

The Times-Picayune

March 6, 2009



Thelonious Monk graduates join jazz greats to make music for a good cause

PASSING THE TORCH

Nicholas Payton is among the local jazz greats playing Wednesday for a concert to benefit the Old Algiers Riverfest.



KATHY ANDERSON / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE



COURTESY OF THE THELONIOUS MONK INSTITUTE OF JAZZ

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

By Keith Spera
Music writer

As Davy Mooney's two-year tenure in the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance draws to a close, the guitarist is looking forward to sleeping again. Mooney landed one of seven slots in the prestigious graduate-level jazz education program in 2007, the year the institute moved from the University of California, Los Angeles to Loyola University in New Orleans. It's been a whirlwind ever since.

On Mardi Gras weekend, Mooney and his classmates returned from a seven-day trip to India, sponsored by the State Department, with Herbie Hancock, George Duke and several legislators. Days later, he took part in a midnight jam session at Snug Harbor. Hours after that, he caught an early morning flight to New York to audition for the doctoral program at the Manhattan School of Music.

"That was brutal," Mooney said. "I got zero sleep. We went from India jet lag right into Mardi Gras."

The rest of the semester is equally hectic. On Saturday and Sunday the Monk students will appear at Soul Fest at the Audubon Zoo (see Page 26). This

spring they'll play the French Quarter Festival, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and a festival in Ukraine.

And for Wednesday's "Jazz for the Ages" concert at Roussel Hall on the Loyola campus, they're paired with a succession of local jazz luminaries, including pianist Ellis Marsalis, vocalist Leah Chase, trumpeter Nicholas Payton, drummer Herlin Riley and percussionist Bill Summers. Proceeds benefit the Old Algiers Riverfest, a free festival of traditional jazz April 4-5.

JAZZ FOR THE AGES

What: A concert featuring Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance students and Ellis Marsalis, Leah Chase, Nicholas Payton, Herlin Riley and Bill Summers.

When: Wednesday, 7 p.m.
Where: Roussel Performance Hall, Loyola University campus

Tickets: In advance, \$10 adults, \$5 students. At the door, \$15 adults, \$8 students. Call 504.362.8813 to purchase.

Mooney has a history with the concert's featured guests. He studied with Marsalis and Chase at the University of New Orleans. He recorded with Riley on an upcoming album by trumpeter Clyde Kerr Jr. He jammed with Summers during pianist Danilo Perez's teaching stint at the institute.

"And growing up here," Mooney said, "Nicholas Payton was like a god. He still is. He's up on a pedestal."

Mooney split his high school years at Ben Franklin and the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. He earned an undergraduate degree from the University of North Texas, then returned to New Orleans in 2001

and plunged into the local club scene. He gigged with the Hot Club of New Orleans and Rick Trolsen's Gringo do Choro, among others.

He later enrolled in the UNO master's program and joined its Louis Armstrong Quintet. Not long after he graduated in the summer of 2005, Hurricane Katrina chased him to New York. Acceptance into the Monk Institute gave him a reason to move back home.

In May, Mooney and his six classmates — players from California, Kansas City, Denver, New York and the Ukraine — will become the first class to graduate from the Monk Institute since its move to New Orleans. Over the past two years, they have studied with guest instructors including saxophonist Wayne Shorter, guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel, vocalist Kurt Elling, guitarist John Scofield — who recorded his new "Piety Street" album while in town — and singer Nnenna Freelon, among many others.

"They all have a totally different teaching style and expect different things from you," Mooney said. "The end result is that, in a good way, you're like, 'I'm going to do what I want.' You find out what you do, and not cater to what somebody else might want, because it's different for everybody."

"And maybe that's the point of the Monk Institute. Maybe I stumbled on it."

Trumpeter Terence Blanchard, the Monk

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Institute's artistic director, encouraged Mooney's tendency to write music reminiscent of famed theatrical composer Stephen Sondheim.

"I'm a big Sondheim fan, and Terence heard that," Mooney said. "In the past, I've been like, 'I don't know if that is respected in the jazz world.' Which is a silly way to think. With Terence's encouragement, I feel much more comfortable with it."

Overall, Mooney said: "I've made so much progress as a musician and compositionally and in my confidence by interacting with these amazing people. Hav-

ing to play on that level consistently, I can now exist in any playing situation. I feel better equipped to go out there. I have my own sound down.

"Now the question is, what do you do with it? How do you make a living with it?"

If he is admitted to the Manhattan School of Music, he and his wife will move back to New York. If not, they'll probably stay in New Orleans, where the Monk Institute will audition players for its next class March 21.

"I wish I could apply again under a different name," Mooney said. "It was an amazing experience."