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Monk Institute Celebrates 20th Anniversary

Thelonious Monk Institute |

By [Franz A. Matzner](#)

It is always tempting to find fault when something formerly counter-culture discovers itself embraced by the mainstream and honored by those who previously dismissed, devalued, or worse, denigrated it. For jazz, the fact that many of its founding fathers struggled against pernicious racism amplifies this tension, injecting the politics of civil rights into what is for other art forms merely the inevitable cycle of artistic innovation, rejection, acceptance, and finally, canonization. Add to this the venue of Washington, D.C., with its inevitable political patina, and one appreciates the complexity of the recent 20th anniversary celebration of the Thelonious Monk Institute.

The Monk Institute's formula for navigating this dynamic is deceptively simple and speaks to the creativity, professionalism, and intellectualism that underlie its two decades of accomplishment. Acknowledge the past, celebrate progress, and focus on the future. All three of these elements were in evidence at the Kennedy Center gala affair held September 17, 2006, and contributed to the success of an event that commemorated not only the annual Thelonious Monk International Music Competition, but also the significant strides the Institute continues to make to a variety of other education and music programs, of which many remain unaware.



Founded in 1987 by the Monk family and a handful of dedicated supporters, the Monk Institute has grown into one of—if not the—premier jazz education and promotion organizations in the country. Its board now consists of jazz luminaries and many of America's foremost talents, including Herbie Hancock, Bill Cosby, and Billy Dee Williams. Its prominence attracts a packed audience of Washington elite every year for the organization's center piece event, the annual competition dedicated to a single featured instrument. (This year was no exception, with the hall bursting with notables ranging from business leaders, to political sponsors, to entertainment industry glitterati.) The Institute, however, does not live and die by this one event. In recent years the Institute has founded several innovative programs to foster jazz education that not only focuses on producing the next crop of musicians, but also the next generation of audiences, and perhaps more importantly, simply strives to introduce to the younger generation, through, or perhaps with, jazz education a broader understanding of American history, cultural, social, and otherwise. This task may well be the Institute's most ambitious and important project.

Programs include the Monk Institute of Jazz Performance, a college-level program providing a direct bridge between today's masters and tomorrow's brightest talents, Jazz in the Classroom, which sponsors a variety of programs in schools throughout the country, the Bebop to Hip-Hop program, which brings jazz musicians and Hip-hop artists together to bring joint education programs to high-school students, and the National Jazz Curriculum. The NJC provides via the internet (www.jazzinamerica.org) a course of study integrating social studies, history, and music focused on jazz for 5th, 8th, and 11th grade students at public schools. The course includes teaching materials, course curriculum, a resource library, and a variety of evaluation materials aligned with national standards. While still under development, this program may represent the most far-sighted of the Institute's experiments, with the potential to bring elements of jazz education into classrooms around the country.

All of this and more was highlighted during the night's celebration, and it would have been easy for the Institute to wallow in well-deserved self-congratulation. However, while a healthy collection of laurels was passed around, the Institute remained true to its mission and wisely kept the evening centered on the piano competition and the three finalists competing for the \$20,000 prize, while bracketing this with rare performances by a huge array of today's jazz talent.

Thus, spaced out over the evening, the audience was treated to performances by the three finalists, alumni of the Institute including Jane Monheit, Gretchen Parlato, and Joshua Redman, the current Monk Institute Ensemble, members of the esteemed judging panel, a variety of special guests, and to top it all off, the recipient of this year's life time achievement award, surprise honoree Stevie Wonder. Add to that MCing duties by Quincy Jones, Phylicia Rashad, Billy Dee Williams, as well as former Secretaries of State Madeline Albright and Colin Powell, and you have a night to give even the most jaded autograph hunter pause.



Under the best of conditions, competing at the Monk competition--which can launch instant careers--must be daunting. Add to that the pressure of performing at the 20th anniversary in front of the luminaries cataloged above, and it's a wonder that the three finalists were able to take the stage at all. And while nerves were apparent, all three of the finalists' engaging performances stood as a testament to both their musical abilities and their professionalism. Presenting first, Aaron Parks of Seattle delivered a crisp rendition of Wayne Shorter's *Ana Maria*, followed by a mid-tempo piece dominated by asymmetric solos. Next, Gerald Clayton took the stage, boldly opening with a funky, mid-tempo original full of slinky lines that got the crowd clapping. In a gambit to highlight his versatility, Clayton then switched gears to present an unconventional combination of Beethoven's *'Pathetique'* Piano Sonata and John Lewis' *"Django"*, which folded together beautifully delivered classical style with adept bluesy improvisation. While this experimental approach proved a crowd pleaser, and displayed an impressive ability to cover the full range of the keyboard, it wasn't enough to overcome the passionate explorations of the final contestant Armenian Tigran Hamasyan. Attacking *"Cherokee"* with a passionate vengeance and delivering a thoroughly reworked version of Davis' *"Solar"*, Hamsyan combined an enormous technique, a touch of good natured irreverence, unfettered enthusiasm, and a seemingly unstudied outpouring of ideas to both secure first place and effectively steal the show.



Before the final announcement of the winner, however, came several additional highlights, including a surprisingly novel arrangement off *"So What"* performed by none other than Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, John Pattitucci, Terri-Lynn Carrington, and Joshua Redman, a rousing take on *"How High the Moon"* by Patti Austin, and at the very least the most poignant moment of the evening, an improvised duet between Hancock and Shorter expressing their gratitude to Monk Institute president Thomas Carter. A moment carved out of the night's clockwork efficiency, this musically satisfying moment was especially affecting because of the honest expression of friendship, affection, and respect it represented, revealing to the audience that at heart the Monk Institute remains the project of dedicated artists passionately committed to both their art and the community it represents.

In the final evaluation, this dedication to community is what makes the Monk Institute's programs--and its annual event--so successful. While embracing its transformation into a major institution able to engage in programs around the world, garner Congressional sponsorship, and secure the support of major corporations, it manages, in the words of Steve Wonder, *"to keep it real"*. It remains a community of individuals bonded to each other as much as to the Institute's mission, and thus grounded enough to remember the challenges of its humbler beginnings while embracing its future ambitions.

Photo Credit

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