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Wynton Marsalis speaks to the arts community

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Wednesday's For Art's Sake meeting at the Sacramento Ballet studios featured a surprise visit from musician Wynton Marsalis. The nearly 100 audience members were treated with a speech from Marsalis, who Mayor Kevin Johnson had previously mentioned in [June's For Art's Sake meeting](#).

After the normally scheduled meeting, Marsalis entered the room to a standing ovation. He gave a 30-minute speech followed by a 15-minute question-and-answer session.

Marsalis, a jazz educator as well as nine-time Grammy winner and Pulitzer Prize recipient, spoke of the importance of music education.

"How can we get kids to our shows?" Marsalis asked the audience early in his speech. "We need to get kids to go to events whether they like it or not!"

California Arts Council director Muriel Johnson noted that California ranks 50th in providing state money to the arts and that music programs in schools have lost 50 percent of their funding in the last decade. She asked if Marsalis could back her up in speaking to state legislators.

"I talk to legislators all the time, and they smile, but they're not going to do anything," Marsalis said. "Our system is based on money, and we have to change [legislators'] consciousness [of the arts]."

Marsalis also answered questions about jazz and its importance. "All music is becoming less important because we're not teaching it," he said.

"The root of the arts is humanity," Marsalis said. "I did a better job when I understood all the other jobs connected to my job, understanding the perspective of everyone else."

Marsalis described the arts as a "nourishing soup." It can be "soul food" in that it helps shape a community's intelligence, as well as preserve culture, but its ultimate goal is to create a "healthier populus."

Johnson retold a story of how he first learned about Marsalis in the early '90s when he was in the NBA and Marsalis was on the ESPN show "Up Close" with Roy Firestone. Firestone called Johnson a hypocrite for speaking of the benefits of education while not finishing his degree at UC Berkeley before entering the NBA.

Marsalis, a devoted Johnson fan, stood up for Johnson back then, arguing that he might be planning to finish his degree after his NBA career (which Johnson did in 1998, earning a bachelor's degree in political science from UC Berkeley).

Ever since then, Johnson has respected Marsalis, and even spoke to him after a concert in Arizona back in the 1990s. Backstage at the concert, Marsalis promised the young Johnson that he would do whatever he could do to help Johnson's career.

Tuesday, Johnson finally took him up on the offer. Marsalis also happened to be in between shows in Monterey and Davis, where he will play this [Friday at the Mondavi Center](#).

The first half of the meeting described the arts initiative's progress: creating a logo, creating a [website](#) and developing an "action plan." The action plan will be carried out over the next 12 to 18 months to help the arts in Sacramento secure continuous funds.

After the meeting, Michael Collett, an employee at La Raza Galeria Posada, described his feelings about the arts initiative. More "press and awareness" is always helpful, he said, "but I'd like to see a serious effort from the city to push the envelope."

"It's in the formative stage, but it's gaining a broad base," Donald Sronce, a past chairman of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, said of the initiative. "Each meeting has grown, and it's indicative of the community's support."

The next meeting will be at Hot Italian, 1627 16th St., Oct. 28 at 10 a.m. Pizza will be served following the meeting. Those who wish to participate should email Sharon Gerber at sharongerber@sixdegreesz.net.