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Top Jazz Students Play Big Number: 1600 Penn.



D.C. musician Elijah Easton plays in the White House Music Series. (By Marvin Joseph -- The Washington Post)

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The first family of jazz was there. The first family of the United States (minus the nation's No. 1 jazz fan, who was busy with health-care reform) was there. And 150 talented young jazz musicians were in the White House, too, all celebrating an original American art form in the most exclusive jazz workshop this city has ever seen.

First lady Michelle Obama told the group that jazz was always in the air when she was growing up in Chicago. Her grandfather put speakers in every room of his house, turned up the stereo and listened to music all day long. "At Christmas, birthdays, Easter, it didn't matter," she said, "there was jazz playing in our household."

Now that she's in the White House, the beat goes on. "Today's event exemplifies what I think the White House, the people's house, should be about," Obama said.

The event took place in conjunction with the Duke Ellington Jazz Festival, Washington's largest music celebration, which concluded last night with a concert at the Kennedy Center. The students, who were chosen by their teachers, participate in programs sponsored by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, which paid for some of them to fly to Washington.

Parts of the White House became an elaborate rehearsal room, where students from 8 to 18 absorbed the feeling of jazz and the blues from those who know it best. The entire Marsalis family -- father Ellis and sons Branford, Wynton, Delfeayo and Jason -- participated, along with Cuban jazz master Paquito D'Rivera and D.C.'s own Davey Yarborough, passing along jazz tips and the larger lessons they've learned from music. In one workshop, the students paraded across the stage of the East Room, improvising variations on the blues under the gaze of the portraits of George and Martha Washington.

"Blues is what connects us to the earth," Wynton Marsalis told the students in his advanced tutorial. "It keeps us grounded, gives us the spirit behind this music. It makes us holler and scream and shout through our horns."

After the intensive hour-long workshops, conducted in three separate rooms of the White House, the students gathered in the East Room for a brief concert featuring D'Rivera and a teenage combo, including three D.C. area musicians: Elijah Easton on sax, Zach Brown on bass, Kusha Abadey on drums. "This kind of interaction was the first of its kind," said Thomas R. Carter, president of the Monk Institute, who has presented jazz events at the White House

during the past three administrations. "It was groundbreaking and truly sets a precedent for bringing education itself into the White House."

The Obama administration plans to continue its hands-on program in arts education in the future, but it was jazz, America's indigenous art form, that got the first turn in the spotlight.

"There's probably no better example of democracy than a jazz ensemble -- individual freedom, but with responsibility to the group," said Michelle Obama, who was wearing a white skirt and sweater.

For longtime Washington jazz musician and educator Yarborough, it was important to see not just the history of jazz honored at the White House, but its future as well.

"To be able to witness the music being perfected in the White House, to be requested to bring my band here," he said, "is a wonderful honor."

The first lady was joined at the afternoon concert by her mother and her daughters -- because, she said, she wanted to introduce the girls to "all kinds of music other than hip-hop."

As Marsalis and D'Rivera swung into Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia" to bring the day of jazz to a close, the first lady bobbed her head to the music, and 150 students had an experience they're not likely to forget.