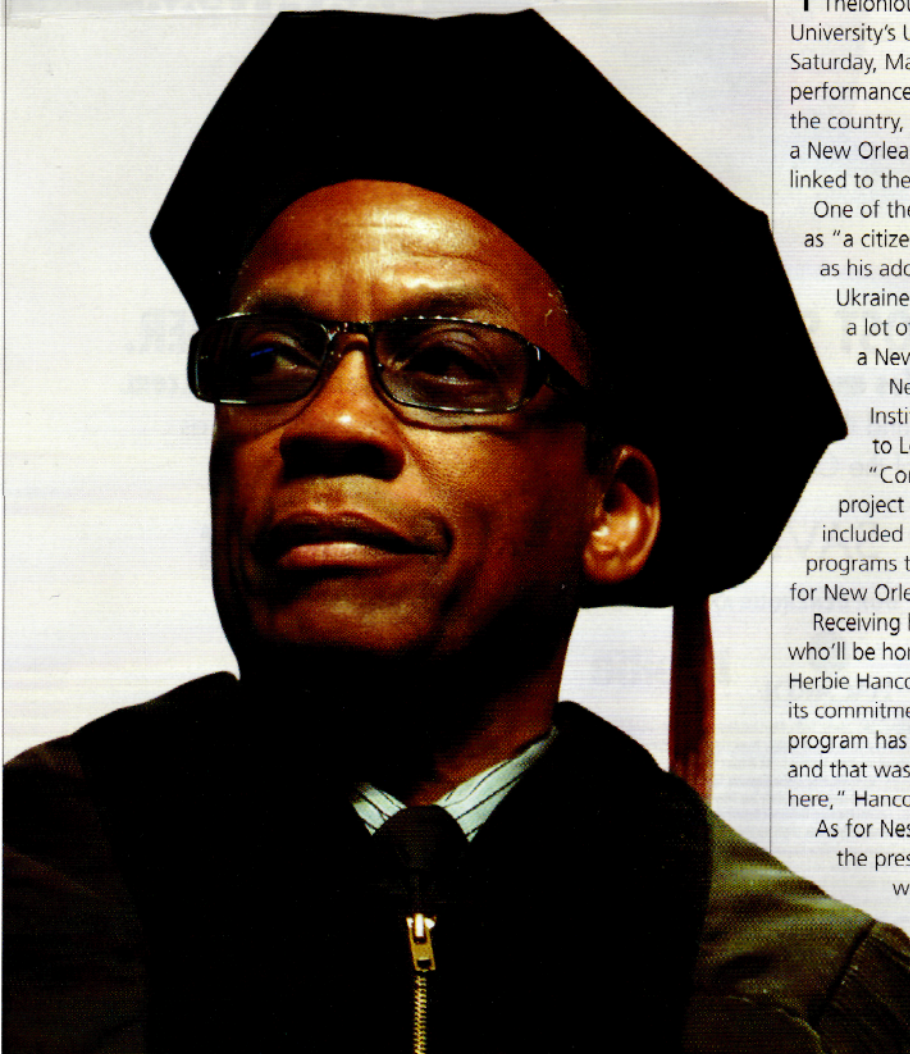


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Louisiana Music & Culture

June 2009 Volume 22, Number 6



The Jazz Class Plays an Encore for New Orleans

The seven members of the first class to graduate from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz since its relocation to Loyola University's Uptown campus in 2007 convened in the Superdome Saturday, May 9 to receive their degrees and give a farewell performance to the city. Though many of them will scatter across the country, they will be doing so like jazz missionaries, spreading a New Orleans musical tradition that has become inextricably linked to the city's cultural identity.

One of these graduates, Vadim Neselovskyi, describes himself as "a citizen of the world" and fondly designates New Orleans as his adoptive home. "I was raised," says Neselovskyi, "in Ukraine then moved to Germany with my parents. I've been a lot of places but it is most special for me to be considered a New Orleanian."

Neselovskyi has been part of a historic class in the Institute's 23-year history. The Institute's 2007 move to Loyola's campus was part of its philanthropic "Commitment to New Orleans Initiative," the largest project ever implemented by the program. That initiative included provisions for ongoing school and community jazz programs to bolster the school system and provide steady work for New Orleans musicians.

Receiving honorary degrees were arranger Wardell Quezergue, who'll be honored at Lincoln Center in New York City in July, and Herbie Hancock, the chairman of the Monk Institute. He spoke of its commitment to re-energize the city's music community. "The program has really helped revitalize the spirit of jazz in New Orleans and that was really our planned directive when we came down here," Hancock said. "To be part of that effusion of energy."

As for Neselovskyi, he will be relocating to New York to attend the prestigious Manhattan School of Music. "This experience was invaluable," he says. "We had two years of not paying rent, of not working, of just thinking about what we wanted to do, and when you have that time to focus you come up with something very special."

—Doug Barry

PHOTO: HAROLD BAQUET