CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Jazz Hopefuls, Trying For the Sound of Success

By BEN RATLIFF

WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 — The voice was the chosen instrument for this year's Thelonious Monk International Jazz competition. And the big preliminary question was whether the contest might reflect what's happening to jazz singing outside of the gently pedantic atmosphere of a jazz education organization like the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

Even the most ambitious jazz instrumentalists seem to find limits for their audience. Singers can have a much broader appeal. Norah Jones, whose two albums have sold more than 12 million copies combined since 2002, proved that a singer with at least a basis in jazz can give audiences something they didn't necessarily know they wanted. And since the last time vocalists were heard in this competition, six years ago (the instrument changes each year), many other singers have proved that divergent approaches to repertory, instrumentation and rhythm, moving away from canonical notions of the jazz singer, can be extremely persuasive to the jazz-oblivious, without blaspheming the tradition.

But the Monk Institute is a nonprofit enterprise, and this competition, in its 17th year and won in the past by musicians including Joshua Redman, Jacky Terrasson and Teri Thornton, isn't about crossing genres; it sets down aesthetic certainties about jazz, asking that they be upheld. This happens through the initial tape-screening process.

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Gretchen Parlato, winner of the Thelonious Monk competition.
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through the judges' uniform list of
criteria and through the high standards
des of the jazz-singer judges
themselves. It's by now an old joke that
Monk himself might not have won
the competition named after him, but
you wonder if Ms. Jones would have
gotten beyond submitting a tape.

In the semfinals on Sunday at the
Smithsonian Institution's Baird
Theater, singers had 15 minutes to do
what they wanted. According to the
rules of the contest, they all had to be
under 30 and without contracts from
major record labels, and they all had
to perform with the same house
rhythm section.

As always, the judges — Dee Dee
Bridgewater, Kurt Elling, Flora Pu-
rim and Jimmy Scott — had before
them sheets to rate the singers ac-
cording to suggested criteria, in-
cluding control, dynamics, time, swing
feel, taste, concept, originality, inter-
action with the rhythm section, lead-
ership and stage presence.

These pressurized performances
were, in effect, miniature nightclub
sets, and the singers had to pace
themselves. Kellylee Evans, from
Toronto, worked hard for the audien-
tes' attention, opening with a
smart, slow ballad version of "Love
for Sale" and generally acting as if
she owned the place.

José James, from Milwaukee,
skinny and magnetic, started with a
version of "Every Day I Have the
Blues" so powerfully suggestive of
Joe Williams that the judges reacted
physically. Mr. Scott, 79, waved his
hands in the air. Ms. Bridgewater,
beaming, cooled herself vigorously
with a fan. But then the spell broke:
Mr. James ended with an unfocused
scat solo and dropped out of the run-
ning.

You want these competitions to
yield thunderous signals of arrival,
but that seldom happens: often the
musicians have already been on the
scene for some years, or the high-
stakes artificiality of the event flus-
ters them. But Gretchen Parlato, a
little-known Los Angeles singer who
recently moved to New York, cre-
ated a surprise attack. (She has a con-
nexion with the Monk Institute, hav-
ing been chosen as the first singer in
its two-year program, from which she
graduated in 2001.)

Ms. Parlato, small and serious,
said almost nothing onstage, but her
talent was so deeply centered and
concentrated that the effect might
have been the same had she stood
behind a curtain. The set included a
scat version of Charlie Parker's
"Embraceable You" improvisa-
tions; an "I Fall in Love Too Easily"
that suggested Chet Baker's dry-
toned version but superimposed
hints of a lavish, Donny Hathaway
melisma, and a hard-swinging
version of "Chega de Saudade," sung in
excellent Portuguese. (Anyone curi-
sous can see her perform tomorrow
night at the Jazz Gallery, 290 Hudson
Street, in the South Village.)

On Monday, in the finals, a concert
held at the Kennedy Center and
filmed by BET, Ms. Parlato did it
again. (Al Jarreau and Quincy Jones
were on hand as more judges.) Rela-
tively unmanered, with accurate
pitch, she didn't copy older singers
or overemote; she just calmly nailed
a ballad and a medium-tempo piece
with improvisations, interacting with
the rhythm section at its own level.

Ms. Parlato won first prize, a
$20,000 check. Ms. Evans came in
second, impressing the judges with
an original song. Robin McKelle, who
teaches at Berklee College of Music,
came in third, punching out "Angel
Eyes" like a hardened professional,
and Charene Wade, an impressive
Betty Carter-influenced singer from
New York, came in fourth.

Because the Monk Institute, based
in Washington, cultivates ties to the

An award presented
by the chairman of the
Joint Chiefs of Staff.

government, and because various
agencies give it support, a disjunc-
tive strangeness arises during these
events, as the jazz world meets bar-
ricades and metal detectors. There
was a State Department reception
for the contestants, held by Secretary
of State Colin L. Powell, at
which Herbie Hancock and Ms.
Bridgewater sang "Caravan."

At Monday night's concert, Sena-
tor Orrin G. Hatch was given the
institute's founder's award. And to-
ward the end of the concert's second
half — an impressive all-star se-
quence involving the judges and a
few other big names, including
Wayne Shorter and Jon Faddis —
Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of
the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked to
present the first prize.