

## Bill Clinton is lauded at all-star jazz gala. But he left his sax at home.



Former President Bill Clinton receives an award and is flanked by Thelonious Monk Jr., left, Quincy Jones and Herbie Hancock. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

By **MIKAEL WOOD**

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**T**o get it out of the way right at the top: No, he didn't play saxophone. But that hardly stopped Bill Clinton from strutting across the stage of the Dolby Theatre like a true-blue jazz cat.

And how could you blame him?

By the time he appeared Sunday night to accept an award at the all-star gala presented annually by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, the former president had been described by no less an authority than Quincy Jones as "the real deal."



Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times  
Quincy Jones makes his opening remarks at the Thelonious Monk Institute's annual All Star Gala at the Dolby Theatre.



Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times  
Dee Dee Bridgewater at the Thelonious Monk Institute's All Star Gala at the Dolby Theatre on Nov. 9, 2014.



Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times  
Bluesman Taj Mahal plays at the Thelonious Monk Institute's All Star Gala.



Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times  
Guitarist John Mayer.



Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times  
Pharrell Williams banter with Herbie Hancock, who is chairman of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

Herbie Hancock went further, referring to the man who famously brandished his instrument on "The Arsenio Hall Show" as "the commander in chief of swing." Alas, the shower of compliments — just one of several on this evening of high-powered back-slapping — wasn't enough to get Clinton on the horn. Insisting he could no longer "put two notes together," the former president instead spoke about the important role jazz had played in his life and the need for jazz education in schools.

He got a musician's reception all the same.

In truth, nobody needed to lament Clinton's demurrals.

Sunday's event, which also served as the final round of the Monk Institute's International Jazz Trumpet Competition, was packed with players eager to play, not least the three young trumpeters vying for a \$25,000 scholarship and a recording contract with the Concord Music Group.

This year's winner — selected by a panel of judges that included Jones, Roy Hargrove and Arturo Sandoval — was 27-year-old Marquis Hill of Chicago, who performed soulful renditions of the standards "If I Were a Bell" and "Polka Dots and Moonbeams."



Sax player Joshua Redman. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

But, of course, Hill and his competitors were psyched; they'd suddenly found themselves onstage in the room that hosts the Academy Awards ceremony. More surprising was blues veteran Taj Mahal's intensity, rare at buttoned-up gigs like this one, in a ferocious version of Robert Johnson's "Dust My Broom" that also featured John Mayer on guitar.

Ditto an insistent, pinprick-like solo by Wayne Shorter, who joined Hancock, saxophonist Jimmy Heath and vibraphonist Stefon Harris, among others, for a sprightly take on Lionel Hampton's "Flying Home."

Pharrell Williams got the audience to stand during his performance of his unavoidable "Happy," which he turned into a funky vamp as he and Hancock lauded each other's work. (Turns out, the young hip-hop star named his son after the older pianist's 1983 hit "Rockit.")

And Chaka Khan sang a vivid, if oddly cheerful, version of "I Loves You, Porgy."



Queen Latifah. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

Queen Latifah was less captivating in a drowsy "Georgia Rose," and Dianne Reeves didn't do much to refresh "Our Love Is Here to Stay" (even if Clinton could be seen swaying to the latter in the wings of the stage). Kevin Spacey, meanwhile, was more memorable in his dead-on impression of the former president than he was finger-snapping his way through "Fly Me to the Moon."

But, hey: If the actor wanted to feel like a jazz star for the night, he picked a sympathetic crowd.