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Snug Harbor sets mark Monk Institute students' graduation

ALL THAT JAZZ

By Keith Spera
Music writer

The curtain drops on "The Real World: Jazz" this weekend.

For two years, seven strangers studied, rehearsed, traveled and gigged together as the 2007-09 class of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Theirs was the first class of the prestigious graduate-level jazz education program to be based at Loyola University.

On Saturday, their reality show-like adventure concludes with a final performance at Snug Harbor. Guitarist Davy Mooney, the only one of the seven who previously had lived in New Orleans, stages his own farewell at Snug Harbor on Wednesday.

Mooney and five classmates plan to move to New York in the coming weeks. Only vocalist Johnaye Kendrick will remain.

"We're ready to get started in life and go out and play," bassist Joe Johnson said. "There will be moments when we look back and miss the program. But, right now, everybody is interested in getting started in the real world."

Founded in 1986 and previously based in Los Angeles, the Monk Institute's artistic director is New Orleans trumpeter Terence Blanchard. When Johnson applied to the program, he was enrolled at the University of North Texas in Dallas and working as country legend Ray Price's bassist. He grew up in Kansas City and knew little about New Orleans.

"It took awhile to grow on me because it's such a different place," Johnson, 25, said. "My first Mardi Gras and first Jazz Fest is when I fell in love with it."

"The city fosters the arts and appreciates musicians. They treat musicians better than in other cities. They want to hear you play. I'd be walking through the French Quarter and hear, 'Hey, bass man, where you playing?'"

New Orleans was also a mystery to Kendrick, 26, a San Diego native. Her high school jazz ensemble visited once and attended a show at Preservation Hall. "I remember sitting on the floor looking at these great musicians — it was so beautiful," she said.

She since has performed at the hall with the Monk Institute. "It was surreal to be on the other side of the stage."

As the only woman and only singer in her class, Kendrick initially felt self-conscious. But because she reads and writes music, "Terence said I was perfect for this group because I could change the perception of vocalists," she said. Her classmates "would try to stomp me, bringing in the hardest vocal parts. That al-



The first graduating class of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz in New Orleans, from left, Jake Saslow, Gordon Au, Colin Stranahan, Vadim Neselovskyi, Davy Mooney, Johnaye Kendrick and Joe Johnson.

lowed me to grow so much. They're all great musicians with special gifts."

Ordinarily, a singer would surround herself with like-minded musicians. With the institute, "we were all put together even though we came from different places," Kendrick said. "The challenge was to meet in the middle and incorporate all seven views. It made us much better musicians."

Johnson agreed. "Sometimes it could be difficult to relate personally and musically," he said. "But we understood that we had different backgrounds. And that created a bond."

Visiting instructors included saxophonist Wayne Shorter, guitarists Kurt Rosenwinkel and John Scofield, and vocalists Kurt Elling and Nnenna Freelon. Blanchard spent a week each month with the students.

"I felt like a little jazz princess. I got to meet these legends and have one-on-one time with them," Kendrick said. "I wouldn't have that opportunity if not for the institute."

Interacting with visiting instructors "could turn into a friendship or, sometimes, animosity," Johnson said. "Within the group, we've maintained a balanced relationship even through some tense times. It was a great life experience, in addition to a music experience."

Previously, Kendrick worked as an overnight manager at a Chicago Walgreens and sang on the side. In New Orleans, she has performed with pianist Jesse McBride and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra. She has a regular Thursday night gig at Irvin

THELONIOUS MONK INSTITUTE OF JAZZ FAREWELL

What: The final performance by the 2007-09 jazz performance class.

When: Saturday, 8 and 10 p.m.

Where: Snug Harbor, 626 Frenchmen St., 504.949.0696.

Tickets: \$20 at the door.

What else: Guitarist Davy Mooney performs at Snug Harbor on Wednesday.

Mayfield's Jazz Playhouse in the Royal Sonesta, and sings most Fridays with Ellis Marsalis at Snug Harbor.

"In two years, I'm making a living with music," she said. "It's been a lot easier than if I had stayed in Chicago."

She plans to maintain New Orleans as her base for at least a year while making forays to the Big Apple. She'll join trumpeter Nicholas Payton's band there for an engagement at Birdland this month.

"I'm in love with New Orleans," Kendrick said. "I'm performing regularly and living comfortably. To go to New York at this point — I don't think it's time for me yet."

On Saturday, she anticipates a bittersweet farewell to her New York-bound classmates.

"It's going to be like saying good-bye to six brothers," she said. "I'm so sad. I didn't want it to end. It's been a really beautiful journey."

"But I'm ready to be on my own and do my own thing."