

DOWNBEAT

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Monk Institute Brings Peer Groups, Musical Mentors Together

The Thelonious Monk Institute has taken another step in bringing student musicians outside of their musical—and geographic—comfort zones.

In weeklong stints from late March through early May, the organization's peer-to-peer program brought New Orleans high school student musicians to Miami, Chicago teenage musicians to Salt Lake City and Los Angeles high school musicians to Anchorage, Alaska. Along with interacting with their like-minded, if geographically distant, counterparts, the students also learned from such professional mentors as saxophonists Antonio Hart and Bobby Watson and vocalist Lisa Henry.

"We take kids from public performing arts high schools and put them together with a jazz master, where they tour after they've learned the artist's material," said J.B. Dyas, vice president of education and curriculum development at the institute. "They're hipping their peers to jazz."

Dyas said other benefits felt more immediate. "We took an ethnically diverse group from Chicago to hang out with Salt Lake City peers, and they found out that they have far more in common than differences," Dyas said.

Students who participated in the program were amazed with the generosity of their musical leaders. Oliver Bonie, 17, an alto saxophone player at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, felt that Hart was especially encouraging.

"Antonio would open us up to new stuff, giving us what we needed, and his playing inspired us," Bonie said. "When he said something, he said it was his opinion, not the way it absolutely had to be."

Sammy Miller, 16, a drummer at Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, felt the same way about working with Watson and Henry in Alaska.

"Bobby Watson wanted to help all of us and give us tips, and he let us be creative while staying true to his music," Miller said. "It's hard not to smile when Lisa is singing. Her advice was you have to be open to all the opportunities that are open to you."

Watson felt equally strong about the students, saying that all the musicians in the program are "serious, devoted and have done an amazing amount of homework."

—Aaron Cohen