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Hypnotic harmonies jazz up the halls at Hillside

Students get schooled in influential genre, learn that jazz is much more than just the music

BY STANLEY B. CHAMBERS JR.
STAFF WRITER

Jazz isn't just snazzy talk, dark glasses and finger-snapping beats. The music genre is nothing less than the soul of America, explained Thelonious Monk Jr., a jazz artist, to more than 100 students at Hillside High School recently.

Students in social studies, English and arts classes were exposed to an "informance" — a mini-concert and lesson — on jazz as the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz brought with it to Durham "Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum."

The tour, with stops in Rocky Mount, Raleigh and Charlotte, also celebrates the organization's 20th anniversary and the birthday of the institute's namesake, who was born in Rocky Mount and would have turned 89 this past Tuesday.

The curriculum, geared toward fifth-, eighth- and 11th-grade students, presents a history of jazz and focuses on the social, economic and political circumstances in which the genre has evolved. The course also shows how jazz influences today's popular music, said Monk Jr., the institute's board chairman.

"[Youth] gravitate towards jazz because it's partially related to hip-hop," Monk Jr. said. "Hip-hop is about teams of people where the individual is just as important as the team and the team is just as important as the individual. Today's youth is into diversity, and jazz is about inclusion and tolerance."

Students and teachers in the auditorium shook their heads and clapped their hands as Lisa Henry sang and Bobby Watson played the saxophone with a rhythm section (piano, bass and drums) behind them. Enchanted by the music, students Lataisha Surratt, Jessica Grady and Roytisha Nelson danced in their seats and recited Henry's lyrics as if they had written them.

Lataisha, 18, was into the music and the instruments. Jessica, 16, is used to hearing



Alto saxophonist and jazz great Bobby Watson and bass player Derek Nievergelt play for students at Hillside High School. The two musicians were touring schools in North Carolina this week as part of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, a nonprofit educational organization established to teach and inspire young people.

So who is Thelonious Monk?

Thelonious Sphere Monk, a jazz pianist and composer, was born in Rocky Mount in 1917. He recorded songs with musicians such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and Sonny Rollins. John Coltrane performed with Monk as part of the Thelonious Monk Quartet. Monk is one of only four jazz musicians to appear on the cover of Time magazine. The Smithsonian Institute has archived his music, and the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in his honor. Monk died in 1982.

SOURCE: THELONIOUS MONK INSTITUTE OF JAZZ

jazz: Her father is a jazz musician. Roytisha, 16, listened to the genre growing up.

"I can get into what's going on the stage, it's more uptempo," Roytisha said.

J.B. Dyas, the institute's vice president for education and curriculum development, gave a lesson on how a jazz song comes together and the role of each instrument. Watson, the saxophonist, explained how mistakes are a gateway to discovery for

TO LEARN MORE:

For more information on the institute, go to www.monkinstitute.org or www.jazzinamerica.org.

jazz musicians — demonstrating his point with a tired musician's rendering of "Amazing Grace." The crowd loved it.

The "informance" concluded with a tune most students were familiar with: the theme song to

The Flintstones cartoon.

It was a pleasant experience for senior Na'im Butler.

"Just to hear [Henry] 'skat' and [for musician Derek Nievergelt] to do different things on the bass, it sounded remarkable," said Na'im, 17.

The curriculum, with elements of history, English, science and math, enhances the learning

process for students, said Principal Earl Pappy.

"When students can get a historical perspective on how today's culture and society is formed, it's a very good, enlightening piece," Pappy said.

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Hillside High students Jessica Grady, left, and Lataisha Surratt clap to the jazz beat of alto saxophonist Bobby Watson and his band.

STAFF PHOTOS BY SHAWN ROCCO