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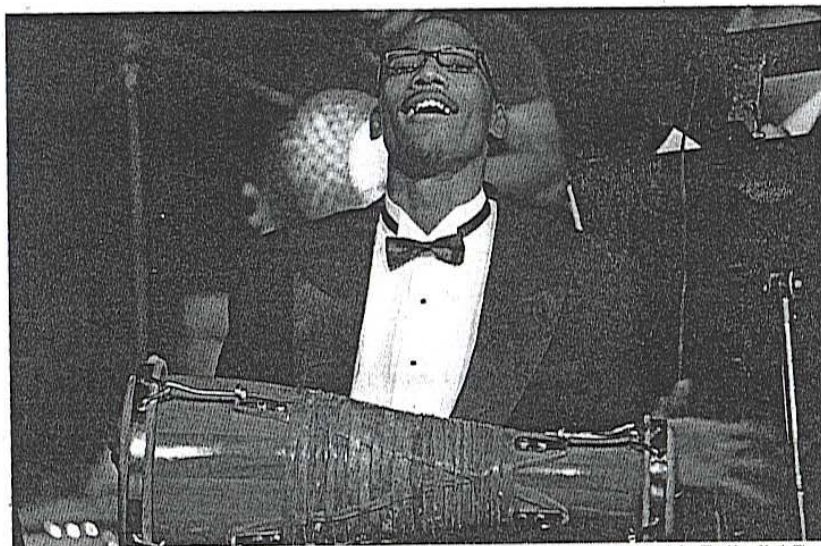
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Monk Contest Puts Focus On Latin Rhythms

By BEN RATLIFF

WASHINGTON, Sept. 10 — The 14th musicians' competition sponsored by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz began on Saturday with a consecration. Renato Thoms, a 33-year-old competitor from Panama, who now lives in Brooklyn, read aloud from Corinthians. "Be anxious for nothing," he said, asking God to bless the festival and the competitors. Then he started to play, not drums, saxophone or trumpet or any of the usual instruments of jazz that have been the basis of past competitions, but congas.

Latin music in jazz has gone far beyond the window-dressing stage. Now American jazz musicians are traveling to Cuba in greater numbers, and musicians from the Afro-Caribbean islands or South America are appearing in New York and changing the music.



Susana Raab for The New York Times

Pedro Martinez, winner of the Monk Institute's first Afro-Latin hand-drum contest.

As Exhibit A, there's this year's Monk competition. The first to focus on Afro-Latin hand drumming, it drew contestants ranging from an ethnomusicologist with a degree from Wesleyan University to a 10-year-old from East Harlem. Originally the notion was to hold a contest open to all hand drummers, said Shelby Fischer, associate director of the institute. But then the insti-

tute decided to limit the drumming competition to the Latin and African traditions and the various mixtures of the two that have grown all over the New World.

Monk Contest Finds New Focus in Latin Rhythms

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But even with the restrictions of the contest, the competitors played many styles. Kera Washington, a young musicologist and drummer, offered her own fusion of Haitian and Brazilian rhythms; Eli Cane, a 20-year-old student at Tufts University, played fume-fume rhythms of the Ga tribe from the gulf of Guinea. Samuel Torres, 23, from Colombia, placed second, playing a Cumbia rhythm.

Ramses Araya, 29, a technically imposing Costa Rican musician and a member of Rubén Blades's band, played five batá drums (used in Yoruban religious ceremonies in Cuba) roped together.

Mr. Araya, a progressive player, had made a risky move: the judges, musicians like Candido, Ray Barretto and Milton Cardona, represent the older guard in Latin music. His choice was daring not only because the batá is a religious instrument for which new-wave innovations are not taken lightly, but also because the judges made their careers playing more modest setups. In the 1950's Candido, 79, became the first conguero in Latin jazz to use two conga drums regularly; some judges clearly felt that more than two was overkill.

Even with the contest's restrictions, Mr. Barretto said the net was too wide. "You wouldn't put a bluegrass violinist next to Jascha Heifetz," he said. "It's two different

Competitors include a New York 10-year-old.

ballgames. There are styles of drumming that are more traditionally African-based, and styles that are more Cuban-based, and others that are Puerto Rican or Dominican. When you have a knowledge of each of these separate categories, you realize that each one should be judged on its own merit."

Other judges disagreed. Big Black, an American musician in his mid-60's who has played a mixture of Latin, African, and jazz percussion for his entire career — he now calls

his style "environmental rhythms" — mentioned a more inclusive ideal.

"The competition was much too narrow," he said. "Afro-Cuban does not fully express the whole drum thing. There should have been some Indian drummers. There should have been young drummers from North Africa, Persia, around the world. They could have brought hundreds of drummers together, and started the elimination process by just having a series of jams. This could go on for a month or two months."

The most celebrated contestant was another student of Mr. Almendra's: Camilo Molina Gaetan, 10, who lives in East Harlem and studies drumming at the Boys' Harbor School in New York. He was possibly the most self-possessed musician, playing cross-rhythms on his four congas with a cushioned serenity. He won third place.

During the finals he played a guagancó rhythm on the Latin standard "Obsesión." "He's so mature," his fellow competitor Mr. Thoms marveled backstage. "He's 100 pounds lighter than any of us, so obviously he doesn't have the strength in his hands. But it's all up here." Mr. Thoms pointed to his head.

Heading into the bridge of "Obsesión," Camilo upshifted and made his patterns denser. "Now he's creating tension in the B section," Mr. Thoms observed. "Tension and release. And he knows how to leave space, too. We all know these things, but at 10 years old? Come on."

Toward the end of a State Department reception for the winners, held by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright and attended by Tipper Gore, one of the Monk Institute's supporters, Camilo talked about himself. Mr. Almendra had taught him since he was 4, he said, adding that he worshiped the Puerto Rican player Giovanni Hidalgo, also one of the judges.

Was he nervous about competing? "In a way, yes," he said, smiling. "I've played in front of an audience before, and I've always played with guys older than me. But I've never competed against guys who were older than me. When I walked in there, everybody was looking at me like, 'that's the competition? There must be a mistake. He can't beat me, he's so small.' And once I started, I saw everybody go..." He made a walking-dead, open-mouthed face.

The first-prize winner was Pedro Martinez, 26, a Cuban who came to the United States two years ago and now lives in New Jersey. He has played with Pancho Quinto, a master of the batá drums, and recorded and traveled with Tata Güines. Mr. Martinez was educated in the entirety of Cuban Yoruba-style percussion as well as in song and dance.

He knew he wanted to play folkloric, Yoruba-style drums in the contest; his style wasn't jazz at all, and his performance forced the judges to abandon the idea that this should be a jazz-related competition. In the finals he started his performance by singing to Elegua, the Yoruban deity, with batá drums; then he sang to Changó and to Obatalá, other gods. Later he moved into a fusion of bongo, three congas and the wooden cajón. For a final piece, he played "Gandinga, Mondongo y Sandunga," a rumba by the pianist Frank Emilio, with the contest house band.

"You have to stay a student," Mr. Martinez said afterward. "You have to stay a student all your life. That's the way to play well. And you have to have respect for the discipline of every musician."

Although this competition may not have penetrated the world of Latin music, the institute may do it again soon, hoping to correct some of its missteps. Milton Cardona, for one, said that the contest was important not so much to make a jazz dent on the Latin music world, but to get Latin music noticed by the jazz world.

"I remember when I started out, I'd be carrying conga drums," he said. "And for years, whenever I saw an Anglo, he'd say, 'Oh, you play the bongos!' Something like this contest should help with that, to give the instrument an identity."