Showing their chops: Young musicians arrive by the busload for annual Santa Cruz Jazz Festival

By Aila Wilson
Posted: 03/27/2010 01:30:48 AM PDT

APTOS -- Young jazz musicians from across the state struck rock star poses Friday at the 24th annual Santa Cruz Jazz Festival at Cabrillo College, where music students get a taste of the limelight.

The students are the stars at the two-day event that brings big bands and small ensembles from the San Francisco Bay Area, Central Valley and Southern California to perform for an audience and enjoy making music.

"This reinforces how fun music is," said Dan Young, the festival's president. "Students spend a lot of time practicing but don't get to do a lot of performing. Performing is a whole new skill set that can't be taught. This is a chance for them to play. It's not about competition, it's about having fun creating art."

The festival hosts 63 big-bands, 23 three- to six-person ensembles, and 16 vocal jazz groups -- more than 2,000 musicians in all. After each performance, they get a dose of some serious feedback from professional musicians and instructors.

Each band gets 30 minutes to perform its best material in front of a festival judge and audience. The band also must sight-read and perform an unfamiliar piece of work. The judges give constructive criticism of how the students can improve.

Novice jazz pianist Jianqin Wang from Monte Vista High School said watching other students perform was an eye-opening experience.

"This is my first year playing jazz, and at first I couldn't really improvise," Wang said. "I just couldn't get it to feel it. After seeing everyone perform here I feel like I get it. It's amazing to hear what these musicians can play. It's a lot of fun."

After performing "Fables of Faubus," "Nightwalk" and "Body and Soul," Santa Cruz High students reflected on their performance outside Crocker Theater.

"The performance was better than expected but the sight-reading, not too good," said William McAneny, who plays tenor saxophone. "I think we learned a lot and progressed quite a bit in a very short period. We'd practice outside Crocker Theater.

"The performance was better than expected but the sight-reading, not too good," said William McAneny, who plays tenor saxophone. "I think we learned a lot and progressed quite a bit in a very short period. We'd practice outside Crocker Theater.

"The performance was better than expected but the sight-reading, not too good," said William McAneny, who plays tenor saxophone. "I think we learned a lot and progressed quite a bit in a very short period. We'd practice outside Crocker Theater.

"The performance was better than expected but the sight-reading, not too good," said William McAneny, who plays tenor saxophone. "I think we learned a lot and progressed quite a bit in a very short period. We'd practice every day. The constructive criticism helps us a lot."

Judges listen for outstanding solos, improvisation, balance, blend and intonation among other factors.

"Toward the end of the day, the vibe does change to can you top this?" and large audiences will appear out of nowhere," said Life Cruise, Cabrillo Stage founder and guest judge. "You will hear musicians as good as anywhere in the state playing on these stages. It's a great chance for the students to really show off and show off what's going on in their school."

Drake Johnson, a seventh-grade guitarist at San Jose Middle School, enjoyed performing on stage and learning from his peers.

"It's pretty inspiring to watch others," Johnson said. "It makes us ask ourselves how we can get to that level."