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COMMENTARY



STEVE PENN

At center of a jazz universe

This has been a pretty good week for jazz in Kansas City.

On Wednesday, officials unveiled the lineup for the Rhythm and Ribs Jazz Festival, Kansas City's newest musical event. The festival, slated for June 17-19 at Parade Park and the American Jazz Museum, is sure to reinvigorate a jazz scene sorely in need of some new momentum.

One day earlier, I saw another sign of the scene's positive future when the students at Paseo Academy had a ball interacting with jazz educators Thelonious Monk Jr. and Bobby Watson.

Monk's Institute of Jazz presented a "Tribute to Kansas City Jazz" performance that included a set with master pianist Jay McShann, singer Lisa Henry and Watson, a saxophonist and director of the University of Missouri-Kansas City's jazz program. It was videotaped for broadcast on BET.

Before the concert, Paseo music instructor Russell Davis invited Watson to critique his jazz band.

First the 16-member band played the challenging "The Day We Call It Night." Watson noticed their proficiency.

"You all sound good," he said. "Take it again from the top."

By the time the students completed the song a second time, Watson knew exactly which passages they needed to emphasize.

"You're hitting your accents good," he said. "You're tight. You all sound like a jazz band. Most high school bands don't do that. Now I want you to start exaggerating your dynamics more. And don't get any louder."

During one interlude, the saxophones weren't hitting their grace notes effectively. Watson demonstrated how it should be done on his own horn before requiring each saxophonist to try the passage individually. Then he paused to compliment the drummer.

"You control the dynamics," Watson told him. "You swing. You push the band. I'm impressed."

The band's pianist, senior Alifa O'Neal, appreciated all the tips.

"Bobby is an excellent instructor," Alifa said. "To have a guy like Bobby come around and teach us some things is truly a blessing."

Just outside the practice room, students clamored around Monk as if he were a rap star.

"Right now is a good time for jazz education," Monk told me. "I'm seeing the same enthusiasm everywhere. I visit high schools from coast to coast. Every high school wants a jazz band. That represents where jazz is in our cultural psyche."

Monk believes he knows why so many young people are choosing to play jazz.

It has to do with issues "of individuality, with teamwork and with self-expression," he said. "In jazz you find that all these dynamics are present, the dynamics that drive jazz drive hip hop."

Monk holds deep respect for Kansas City's musical roots.

"Kansas City is truly one of the centers of the jazz universe," Monk said. "It's perhaps the first true center."

Monk learned the significance of Kansas City from his father, who was considered a musical genius.

"I know this because of my father's personal history," Monk said. "He left high school as a teenager to go on the road to find a way to get to Kansas City. He finally did come with a gospel group. My mother and family all agree the Thelonious Monk that emerged from Kansas City was a different man," he said.

First Paseo students get coaching from jazz masters, then Kansas City gears up for a new jazz festival. This week's good news shows that the local jazz scene is moving in the right direction.