

Bill Clinton earns top jazz honour

Former US president Bill Clinton accepts Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz award from Herbie Hancock



By **Martin Chilton**, Culture Editor online
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Bill Clinton has always been an ardent jazz fan – he can reel off the names and dates of Sonny Rollins' back catalogue - and the former President was presented with the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz's Maria Fisher Founder's Award on November 9 2014 for his decades of jazz advocacy.

Clinton was honoured during an all-star gala concert at the Dolby Theater in Los Angeles. Quincy Jones and Herbie Hancock presented the honorary award to the former leader of The Three Kings jazz trio from Hot Springs (Arkansas) High School, praising Clinton for showcasing jazz at the White House during his presidency.

In accepting the award, Clinton cited the nonprofit Monk Institute's efforts to give countless young people in schools a chance to learn about and play jazz.

"Most of them won't be jazz musicians, but sometimes frustrated jazz musicians wind up with another life that works out pretty well." Clinton said with a laugh.

Clinton recalled his own experience growing up in Arkansas: starting to play the saxophone at age 9, going to summer camp and playing 12 hours a day until his lips bled, playing the grooves off of 33 rpm records and reading Downbeat magazine cover to cover.

"I could not stand to hear myself play until I was 15. By the time I was 16, I thought I was getting pretty good and I looked in the mirror and I said, 'Would you ever be (John) Coltrane?' and the answer was no. So I had to become a fan."

An all-star band, including saxophonists Wayne Shorter, Jimmy Heath and Joshua Redman, played Flying Home before Clinton accepted the award. And after his remarks, singer Dianne Reeves serenaded Clinton with the Gershwins' tune Love Is Here to Stay.

Other musical highlights included Kevin Spacey imitating Frank Sinatra as he sang Fly Me to the Moon, Pharrell Williams teaming with Hancock on a jazzy version of his hit Happy; and John Mayer and Taj Mahal performing Mississippi Delta Blues legend Robert Johnson's Dust My Broom.

The concert included the finals of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, which this year was devoted to trumpeters. Marquis Hill, of Chicago, was declared the first-place winner by the panel of judges after performing the standards If I Were a Bell and Polka Dots and Moonbeams. As the winner, he received a \$25,000 scholarship and a recording contract with the Concord Music Group.



President Clinton hands over his saxophone to a student at the White House in April 1998, during a campaign to restore music education to America's public schools PHOTO: AP

Clinton was a dedicated musician as a youngster in Arkansas – attending band camp in the Ozark Mountains every summer. One of his heroes was saxophone player Louis Jordan, who was also a native of Arkansas. In 1994, while he was president, Clinton played a gig at the Reduta Jazz Club in Prague, performing jazz standards such as My Funny Valentine and Summertime. In 2007, he signed and donated the saxophone he played at his presidential

inauguration to the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Clinton once told veteran jazz guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli that he considered a career in music as a teenager but thought that he did not have the skills to emulate great jazz stars such as Stan Getz or John Coltrane, so decided instead on a career in politics.

Clinton would be amused to hear that the fine saxophone player and trumpeter Benny Carter jammed in 1996 with the saxophone-playing King of Thailand and said afterwards: "He's no Bill Clinton!"