Party lines: people, places and politics

Jazz greats Al Jarreau (from left), Lonnie Plaxico, Flora Purim and Terence Blanchard wowed the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater crowd with a jam during the 17th annual Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition Monday night.

Photographs by James A. Brantly/The Washington Times

Passing the vocal-jazz torch

Present and future generations of jazz greats met, mingled and grooved during Monday evening's finals of the 17th annual Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater. The highlights were many.

An all-star jam session featured keyboard masters Herbie Hancock and George Duke; vocalists Dee Dee Bridgewater, Al Jarreau, Flora Purim and Kurt Elling; trumpeters Terence Blanchard and Clark Terry; saxophonists Wayne Shorter and Jimmy Heath; bassist Lonnie Plaxico; and Carl Allen and T.S. Monk — the son of the Monk Institute's namesake — on drums.

Although the institute initially planned for just three winners, vocal sparring among the 13 contestants the previous day at the Smithsonian's Baird Auditorium had proved so stiff that four finalists were chosen. (Overall, 170 vocalists worldwide submitted tapes.)

"The level of competition was overwhelming," Mr. Monk said. The victors: fourth place, Charenee Wade; third place, Robin McKelle (radiant in a show-stopping white-and-fuchsia gown); and second place, Keilyleev Evans. Gretchen ("I'm still in shock") Parlato took top honors.

Another winner: Sen. Orrin G. Hatch, Utah Republican, who took home the institute's Maria Fisher Founders Award for outstanding contributions to the world of jazz.

Actor Billy Dee Williams and the legendary Quincy Jones, the night's emcee duo, kept the momentum flowing.

The evening's most heartfelt moment came from the great singer Jimmy Scott, who brought the packed house to its feet with his beautiful delivery. VIP guests hopped after the show in the center's atrium, with many speaking highly of the Monk Institute's mission of furthering jazz.

"So many people from the jazz world are here. I don't know when I've heard a better concert," said Robert G. O'Meally, director of the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University in New York City. Others voiced similar sentiments.

"I was glad to be a part of such a glorious occasion, when old and young performers could co-exist," jazz master Jimmy Heath said.

Also spotted in the crowd: Sens. Lamar Alexander and John E. Sununu; Reps. John Conyers Jr., Harold E. Ford Jr. and John D. Dingell; Joe Robert (who hosted Friday's VIP pre-party at Blues Alley); Ann Jordan; Alma Powell; Jim Kinsey; Bill and Allison Paley; and the ambassadors of Russia and Kuwait.

— R. Denise Yousse