazz in America. Students at Elkhorn Middle School tasted the “conversation” played Tuesday by, from left, pianist Danny Grissett, vocalist Lisa Henry, bassist Derek Nievergelt, saxophonist Bobby Watson and drummer Otis Brown III as part of Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum.