

A Blog **Supreme** FROM NPR JAZZ

A BLOG SUPREME

## A Jazz Institution Moves Back Home To Los Angeles

ALEX W. RODRIGUEZ

11/19/2014 2:27 PM ET



The Thelonious Monk Institute presented Bill Clinton with an award at its annual jazz competition this year. T.S. Monk, Quincy Jones, Herbie Hancock, Dianne Reeves and Kevin Spacey were also on stage for the ceremony. *Imeh Akpanudosen/Getty Images for Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz*

Last weekend, at a sold-out, star-studded gala concert in Hollywood, Pharrell Williams and Herbie Hancock remixed Williams' hit "Happy," Kevin Spacey served up a compelling Frank Sinatra imitation singing "Fly Me To The Moon" and former President Bill Clinton offered a heartfelt reminiscence

about his early days as a John Coltrane wannabe. ("Sometimes frustrated jazz musicians end up in another line of work and it ends up pretty good," he joked.) The opener was a jazz concert: Three virtuosic young trumpet players — Adam O'Farrill, Billy Buss and Marquis Hill — deftly negotiated standards.

It was the final round of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, the annual showcase for the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and the highest-profile event of its kind. This year's competition took place in Los Angeles for the first time in six years, though it's only the latest of the Monk Institute's endeavors to put down roots here. The Institute's other flagship program, a select graduate school called the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance, came to UCLA in 2012, after having been housed across town at USC from 1999 to 2007. It also enjoys a close relationship with the Los Angeles Unified School District, where a number of middle- and high-school jazz education programs have operated for nearly 20 years.

On the same day I committed to doctoral study in the UCLA Department of Ethnomusicology, the Institute announced it would move to UCLA. Since arriving in the fall of 2011, I've watched the performance program quickly weave itself into the fabric of the recently formed Herb Alpert School of Music at UCLA. Its first cohort of master's degree students graduated this past June.

Kenny Burrell, the director of jazz studies at UCLA, says he's been impressed by the Institute's smooth landing. "It seems to be working out really well," he says. "Everyone is getting along with each other ... it's a very harmonious thing going on." Daniel Seeff, the Institute's West Coast Director, agrees. "The relationship with UCLA is so good, the stars have aligned to allow the program to be in a special place," he says. "I would say that we're in a golden period."

Three years ago, "golden period" wouldn't have been a phrase that I associated with the local scene. Angeleno jazz fans were still reeling from the loss of the Jazz Bakery in 2009; another local favorite, Charlie O's, closed just days before I arrived. But the Monk Institute's arrival has coincided with a noticeable upswing in jazz activity in Southern California — and the Institute seems committed to contributing to that trend.

### **It's Not About The Competition**

T.S. Monk, the son of famed pianist Thelonious Monk, is the chairman of the Institute's Board of Trustees. He's frank about the purpose of his organization's recent gala.

"The Thelonious Monk Institute Competition is not about the competition," T.S. Monk says. "The competition is simply because our American mentality, we like things like 'the world's greatest' and 'number one.' That sort of satisfies that American desire, but really this is about bringing these guys together. ... We've tried to be a new interface between the grand masters and the youngsters — an environment where we can bring them all together, close the door, and it happens like it's supposed to happen naturally."

The final-round gala, in particular, featured a special alignment of stars — not just the celebrity acts onstage, such as Queen Latifah and John Mayer, but also many towering figures in the jazz community. The Institute flew in past competition winners Melissa Aldana, Kris Bowers and Ben Williams to perform on Sunday, and they shared the stage with Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Jimmy Heath, Jon Faddis, Kenny Burrell and many other jazz giants.



For the competition part of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, Chicago trumpeter Marquis Hill, 27, took top honors. Imeh Akpanudosen/Getty Images for Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz

Marquis Hill, who won the competition, found value in the networking. "I bonded with everyone, we exchanged information, we geeked out talking about trumpet mouthpieces," he said. "It's been great." Semifinalist Benny Benack III agreed. "You don't realize until you're part of it, the scope of how big it is in the jazz community," Benack said. "There's only one competition like this, and it only comes around to your instrument once in a decade. What it does for the young guys in jazz is incredible."

That this group of diverse musical interests could gather for an evening to celebrate jazz is a testament to another of the Institute's goals: to acculturate young jazz musicians into the current reality of popular entertainment.

"One of our missions has always been to help redevelop the connective tissue between jazz and the entertainment industry," Monk says. "So this is a win-win-win situation."

## 'It's Not Like Teacher-Student Stuff'

As Monk suggests, the competition is only a small part of what the Institute does. When I asked him about what made this year's competition unique, his response was unequivocal: "My first feeling is that we're doing the competition at home for the first time, because this is now the permanent home of the Monk Institute."

Monk refers to the fact that this year's competition took place — for the first time — in the same city where the Institute's graduate, undergraduate and secondary education efforts are centered. Those initiatives take up a large part of the Institute's daily grind.

Centering the organization geographically has allowed the Institute to better consolidate the "Monk Family," a phrase I heard countless times throughout the competition from musicians and Institute staff alike. (During his opening remarks before the competition semifinals, Monk even joked, "Once you get with the Monk Institute, it's like the mafia: You're in the family.")

This tightly knit network is forged most directly through the Monk Institute for Jazz Performance, which selects seven "Monk Fellows" every two years to work together as an ensemble. The Monk Fellows also teach in local high schools and work regularly with a rotating cast of jazz legends — Jimmy Heath, for example, was recently in residence for a week.

"Just to see them walking down the halls, or see Jimmy Heath walking down the halls ... I like the diversity that exists in the sense that it is multi-generational," says flutist James Newton, a tenured professor on the Jazz Studies faculty at UCLA. "Add to them Kenny Burrell and it says so much.

Monk Institute artists-in-residence have also given a number of master classes, all open to the public. "It has worked really well," says Tim Rice, UCLA ethnomusicology professor and founding director of the Herb Alpert School of Music. "I've sat in on



Herbie Hancock and Pharrell Williams performed Williams' hit "Happy" at the 2014 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Trumpet Competition. *Imeh Akpanudosen/Getty Images for Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz*

some of the sessions myself, and have enjoyed listening to Herbie Hancock reminisce about making his *Head Hunters* album — that's pretty astonishing."

Hancock and Wayne Shorter, who were named UCLA professors as a part of the Institute's move to Westwood, also mentor the group on a regular basis. Shorter, in particular, seems to have embraced his role as a jazz torchbearer.

"It's not like teacher-student stuff, but it's interacting and sharing, going over the history, and discovering what the future can hold," he says. His pedagogical vision is geared toward exploring the unknown. "We know that we need a lot of historical data to get into the future. I know there's stem-cell research and all of that, but this is a broader version of that. To go forward without fear. We're talking about courage, the broadest view of what faith is: to fear nothing."

The impact of these major musicians' presence has trickled down to the undergraduate Jazz Studies program, as well. "I have been very touched by the interaction between the Monk students and other students in the program," Newton says. "Seeing the level of achievement and commitment that the Monk students have inspires the Jazz Studies students to aspire to that level; to breathe that rarefied air that this art form has to offer."

"It has increased the level of all the undergraduate musicians, because it gives us a point of reference that we didn't have before," says trombonist Masai Marcelin, a senior Jazz Studies major. "Just seeing them be who they are gives me a good point of reference for how I want to be as a person — more than just as a jazz musician, but as a human being."

## **Bringing The Jazz World To Los Angeles**

Having assembled its initiatives in one place, the Monk Institute aims to drive growth in the local jazz scene.

"The importance is bringing the world to L.A., and showing that to the world," says Tom Carter, the Institute's longtime president. "We bring so many of the artists and young musicians here, and our belief is that the strong scene here will come over time to be a true jazz center." That process has received an assist from an array of other local institutions that have sprung up in the past few years, such as the downtown club bluewhale, where the Monk Fellows host a monthly jam session.

Carter is adamant that the Institute is learning from Los Angeles, as well. "L.A. is the model city that represents different ethnic groups — it's the second largest city in America," he says. "And [Los Angeles Unified School District], to present opportunities to pilot a number of programs in the public schools. Many of those have been tested here and then expanded nationally."

Still, Los Angeles is rife with challenges and contradiction for jazz-focused artists. Shorter offered a prescient take on the peculiarities of this situation during the last number of the Trumpet Competition finals on Sunday. With the hodgepodge of jazz and pop celebrities all gathered onstage blowing over "Every Day I Have The Blues," Shorter took a solo that stayed within the lines of convention — familiar blues riffs and a swinging feel — while still projecting his inimitable musical voice through rhythmic displacement and subtle manipulations of timbre.

I asked him about how different the gala performance sounded from his other work. "You've got to get all of this in, within the web of all that's going on—[even with] people who just want to be entertained, not wanting to get out of the comfort zone," Shorter said. "Do we as artists have the courage to jump into the unknown and start a dialogue to negotiate the unfamiliar, the unexpected?"

That solo, and his explanation, speaks to a core truth about my adopted city: that amid the absurdity of celebrity glitz and glamour, there are still powerful opportunities for human expression. In a nutshell, it also seems to be what the Monk Institute is seeking by moving back home.