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Professional jams with young artists

BY GARY RUMMLER
of the Journal Sentinel staff

Head bobbing to the music, right heel pounding out the beat, it was only a matter of time before Butch Thompson would slide onto the piano bench to join the group of jazz musicians from the Milwaukee High School of the Arts.

As they finished "Tom Cat" by Lee Morgan, he asked if he could join them. Flattered and a bit awed that a professional musician would want to be part of their music, the students readily agreed to make room for the lanky, gray-haired pianist.

Thompson, in town with his trio to do a solo spot in the Milwaukee Symphony Pops series, glanced at the music to get his bearings and then was ready to race off on side roads and alleys, always coming back to the main tracks when it was time to share the spotlight.

After some initial tentativeness, the musicians meshed, much to the delight of the students and about 50 other students who crammed into the music room Nov. 16 at the School of the Arts to listen to Thompson.

"I was sort of nervous at first," said Maurice Cotton, piano player, who lives in Milwaukee.

"But when we got down and started playing you just start to listen to each other's chops. You just fill it. When you listen to it, your vocabulary builds."

The listening paid off. The playing of Thompson and Maurice fit masterfully. Afterward Thompson congratulated Maurice and praised the other six musicians—Brendan Kelly, vibes player from New Berlin; Jon Westover, bass, from Brookfield; Desmond Henry, tenor sax; Zach Lozier, trumpet; Raymond Hinton, drums; and Joe Riley, congos, all from Milwaukee.

"This is brilliant," Thompson said. "The rhythm was fantastic. That's why I wanted to play with them. They're relaxed. They're not uptight. They know what they want to play, and they do it."

The student musicians already knew about Thompson's ability to play. What impressed them was his ability to fit in comfortably with students.

"He didn't have an ego in his playing," Brendan said.

Thompson, who tours the world but is also well-known for his 12-year stay on public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," started playing the piano at 3 years old.

Able to pick out a tune after hearing the music, Thompson admitted that "I didn't really learn how to read music. If I could get my teacher to play it, I could just imitate her."

It wasn't until he was in high school, playing a clarinet, that a band teacher realized Thompson could not read music, so he "started me at the basics. I'm glad he did."

Learn more about Butch's workshops and residencies at his website: www.butchthompson.com