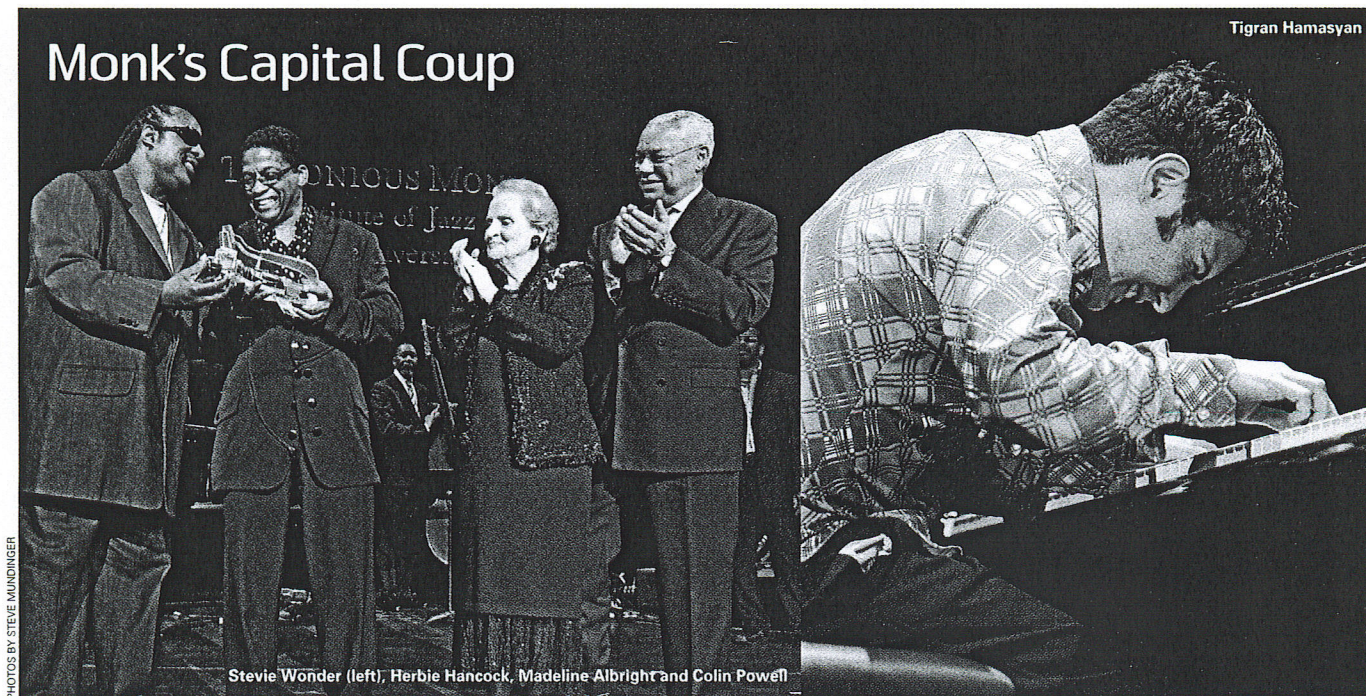


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## Monk's Capital Coup

Tigran Hamasyan



Stevie Wonder (left), Herbie Hancock, Madeline Albright and Colin Powell

There's at least one way to get bipartisanship in Washington, D.C. Just say Thelonious Monk. On a September weekend, the nation's capital buzzed with celebrations and an international piano competition, all in honor of the 20th anniversary of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

The organization—founded two decades ago by friends and family members as a tribute to the pianist—began as a jazz piano competition. It has mushroomed into a jazz education advocacy force with educational programs that span the globe and have attracted the attention and support of a coalition packed with star power.

That coalition was on full display as a weekend of anniversary events featured a who's who of jazz luminaries, screen stars and politicians from both sides of the aisle, including the President of the United States.

The festivities kicked off with a dinner and performance at the White House hosted by President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush on Sept. 14. In addressing the gathering, the president lauded jazz as "an American cultural treasure." Following dinner, newswoman Barbara Walters emceed as an all-star lineup performed during a taping of the PBS series "In Performance At The White House."

Alto saxophonist Bobby Watson joined a trio of Monk Institute alumni—trumpeter Gregory Diaz, pianist Helen Sung and singer Lisa Henry—on a rendition of "Kansas City." Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Roy Hargrove dug in on Hancock's "Watermelon Man."

The next day, Congress got into the act as Senators Thad Cochran and Ted Stevens joined with Representatives John Conyers Jr., John Dingell and Ed Markey to sponsor a congressional luncheon in honor of the institute.

Both events were timed in coordination with the 2006 Thelonious Monk International Piano Competition. Over the years, the competition has rotated instruments to uncover jazz talents such as pianists Marcus Roberts and Jacky Terrasson, saxophonists Joshua Redman, Tim

Warfield and Chris Potter, guitarist Anthony Wilson as well as singers Jane Monheit and Tierney Sutton.

"This year, we're going to shine a spotlight on my father's instrument one more time—the piano," said Monk Institute board of trustees chair T.S. Monk to kick off the competition's semifinals. Twelve pianists, born in eight different nations, performed at the Smithsonian Institution's Baird Auditorium. If the near-capacity audience wasn't daunting for contestants, the judging panel was: Hancock, Randy Weston, Dr. Billy Taylor, Danilo Pérez, Andrew Hill and Renee Rosnes.

From the semifinals, a trio of pianists were selected and performed during the next evening's 20th anniversary gala at the Kennedy Center. Tigran Hamasyan, a 19-year-old from Armenia, took first place. Gerald Clayton, son of jazz bassist John Clayton, won second prize and Aaron Parks, a member of Terence Blanchard's quintet, took third.

Monk celebration organizers balanced the competition finals with speeches from a variety of notables. Former Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Madeline Albright delivered moving words about the power of jazz.

"During my term, the Thelonious Monk Jazz Ambassadors visited several nations on behalf of the United States," Albright said. "They traveled to South Africa, India, Thailand and Chile bringing one of the finest gifts anyone can offer—the sounds of jazz."

"In the depths of the Cold War, when nothing else could go behind the iron curtain, our jazz musicians went," Powell added. "They showed what America was all about, what our cultural and value system was all about. And it made a difference in the history of the last 50 years."

Powell helped cap the evening by welcoming Stevie Wonder to the stage. Wonder received the Maria Fisher Founder's Award for his long-time support of the Monk Institute and jazz education. —Frank Alkyer