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Jazz Sits In on the Curriculum and Moves a Young Audience

By ROBERTA HERSHENSON

Before Billie, Dizzy and Miles melted the hearts of the sixth graders at Public School 156 in Brownsville, Brooklyn, the students viewed jazz as old people's music, their parents' music, as unhip as Beethoven and Brahms.

But that all changed when jazz became part of daily life at the school this spring. There was the music itself, a panoply of new rhythms and sounds. There was the cast of colorful characters, each one a revelation. And there was the subject of jazz history, reflecting social concerns from segregation to the civil rights movement.

No saxophones or slide trombones were in sight — just a CD player — the day in June when Tracey Bean, a sixth-grade teacher, played Billie Holiday's recording of "In My Solitude" in her classroom.

"How did the music make you feel?" Ms. Bean asked when it was over.

"Sad," several students said in unison.

"I felt alone," Elise Long volunteered.

"I feel like I want to cry," Jameel Baker said.

Then Ms. Bean played an upbeat song, Ella Fitzgerald singing "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," and the students happily sang along.

For the second year, jazz will be an academic subject at P.S. 156 and 1,900 other schools nationwide, thanks to a curriculum produced by Jazz at Lincoln Center, a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to jazz performance and education.

The curriculum, aimed at upper elementary and middle schools, was developed with Scholastic, the children's publishing and media company, and financed mainly by the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation.

Wynton Marsalis, the artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, wrote and narrated 17 lessons on the history and significance of jazz, telling stories about important figures and providing 120 musical examples performed by the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, with Mr. Marsalis himself on trumpet. The lessons, which range from the roots of New Orleans jazz to the latest Latin and Afro-Cuban music, are intended to be used without a visiting artist. More information about the curriculum is available at www.jazzatlincolncenter.org/. The lessons are on 10 CD's, so that teachers need only press start.

But the teachers at P.S. 156, an arts-centered school from prekindergarten



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Tracey Bean's sixth-grade class at Public School 156 in Brooklyn taking lessons on the history of jazz. It is the second year jazz has been an academic subject.

A Duke, a Count and a Lady, but this is a syncopated history.

through eighth grade, took a more intensive approach.

They added films, videos and recordings to the Lincoln Center materials to create a tapestry of African-American history, racial politics, artistic innovation and poetry for use in their social studies and language arts classes. The curriculum's music lessons were left to Jose Ramos, the music teacher, who led the students in Latin jazz and "stomp" performances.

For 12 weeks, the sixth graders kept journals, recording their thoughts about hot jazz, cool jazz, bebop and the blues. They expressed in poetry and prose their feelings about the pioneering black musicians who spawned a new, uniquely American art. They learned of the toll that prejudice, alcohol abuse and drug addiction took on the artists.

"They got so worried about these people," said Leonore Gordon, a consultant from the Teachers and Writers Collaborative

who led the poetry sessions. (The collaborative is a nonprofit Manhattan group that sends professional writers into the schools to teach creative writing.) "When they began liking someone, they would ask, 'Did he die?'"

Mr. Marsalis provides vivid character studies on the CD's, telling how Louis Armstrong was sent to a correctional home "for young trouble-makers," calling Dizzy Gillespie "a hell raiser" and describing the diamond in Jelly Roll Morton's front teeth. He calls Morton "a pool shark" and "a con man," revealing the artists' flaws as well as their genius, because, he said in an interview, "the lesson to the students was imitate what you like about the people you idolize; don't imitate what you don't like."

He promotes the curriculum as a tool for self-discovery that reveals the virtues of individuality (solo improvisation) and the benefits of cooperation (letting other soloists have their turn). He says that studying jazz "can give us a painless way to understand a new American mythology."

He also feels that academic attention to the subject is overdue. "Jazz is our principal art form," he said, "and we've never taught it or went out of our way to be sure that our nation was informed about it."

Oswaldo Malave, the principal of P.S. 156, said the schedule changes that had led other schools to cut arts programs had not affected P.S. 156 so far. The school was failing eight years ago, he said, but since it reorganized around the arts, reading scores have gone up. "We have been successful at integrating the arts into reading, social studies and especially writing," he said. "We're going to continue the same way."

Ms. Gordon, who coaxes images from the students as they listen to jazz recordings, says her goal as the school's poetry consultant is to become obsolete by enabling the teachers to take over.

Celeste Thompson, one of the teachers, is well on her way, provoking students with tapes by John Coltrane and Miles Davis, movies like "Cabin in the Sky" and songs like "Strange Fruit," as sung by Billie Holiday.

One sixth grader wrote:

*Billie Holiday, your voice sounds like a bell
shaking through
a windy world.*

The students say that they still prefer Destiny's Child, 50 Cent and Ashanti, the music of their own generation, but that they were glad to be introduced to artists like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.

"It's exciting to learn about how people lived before we were born," Shanice Schoolfield said. "Like Lady Day. She kept going on and believing in her dreams."

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