

Win Or Go Home?

From student jazz festivals to auditions, competition is an entrenched part of jazz education. But is it a healthy component of the teaching process?

By Brad Howey

Competition has been a formal part of jazz education for decades. But what is the value of competition in jazz education for today's young people and for the art form itself? What are the costs associated with competition, and what are the benefits?

"The power of music and the power of music education shouldn't be about, 'My band is better than your band,'" said Dr. Ron McCurdy, chairman of the jazz studies department and professor of music in the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California. "It's about the music, and about trying to teach kids about love for the art and for the music, so they continue to be involved in some form: as performers, or as listeners. If it's just about the competition, then when the competition is over, their interest in music is over, too."

McCurdy was one of number of educators and musicians who, over a series of interviews, discussed the value of competition to jazz education. Others who took part in this story include trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, Jazz at Lincoln Center artistic director; Dr. J.B. Dyas, vice president for educational curriculum and development at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz; bassist John Clayton, artistic director at Jazz Port Townsend and the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival; Bart Marantz, director of jazz studies at the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas; Dr. Rob Klevan, educational director for the Monterey Jazz Festival; and Bob Athayde, director of music education at Stanley Middle School in Lafayette, Calif.

Some say that the value of competition in jazz education lays in its ability to motivate. For others, competition offers the possibility of recognition for the hard work that goes into an outstanding program. What is the real value of competition in jazz education?

Rob Klevan: These are the two benefits to competition in jazz, and in music in general: Good players inspire good playing, and festivals/contests that recognize good players are a healthy use of competition.

Wynton Marsalis: Competition provides motivation. In sports, it's winning the big game. In corporate America, it is motivation for money and in politics it is motivation for power. For musicians, the motivation is recognition, pride and self-achievement. A higher level of competition creates a higher level of musicianship. There is no greater incentive than students challenging each other to become better musicians. I'm talking about competition within the limits of reason.

Ron McCurdy: The real value in competition comes from what I like to call intrinsic competition—where you're competing with yourself to see just how good you can become. The problem is when everything becomes about the trophy, ribbons and winning—when your whole year becomes tied to that 35-minute performance. If you win you're a success, but if you lose, you feel like a failure.

Bob Athayde: I'm competitive as a director—trying to get the old middle school band to sound good—and it has nothing to do with beating somebody else out. But how are we educating kids? Why are we doing this? Don't we want to have life-long learners? What is better than training a group to win is to teach them to produce beautiful art, and get into that art.

John Clayton: If there is value in competition, it would be as a motivational tool for students. I am, however, strongly opposed to encouraging students to compete against each other. It's unhealthy, it destroys egos, it encourages the flawed concept of the arts as being objective—that one can have a "best" trumpet player. It is not a part of the professional jazz world.

J.B. Dyas: By entering national-level competitions, such as the Thelonious Monk Competition, students have to get a lot together that they might not otherwise get together. They practice harder and check out what they need to check out so they can compete. And if they win? Let's take the Brubeck Colony competition: If you win there, you get to attend for free for a week, working with great jazz musicians like Christian McBride, Nicholas Payton, Ingrid Jensen and Chris Potter. But more importantly, winning students get to play with their peers. These kids are the best, which means they aren't usually getting to play with their musical peers in their own high schools. But by entering these competitions and winning, they get to play with kids who really are as good as they are—if not better—for the first time.

Bart Marantz: Having a competitive goal for students to look at gives them something to shoot for. When students step up and attain high expectations they are fulfilled because they have reached their goal. More importantly, the students as individuals and the programs they come from are recognized as high caliber. I saw that take place with Roy Hargrove (a Booker T. Washington High School alum). In the early '90s, Roy was a junior performing in Chicago at DownBeat's Music Fest USA. When Hal Crook (his adjudicator) heard him, he went over the top. It was a coming out party for Roy. Later that evening, Larry Linkin of NAMM wanted to know what he could do for Roy. We ended up making a call to Doc Severinsen and getting Roy a trumpet—he didn't even own a trumpet at that time. I believe in national-level competitions.