Tearing Down the House
At a Jazz Competition

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By PETER WATROUS

WASHINGTON, Sept. 28 — Musicians call it "getting house," working the audience into a frenzy, and on Friday night at Birdland Auditorium at the Smithsonian Institution here, the 66-year-old singer Teri Thornton, competing in the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocal Competition, not only got house but large building, zip code and city.

Ms. Thornton, who last released a recording in 1953 and now lives in the actor's retirement home in Englewood, N.J., won first prize in one of the best fields of competition that the Monk Institute has seen in years. She did it by singing well and by digging into some of the best aspects of black entertainment culture, the parts that make audience members and performers join in the same experience.

"Teri just came out here and said, 'This is my stage,'" said Nina Freeden, a singer and one of the judges for the competition. "(Joe Williams, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Dianne Reeves and Diana Krall were the others.) 'She just booted everybody else off. I was waiting for the hair on the back of my neck to stand up. And when she started singing, I got that tingling feeling you get when real music is being made.'"

This year's competition, the 12th, featured vocalists, and, as important, featured new rules. Previously the competition had age limits — usually around 30 — meant to keep the competition open to young singers. After the last vocal competition, in 1995, the Monk Institute had to field about 300 complaints from older singers who felt excluded. In other years, competition has focused on particular instruments.

"It was a mess," said Shelby Fisher, the executive producer of the competition. "So we decided to change the age limits. Singers take longer to mature than other musicians, so we've adapted." A result was that plenty of music was sung, and a new level of professionalism inflamed the competition.

"It's not an accident that the older performers were really making music instead of showing off their technique," said Ms. Fisher. "The admission of older performers changed the whole environment of the semifinals and made them much better. When they sang, they understood what they were saying. They were telling a story. In the last competition, when a 20-year-old sang 'Sopranic Lady,' it sounded a bit silly. But when Everett Greene, 84, sang the blues, you knew that he knew what he was singing about."

The semifinal round, with 15 singers chosen from among applicants in jazz club, Blue Note, on Thursday, was rife with elders turning their performances into exhibits of naturalism. Mr. Greene, a large man, sang in a nearly forgotten baritone style that had the women in the audience walking back and forth.

"I used to dream about angels," he sang, "Ohhhhh," responded the women. Mr. Greene smiled.

When Ms. Thornton came out, the house erupted in applause, and she sang of love and longing, and her abilities remained through the club.

But singing was nothing compared with her performance for the finals. Ms. Thornton, who won $10,000 for her trouble, came out, said that the performance was dedicated to her sister, the singer Bessie Carter, sick with cancer. (Mr. Carter died on Saturday at her home in Brooklyn. An obituary appeared in the New York Times.)

"And there were so many different ways of singing, and thinking, too," she continued. "This was a good crop. I don't think jazz singing is leaving us anytime soon."