

ON THE COVER:

Bridging the Gap

The Monk Institute's graduating class offers words of wisdom to eager Monk newcomers

By Keaton Postler
Photos by Chris Rodriguez

This past spring, the Thelonious Monk Institute's class of 2009 graduated. The Class of 2009 was the Monk Institute's first class housed at Loyola, from its two-year, graduate-level jazz program. But to bridge the gap between past and present, the new class of 2011 is already showing the geezers of 2009 what they can do as an ensemble.

"The new band has already experienced an amazing evolution. I'm excited to watch them play and grow as a group," says Johnaye Kendrick, vocalist from the class of 2009.

Hoping to improve themselves as musicians, to teach music in the New Orleans community and to grow as a jazz band, the members of the class of 2011 are excited about the opportunities offered by the Monk Institute.

Established in 1986 and named for eminent jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk, the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz fosters jazz music and culture from the classroom to the professional realm, and recognizes gifted jazz musicians throughout the world.

In 2007, the Monk Institute announced its "Commitment to New Orleans Initiative." Designed to preserve and strengthen the jazz culture that originated in New Orleans, the Monk Institute's "Commitment" seeks to improve jazz education within New Orleans's schools, as well as provide musicians who are living in New Orleans with work that has been hard to find ever since 2005's Hurricane Katrina.

As part of its "Commitment," the Monk Institute chose to relocate its graduate-level jazz program from Los Angeles to Loyola in 2007. Officially known as the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance, the program accepts a select number of young jazz musicians from around the world to participate in its rigorous, two-year, tuition-free program. Jazz musician, composer and native New Orleanian Terence Blanchard serves as Artistic Director of the jazz program.

Trumpeter Gordon Au, who played alongside Kendrick, is another class of 2009 graduate. Currently living in Brooklyn, New York, Au considers the Monk Institute program a tremendous experience. He retains notes from each guest artist that taught him in the program and still looks through them for tips and advice.

"Each month, the Monk Institute brought in guest artists to instruct us," Au says.

"But the guest artists taught us more than how to improve our playing. They also taught us life lessons about business, recording,

touring and promotion. It was a very rewarding experience."

The new class should appreciate these opportunities, Au says.

"When a guest artist comes in to work with them, the new class should take the time to research that guest artist in order to get the most out of the experience."

Monk Institute newcomers come from all around the world for this experience. The class of 2011 hails from cities in California to cities in South Korea.

Nicholas Falk, who plays drums for the Monk Institute's class of 2011, graduated from Berklee College of Music, along with four other members of the newest class. After spending time living in Virginia and New York, Falk heard about the Monk Institute's program from friends.

"I saw it as an opportunity to spend two years playing, teaching and improving my music," Falk says.

"More importantly, I saw it as an opportunity to grow as an individual and with the band."

Playing alongside Falk in the Monk Institute's newest class is tenor saxophonist Matt Marantz. Before coming to New Orleans, Marantz received a bachelor's degree in jazz performance from Manhattan School of Music. Upon graduation, he looked for work in New York, but had a tough time getting steady gigs. Thus, the Monk Institute's program sounded like the ideal situation.



Members of the Thelonious Monk Institute

“The Monk Institute gives you a place to live, a stipend to cover your expenses and great teachers like Terence Blanchard,” Marantz says.

“They even bring in monthly guest artists like Jimmy Heath to work with you and the band. The entire program is really a unique thing.”

The Institute, which is dedicated to both teaching jazz and expanding it in new directions, emphasizes the importance of composing original music, and the program’s students and graduates acknowledge what this does for their routines.

“I realized that I only scratched the surface of music writing before coming to the Monk Institute,” Marantz says. He praises the program’s interest in music composition, calling it “the best opportunity to learn how to write music.”

“You can learn a lot about music from writing,” says Falk, who also composes music for the Monk Institute’s jazz band.

Graduates like Kendrick may benefit the most from the Monk Institute’s focus in music composition. Kendrick believes that learning to create original music is an invaluable asset of the program, she says, and that asset still assists her today when she writes music for her band, the Johnaye Kendrick Quartet, which performs every Thursday night at the Jazz Playhouse in the Royal Sonesta Hotel.

As part of their “Commitment,” the Monk Institute also has a hand in the community with everything related to jazz. The Institute

organized “Jazz in the Classroom,” a project designed to bring jazz musicians into the country’s schools to mentor young students. The Institute also founded “Jazz in America,” a program that supplements the national education system with a free online Web site created for teaching students about the history of jazz and its effects in America. And, The Institute sponsors the International Jazz Competition, an annual event that acknowledges talented young jazz musicians.

In addition to these programs, the Monk Institute affords its students the opportunity to instruct

Falk and Marantz are excited about the opportunity to teach through the Monk Institute’s program, they say. They will soon begin working with high school musicians and Loyola’s Jazz Combo.



Above all else, the Monk Institute’s students value the time that they spend playing together as a band, working towards “that ultimate band cohesion,” as Falk calls it.

“The one thing I enjoy most is getting to play with the others,” Marantz says.

“They’re such a relaxed group of excellent musicians.”

However, the two are not looking to limit themselves to playing only with the band and with guest artists.

“If another musician wants to play a session, then just ask,” Marantz says. “I love meeting new musicians, whoever they are.”

“Students of music,” Falk adds, “can always learn something from someone else.”

Though Monk Institute practice sessions remain open, during Au’s time there was only a small group of Loyola students who took advantage of learning from the class of 2009, Au says.

“Any musicians at Loyola,” he says, “shouldn’t be afraid to play with the Monk Institute’s newest class.”

Every musician should also reap the benefits of New Orleans, Au says.

“Be passionate. Go out and really take advantage of living in a great city like New Orleans.”



perform at Snug Harbor on September 22.

other musicians in settings ranging from college-level jazz combos to one-on-one lessons.

Kendrick and Au, who are both still teaching, miss the program’s education element, they say. They, along with the rest of their band, taught a master class each week at various schools in addition to teaching individual lessons.

“The regularity and consistency of teaching every week for two years helps greatly,” states Au, who offers private music lessons in New York.