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# Young people identify with jazz in the tradition of Duke Ellington

By Laura Andrews

Before competing in the third annual Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) Essentially Ellington High School Jazz Band Competition and Festival, it is unlikely that the students in the 15 high school jazz bands understood Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington's description of jazz or Langston

Hughes' definition that jazz is a "a heart-beat."

The students' interaction for two days with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra (LCJO) in rehearsals, a jam session and a concert helped to solidify the mandate of trumpeter and JALC Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis - that jazz should be played

with soul.

Essentially Ellington proved to offer a myriad of opportunities.

"It is one of the greatest experiences of my life," said musician, conductor and educator Paul Jeffrey. "I had the McDonald's Jazz Band in 1979-80 and from 1992-95. I had a jazz program in the Aspen Music Festival in

Colorado; and I think that JALC's Essentially Ellington program is the most exciting."

According to Jeffrey, who served as a judge in the competition along with Marsalis, Slide Hampton, Branford Marsalis and Davis Sanborn, "(Essentially Ellington) is more comprehensive and addresses diversity more than other programs."

Unlike most Ellington admirers, Jeffrey had a professional relationship with the venerable composer.

Working his way through college as a bus-boy at the Ithaca Hotel, Jeffrey had a chance to meet Ellington. Later, as a full-time working musician, he copied music for Ellington.

"Duke was one of the most gracious people and a genius," Jeffrey recalled.

Essentially Ellington is structured to expose Ellington's music to high school students. The relatively new, innovative program - only in its third year - is drawing a growing interest from adults looking to be entertained by stellar jazz musicians at an inexpensive price.

"Where can you see Branford Marsalis, Wynton Marsalis and JALC for a few dollars?" asked a patron attending the Essentially Ellington concert at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall.

Essentially Ellington High School finalists did not view the Competition and Festival as an educational task. Excitement was plentiful. Young musicians attired in their Sunday best played with gusto and soaring enthusiasm. The three top placing bands - Foxboro High School (Foxboro, MA) Sun Prairie High School (Sun Prairie, WI) and Hall High School (West Hartford, CT) - performed two Ellington tunes and the Ellington and Bubber Miley composition, "Black and Tan Fantasy" with Wynton Marsalis.

Having recently completed a JALC concert tour narrated by Andre De Shields, Wynton Marsalis' chops were up. He was consistently effective in delivering music with precision, ease and natural spontaneity.

Continued on next page



New York's own LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts, led by Band Director/Conductor Bob Stewart, placed first in the 1996 Essentially Ellington High School Jazz Band Competition. Photo by Stephanie Berger