

# SPARK

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BLUMENTHAL PERFORMING ARTS - IGNITING CULTURE



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THROUGH JAZZ | P.4

# CONNECTING COMMUNITY THROUGH JAZZ



This page: Students compete in the Loonis McGlohon Young Jazz Artists Competition during the Charlotte Jazz Festival in April. Next page: Sammy Miller and the Congregation bring down the house during First Night at the Mint Museum.

## COVER STORY

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COVER AND LEAD-IN PHOTOS BY  
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## Charlotte Jazz Festival reaches deep into the community extending cultural partnerships, providing educational opportunities, and creating positive economic impact while entertaining sold-out crowds

**T**hough the books are closed on the 2016 Charlotte Jazz Festival, sponsored by The Leon Levine Foundation, and the last note was played in late April of this year, the lasting ripple effects continue to be felt across Charlotte, leaving all involved anxious for next year's encore.

By most any measure, the years-in-the-planning festival saw success at every turn.

Thousands of Charlotte residents and visitors from across the state and the country experienced world-class jazz performed at the highest level. Jazz legend Wynton Marsalis, a key collaborator and driving force behind creating the annual Charlotte Jazz Festival, brought the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra to town from New York City for both

scheduled and impromptu performances highlighting the weeklong festivities.

Every ticketed event for the festival was a sellout.

The festival was the first multi-performance event with activities in all venues at Levine Center for the Arts, demonstrating what the strength and vibrancy of collaborative cultural partners means for our city. Festival events at the Mint Museum, the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture, the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Knight Theater and the plaza showcased the dynamic cultural campus in action once only hoped for by city planners.

### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

“One of the aspects of our festival distinctly different from others

is the level of community involvement and programming,” said Tom Gabbard, president and CEO of Blumenthal Performing Arts. “We held jazz clinics with area students, offered several free events featuring local musicians including lunch hour jazz with daily ‘Free Fun on the Plaza,’ after work ‘Happy Hour Jazz,’ and special programming for children with the ‘Junior Jazz Club.’”

Gabbard noted the seeds for the festival were sown years ago when former Charlotte mayor, now secretary of transportation, Anthony Foxx along with former Arts & Science Council president Scott Provancher visited Wynton Marsalis, artistic and managing director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, in New York City as part of the Charlotte

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PHOTO BY PHILLIP HOFFMAN

Chamber's intercity visit.

"Marsalis lamented that many Jazz fests across the country had evolved around pop music and weren't necessarily celebrating the unique American art form nor truly involving the broader community," Gabbard said. "Fox and Provancher suggested Charlotte would be a perfect venue for that and subsequently invited Blumenthal to develop the Charlotte Jazz Festival."

With Marsalis' support to move forward, visible steps leading to the festival began in 2013. That year Marsalis along with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra performed his stunning Abyssinian Mass at Charlotte's Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, with Foxx and his mother looking on in their home church.

Reaching into the community, Marsalis and friends went to area high schools, conducted student workshops and held educational programs for area youth – a practice Marsalis has continued on subsequent visits to Charlotte and a key component of his vision in developing the festival.

"Diversity of generations is important," Marsalis said. "Younger musicians bring a certain type of energy and freshness. The young artist competition allows people to hear what their peers are doing and gain a higher level of involvement from teachers. If you are open to creativity and the celebration of individual personhood, if you are open to these types of values, then you have a chance to be a city that will embrace jazz."

Making community connections through the power of jazz was also critical to Marsalis in the unfolding of the festival.

"The consciousness of people in Charlotte has been aware of where jazz is," said Marsalis. "For a jazz festival or anything like we are trying to do, it takes time to build and develop. The leadership in the business and arts community has the type of patience that is required to develop something of quality."

### EDUCATION IMPACT

This year's 2016 Loonis McGlohon Young Jazz Artists Competition sent three area students home with generous scholarship awards made possible by the festival's lead sponsor, The Leon Levine Foundation. Not only did Veronica Leahy of Charlotte Latin School and Ariel Mejia of South Mecklenburg High School take top honors in the competition, which was adjudicated



PHOTO BY BRANDON CARTER

Top, festivalgoers gather to welcome the second line parade crowd back to Knight Theater. Above, it was an intimate evening with jazz and dessert at the Harvey B. Gantt Center. At right, hundreds of people packed the plaza at Levine Center for the Arts Saturday afternoon for live music, food trucks and more.



PHOTO BY FRANK STEWART

by members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, the pair was invited to play solos during the final evening performance with Marsalis and the orchestra.

“Education is such an important aspect of community-building power behind jazz,” said Lonnie Davis, CEO and cofounder of the Jazz Arts Initiative, an area nonprofit working to develop a jazz audience and connect the cultural community through education, performance and support of musicians. “I’ve seen the appetite for jazz in Charlotte grow. The festival adds to that energy and excitement.”

## ECONOMIC BOOST

Charlotte’s Jazz Festival demonstrates the important role the arts play in helping create jobs and economic opportunities across the region. According to the North Carolina Arts Council, the nonprofit arts and cultural sectors in the state represent \$1.24 billion of the state’s economy, generating more than 44,000 jobs and \$124 million in tax revenue for local and state governments.

Local jazz pianist Lovell Bradford is excited about opportunities he sees developing around jazz in this area.

“There are incredibly talented jazz musicians right here in Charlotte,” said Bradford, a local jazz pianist and adjunct faculty member at Davidson College. Bradford played with his group during the festival.

“To have a true jazz festival, right here in our home city is tremendously exciting,” he said. “Events like this create opportunities for professional musicians to play here in Charlotte as opposed to leaving the city to earn a living. The festival has been great in galvanizing the listener and also with the musicians in creating the feeling that we have a place here in Charlotte.”

Energy and excitement was exactly what Charlotteans saw during the weekend’s wildly popular second line parade experienced by hundreds of fans as it snaked down Tryon Street.

As for Marsalis?

He’ll be back to continue executing on his vision. “I love Charlotte,” he said, speaking about his time here. “The city is filled with jazz lovers. Jazz is the type of culture that doesn’t require a certain type of person. All kinds of people are jazz people.” ✨



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Top, Wynton Marsalis makes a surprise appearance at First Night to join Sammy Miller and the Congregation. Above, guests enjoy music during the Hot Platter event at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. At left, Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra performs to a sold-out crowd for “Music of the Masters: Duke Ellington and George Gershwin” in Knight Theater.