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Saxman's tune hits right note in contest

BY JOYCE SHELBY

JOHNNY HODGES, John Coltrane, Stan Getz, Wayne Shorter, Warne Marsh, Steve Lacy, Joe Lovano and Evan Parker. It's hard for Daniel Blake to choose which of these jazz saxophonists is his personal favorite.

But when it comes to selecting a favorite song right now, the 25-year-old sax player and composer might be tempted to pick "I'm Sitting on Top of the World."

Blake, a graduate student at Brooklyn College, just won the grand prize for jazz in the John Lennon Songwriting Contest. The international competition is open to amateur and professional writers.

Blake's composition, "The Morning Shuffle," scored with a panel of judges who included jazz vocalist Al Jarreau and Jesse Harris, who wrote Norah Jones' "Don't Know Why."



Daniel Blake

"Morning Shuffle" is featured on Blake's debut CD, "The Party Suite," which won an ASCAP Young Jazz Composers award in February.

Winning the Lennon award gave momentum to his creativity, said Blake, who also plays clarinet, flute and piano.

"I don't write to win. I write because it makes me feel a lot of joy," Blake said. "To win for something that makes me feel joy is like the icing on a cake. I feel great about it."

Blake's music career began with piano lessons when he was 5. By middle school, he had heard the saxophones of Coltrane and Hodges.

"I found my sound inside that tradition and couldn't go back," said Blake, who grew up in Fairfield, New Jersey. By age 13, he was carrying his sax to local jam sessions.

Studying at the New England Conservatory of

Music and Tufts University meant being away from this area, but Blake said he always knew he would be back.

"New York is the jazz capital. No other place has that kind of pull, that Mecca-like magnetism. You can feel it all around you," Blake said. "You almost don't have to listen to the music to feel the energy. There is such creativity here."

While he works on his master's degree at Brooklyn College, Blake is teaching a keyboard class at the school's conservatory and making the scene as an up-and-coming musician.

He has played at clubs in Williamsburg and Manhattan, including the Blue Note and Sweet Rhythm.

"Life feels good," Blake said.

The Lennon Songwriting Contest selects two winners annually in each of 12 musical categories. With one of the jazz grand prizes under his belt, Blake is set to compete in the spring for an EMI publishing contract.