

ARTS & CULTURE

BLACK MUSIC MONTH

Jazz Legend Passes Down Music Know-How to Youth

BY INDIA ALLEN
ASSISTANT EDITOR

From the old spirituals and big band jazz to the P. Funk era and the innovative beats of the late J Dilla, music has been a living, breathing archive of historical identity for African Americans.

It's also been a hub that connects each generation to the next, creating a context by which blooming musicians springboard.

Above all, it's been a community adhesive that has stood the tests of time, turmoil and various transitions.

But with many public schools shutting down music programs to compensate for the state's budget crises, the lifeline that the performing arts provides to various communities is being threatened.

In response, teachers have held rallies. Parents have hit the streets with signs and catchy slogans, and Billy Mitchell, jazz musician and composer, has answered the call of duty by offering free music and audition workshops through his Scholarship Audition Performance Preparatory Academy (SAPPA).

"It's hard to understand how the educational system could remove the very programs that help kids' development ... It was hard for me to comprehend," Mitchell said.

Started in 2002 by Mitchell and a group of local instructors and musicians, the academy offers an array of courses to students through its workshops, including beginning keyboarding and percussion, music

theory, principles and history. It also acts as a go between for youth and existing music and art education programs. In conjunction with music courses, SAPPA assists youth with applying and preparing for auditions and interviews. In 2007 alone, the program served more than 17,000 kids in Los Angeles County.

"Our goal is to reach the 90 percent of kids who do not have the resources to be exposed to music or audition classes," Mitchell said.

For Mitchell, SAPPA is more than a resource for underprivileged kids to learn music theory and principles. It's a means by which future generations can inspire and be inspired to question the status quo—an infrastructure he sees as handicapping creativity.

"Without creativity you don't have leadership. You don't have people who are going to challenge the system," he said. "If we can get kids to alter their perception through music, we can change the inner cities."

Robert Lesoine, Master Teacher for SAPPA, said that many African American and Latino kids are hungry for music and that the workshops gives an otherwise neglected population an opportunity to be exposed to basic musical training.

"When I first start some of the classes the kids are reluctant, which is about self esteem ... But six months later, they're shouting out their names," he said. "Whenever I leave those classes I feel like I'm rejuvenated and that I'm doing what god has asked me to do."

SAPPA also has partnered with several charter and public schools, Pasadena Parks and Recreation, L.A. Cultural Affairs and other organizations.

While the program is open to all kids and youth, it especially targets and focuses its outreach on the African American community.

Juanita De Vaughn, chairperson for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Academic Cultural Technological Scientific Olympics (NAACP ACT-SO), which works with ninth through 12th-graders in cultivating an appreciation for music and the performing arts, credits SAPPA with educating thousands of youth about music and its historical context.



KEEPING MUSIC ALIVE—The Scholarship Audition Performance Preparatory Academy (SAPPA) serves communities in Southern California as an outreach and training program that identifies youth in underserved communities and connects them to existing music and arts education programs. SAPPA also provides music workshop programs in selected areas and, although this program is for all young people, it is currently focusing on communities with the highest percentage of at-risk youth. Pictured (above): young people of various ages participate in SAPPA workshops, which include keyboard and percussion lessons. Also pictured (right): Billy Mitchell, jazz musician and founder of SAPPA.

Courtesy of SAPPA



"SAPPA is an excellent organization," De Vaughn said. "It's very important, because a number of young kids these days don't know how to use instruments, but Billy teaches and trains kids who want to produce and create music."

"He brings a lot of groups together to provide the kids with the know how as well as training them to perform for an audience ... He is

one source that we can reach out to get students involved," De Vaughn said, adding that some of the kids SAPPA has trained have gone on to universities and higher education music academies.

Though Mitchell says he feels the level of artistic development has decreased and scores of youth are being "dumbed-down" by popular culture, he remains optimistic that

with the help of parents and the black community, change will soon come "one child at a time."

"This is about maintaining and stopping the destruction of cultures," he said. "A lot of our responsibility comes right back to us."

For more information about SAPPA and a listing of workshop courses and locations, visit www.sappa.net.

APRIL HOLMES

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amputees, visual disabilities and those with cerebral palsy.

"At first I thought he was crazy because I didn't know anything about the Paralympics," she said of the competition that is held every four years, following the Olympic Games, and is governed by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).

After a few conversations with the doctor and her sister, Holmes dared to dream. Two months after the accident, she received her walking leg. By April 2001, she was jogging on a treadmill. In April 2002, she entered her first Paralympic track and field competition.

Today, Holmes is the world's fastest female amputee. She holds world records (women's T44 classification) in the 100-meter, 200-meter and 400-meter dashes. In the 2006 U.S. Paralympics Track and Field National Championships in Atlanta, she shattered her own world records in the 100-meter

and 200-meter dashes. At the 2006 IPC World Championships in Assen, Netherlands, Holmes put in gold winning performances in the 100-meter and 200-meter races. At the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, she brought home a bronze medal as she broke the American record for the long jump. This year she will represent the United States from Sept. 6-17 at the Paralympic Games in Beijing, China, where she is favored to bring home the gold.

Holmes' track and field exploits have landed her a lucrative contract with basketball great Michael Jordan's Jordan Brand, a division of NIKE Inc., because the brand touts itself as being "synonymous with style, grace, athleticism, and defying the odds of greatness and abilities." Holmes, reportedly, is the first woman to be signed to the high-profile label that also boasts such stars as Utah Jazz forward Carmelo Anthony, the Boston Celtics' Ray Allen, N.Y. Yankee Derek Jeter, Dallas Cowboys' Terrell Owens, and the New Orleans Hornets' Chris Paul.

Her performance on the field has also translated into celebrity off the field for the self-proclaimed loner. Holmes travels around the country sharing her life-changing experience with children, other amputees and soldiers returning from war.

"I've been blessed with the opportunity to be able to touch people's lives and that to me is one of the most important things you can do in life. I appreciate the opportunity that I can go out and speak to kids, and go to hospitals to speak to people who have lost a limb. Also, there are a lot of war veterans who are coming back and have lost a limb. To be able to impart to them that there is life after amputation, that is the great thing I have been able to do," she said.

Holmes was this year's national spokesperson for Disability Insurance Awareness Month, which was held in May. According to the April Holmes Web site:

- 54 million Americans are physically disabled

- One of four children do not participate in elementary or secondary physical education programs

- 143 million Americans are family members of persons with disabilities

- 66 percent of Americans are disabled for more than six months of their life

- 3,000 people daily become amputees.

In response to these statistics, Holmes has established the April Holmes Foundation "to assist disabled individuals to reach their goals by encouraging them to rise above any obstacles that will give them an opportunity to develop to their full potential; thus, realizing that the opportunity of a challenge is rewarded with success."

The foundation is currently holding an essay contest for the disabled. Participants should write a 230-word essay in response to the following question as it pertains to their level of disability: "If your Jordan shoes could talk the moment you put them on, what would they say about you? Where would they take you? Who would you inspire? What story would you tell?" The contest ends June 23.

What advice does Holmes offer, not just to the disabled, but to everyone?

"Keep dreaming and keep living. Everyone falls down at one time in your life, no matter where you are in life. No matter how much money you have, no matter where you came from, you fall down in life. And sometimes it can be a physical fall down and sometimes it can be a mental fall down. If you keep dreaming and keep faith, good things will happen to you," she said.

For more information about April Holmes and her life-changing journey, the April Holmes Foundation and the essay contest, visit www.aprilholmes.com.

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