



Retrieved from: <https://www.ed.gov/content/thelonious-monk-jazz-informance-lesson-democracy> on 10 December 2021

---

## Thelonious Monk Jazz Informance: A Lesson in Democracy

04/20/2017

The conception of a perfect democracy drove the recent musical performance by students when their peers from nine District of Columbia schools, parents, educators, and ED employees gathered at U.S. Department of Education (ED) headquarters to hear jazz – America’s gift to the world.

To celebrate [Jazz Appreciation Month](#), ED hosted its fifth annual jazz informance—an informational performance—with the [Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz](#). A jazz ensemble composed of student musicians from the [Baltimore School for the Arts](#) and [Duke Ellington School of the Arts](#) joined nationally acclaimed recording artist, educator and jazz trumpeter [Terell Stafford](#) to perform at the event.

One value of a perfect democracy is innovation. Jazz is innovative because much of it is created “right before your eyes,” according to Phil Rosenfelt, ED’s acting general counsel and a recent jazz convert who introduced the informance. What the audience hears “is never performed exactly the same way,” Rosenfelt explained, no matter how much the ensemble has rehearsed. Instead, the composition begins and ends with predictable and identical measures of music — but in the middle section individual performers improvise, thus the half-blank piece of sheet music in the image below. Improvisation is another large-looming value of a democracy.

This uncertainty — this innovation through improvisation — is the most exciting aspect of playing jazz, according to many of its adherents. Thomas “Murphy” Hagerty, bass player from Duke Ellington School of the Arts, said that the reason he chose jazz from among all the art forms is that “you never really play the same thing twice. You never really know what you’re going to play until you’re on stage.” This takes courage, another value of a democracy.

“The most important element [of jazz] is improvisation ... it’s like a musical conversation,” J.B. Dyas reiterated. Dyas is the vice president for education and curriculum development at the Monk Institute, which aims to expand the community of jazz performers by bringing jazz masters and young musicians together.

Just like any conversation, Dyas said, jazz music requires “really listening to one another.” Therefore, while improvisation may make jazz exciting, community is what makes the sound beautiful. Everyone in the ensemble has a responsibility to each other to “make the sound work.” Moreover, he said, the audience has a role in what is produced musically in jazz, unlike in other forms of music where the audience is expected to remain silent. With jazz, the musicians hear and respond to the audience’s responses throughout a piece, which also changes the music. Democracy, after all, is a conversation, a work in progress.