

THE MISSISSIPPI PRESS

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2005

OPINION

Gautier Middle, Moss Point and the Grammys

Along with the decline of decency and manners in America, more than a few folks have mourned the decline of the culture, not only in terms of morality, but in the context of the definition of excellence.

Two happenings in recent days — on local and national stages respectively — spark at least a glimmer of hope that we haven't completely lost our way.

First, at Gautier Middle School, The Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz, thanks to help from Northrop Grumman Ship Systems, brought some of the world's most gifted musicians to the Gulf Coast as part of its Jazz in America national jazz curriculum.

As a quintet fronted by world-renowned saxophonist Bobby Watson wailed, an audience of youngsters at Gautier Middle School cheered, clapped, patted their feet, even danced in their seats.

Thelonius Monk Jr., the son of the legendary jazz pianist Thelonius Monk, and spokesman for the institute, watched with quiet satisfaction, as the children whistled their approval.

Kids, honest-to-the-core critics they are, knew real talent when they heard it, proving that their sponge-like sensibilities haven't been completely snuffed out by headbanging heavy metal and X-rated rap.

Many of the youngsters, new to America's most democratic musical form — in jazz, the individual flourishes without sacrificing the good of the whole — as well as the veteran musicians, seem to understand the Greek definition of happiness. "The full use of your powers along lines of excellence," as President Kennedy put it.

The same, it seems was true at Sunday night's Grammy Awards. Aside from the local tie — Moss Point High's Associate Band Director Ayatey Shabazz orchestrated some of the music at the ceremony — excellence won big, with the late Ray Charles honored with eight awards.

Charles, who died last year, could do it all — blues, R&B, country, pop, rock n' roll — with a sensitivity and first-rate musicianship that respected the music and its audience.

While there's more than a little to worry about in terms of America's cultural soul, the cheers of the kids at Gautier Middle and the gold heaped upon the late musical legend give us good reasons to get up and dance.