At Thursday night’s Little Kids Rock benefit at New York’s Edison Ballroom, surprise guest Lady Gaga paid tribute to collaborator and friend Clarence Clemons and accepted the Big Man of the Year award for her contributions to music education.

The singer joined program co-chairs Steven and Maureen Van Zandt, and Evan Harrison, along with Billy Squier, Matt White and Jake Clemons, musician and nephew of the revered saxophonist, for a night dedicated to both the program’s recipients and the E Street Band member who died earlier this year. The nonprofit organization provides free musical instruments and training to more than 160,000 low-income students around the country and has been presenting the Big Man of the Year award since 2009.

The award is presented annually to “a musical luminary who is passionate about and dedicated to helping Little Kids Rock provide music education to schoolchildren who may otherwise not have access to it.”

“No Child Left Behind had an unfortunate effect,” Van Zandt told Billboard.com. “By causing teachers to be obsessed with testing, they ended up cutting all the arts classes and killing music in our schools. Every statistic says a kid who takes music class does better in math and science. We’re the only country in the world that thinks art is a luxury. It’s not a luxury; it’s a necessity of life.”

The night featured a commingling of performances, as artists sang both solo and with the program’s students. After performances by White and Squier, the latter delivering standout tracks “Lonely Is the Night” and “Everybody Wants You” with the youth band, Clemons and the group showcased a rousing rendition of Gaga’s “The Edge of Glory,” with Jake filling in for his uncle’s original guest spot.

Van Zandt gave a brief, seemingly extemporaneous, speech on Clarence’s generosity, saying, “We were late for everything. But a kid waiting for an autograph is the only thing Clarence would ever be on time for.”

Presenting the Big Man of the Year award to Gaga, Clemons’ wife Victoria said, “You can’t do anything about the length of your life, but you can do something about its depth. When Clarence was going through struggles, you told him, ‘I believe in you seven days a week.’ Those words meant the world to Clarence and helped him get through a lot.”
While Gaga didn’t perform, the singer delivered a moving speech dedicated to both Clemons and her father, who joined the singer at the event. After noting that “The Edge of Glory” was written for her ailing grandfather, she told the 350-person crowd about the impact Clemons had on her life.

“My first experience with music was my father playing vinyl of the E Street Band,” Gaga said. “When I finished ‘Edge of Glory,’ I said, ‘There’s something missing.’ I’ve been through so many challenges and obstacles along the way, I didn’t remember what my youth sounds like. But the sound of Clarence’s saxophone was the sound of my youth. It was the only instrument to describe the way I felt when I was five. I knew every time the song played that my grandpa was looking down and thanking me, not for the gift that I had given to my fans, but the gift I had given to my father by having Clarence on that record. May the big man live on forever. There is no edge when it comes to Clarence’s glory.”

In addition to a silent auction featuring signed drumsticks by Ringo Starr and signed guitars by Slash and Megadeth’s Dave Mustaine, the event featured a spirited live auction hosted by Jim Kerr of New York classic rock station Q104.3. After auctioning off a signed Stan Lee Spider-Man guitar ($7,000), a signed Lady Gaga keytar, a pair of Gaga earrings and a private meet-and-greet with the singer ($21,000), organizers auctioned a dinner for two with Van Zandt and wife Maureen, culminating in a bidding war between a guest and Lady Gaga herself. Gaga eventually won, topping out at $13,000, but requested one condition: The restaurant must be Parma on New York’s Upper East Side where, as a struggling artist, the singer used to wait tables on Van Zandt.

The event, which sold tables from $5,000 to $50,000, culminated with Van Zandt and the program’s graduates performing “I Don’t Want to Go Home,” the 1976 track written and produced by Van Zandt for Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes.

Little Kids Rock was founded in 1996 by San Francisco elementary school teacher David Wish and has grown into one of the largest free music programs in the country. In addition to providing music education and instruments, the program has brought musicians such as Paul Simon, Slash, Tom Waits and Bonnie Raitt to classrooms around the country.

“Not every kid will find music,” Squier told Billboard after the event. “But you want to give them a chance to find it. It’s an unadulterated, untarnished program.”