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Thelonious Monk jazz program moves from Los Angeles to New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS, Louisiana (AP) -- One of the jazz world's foremost learning institutions will move here from Los Angeles, and those involved hope it will ensure the genre has a future in the city where it was born. The Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz is relocating its performance program from Los Angeles to New Orleans' Loyola University.

To celebrate the move, jazz pianist Herbie Hancock, saxophonist Wayne Shorter and trumpeter Terence Blanchard joined the program's incoming class and drummer Thelonious Monk Jr., son of the pianist and composer for whom the institute is named, for a performance at Loyola on Monday.

"Jazz can help the re-emergence of New Orleans after the worst natural disaster," Hancock said. Having the program in New Orleans will help "foster the next generation of jazz greats," he said.

The program, which will be based at Loyola for the next four years, is dedicated to developing musicians who are teachers as well as performers.

"We have finally, finally found our home here in New Orleans," Monk Jr. said.

Only a handful of students are chosen for the graduate-level college program, previously based at the University of Southern California. The selection process lasts for several months and includes several national and regional auditions.

"It's the best out there," said Elizabeth Dalferes, a spokeswoman for Loyola.

New Orleans' appreciation for jazz, its mission to preserve jazz music and heritage, and the space and programs already available at Loyola led the institute to pick the college along the city's iconic St. Charles Avenue, Dalferes said.

At least a half-dozen schools were interested in acquiring the jazz performance program, including Harvard and a number of other Ivy League schools, according to Tom Carter, the president of the institute.

"My first reaction was, 'Why go to those places?'" said Blanchard, a native New Orleanian and artistic director for the program. "Those people don't love this music the way we do. They don't have the history with this music the way we do."

The institute also recognizes a need for music mentors in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, scattering many of the city's musicians, Dalferes said. Hoping to help fill that void, the institute's students will work with the city's young musicians and promote jazz in schools.

The celebration Monday also included the launch of the institute's "Jazz in America" program with performances for New Orleans area high school students by jazz saxophonist Bobby Watson and singer Lisa Henry.

The institute's new class of seven will live in New Orleans for two to four years. Students also will participate in national tours to classrooms in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and other cities with a strong need for public arts education, Dalferes said.

The institute is a nonprofit educational organization created in 1986 in memory of Monk, the jazz pianist and composer who believed the best way to learn jazz was from a master of the music.

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