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MUSIC



Ben Williams played Duke Ellington's "Caravan" with Dee Dee Bridgewater to win top prize.

Local Star Ben Williams Wins Thelonious Monk Competition

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After a three-year absence, the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition returned to Washington on Sunday night and gave local fans plenty to cheer about. For the world of jazz, the glittering gala and competition are Oscar night and "American Idol" finals rolled into one — though with a much higher level of talent.

Since its founding in 1987, the annual contest, sponsored by the Washington-based Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, has become the most prestigious competition in the world for aspiring jazz musicians. Focusing on a different instrument each year, it has become the equivalent of the Van Cliburn and Tchaikovsky competitions in classical music. Past winners and finalists, such as Joshua Redman, Jane Monheit and Eric Alexander, have become the new stars of jazz.

This year focused on the bass, the unwieldy instrument that anchors the harmony and rhythm of most jazz ensembles. Fifteen competitors came from all over the world for Saturday's semifinals at the National Museum of Natural History's Baird Auditorium.

The six judges, including such iconic bassists as Ron Carter, Charlie Haden and Dave Holland, winnowed the list to three, and those finalists performed Sunday with singer Dee Dee Bridgewater and a rhythm section of pianist Geoff Keezer and drummer Carl Allen.

The crowd favorite was 24-year-old Ben Williams, who grew up in Northeast D.C. and graduated from Davey Yarbrough's jazz program at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. He pulled hard at the strings, building up a powerful rhythmic attack on Duke Ellington's "Caravan," locking eyes and trading musical ideas with the ebullient Bridge-

water.

The other competitors, Joe Sanders from Milwaukee and Matt Brewer of Albuquerque, were solid, but a huge hometown cheer erupted when the top prize went to Williams, anointing him the finest young jazz bass player in the world.

"My whole life has been preparation for this," he said backstage.

He began playing the upright bass at 12, when the instrument towered over his head. His mother, Bennie Barnes Williams, recalled getting a call from a teacher at Hardy Middle School, asking, "What size vehicle do you have?"

After the Duke Ellington School, Williams graduated from Michigan State University and is currently enrolled in the master's program at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. For winning the competition, he receives a \$20,000 scholarship and a recording contract with the Concord Records group.

Beyond the talent competition, the annual Monk gathering has become the glamorous event on the jazz calendar. Thelonious Monk Jr. and actor Billy Dee Williams were the hosts, and Herbie Hancock and Tipper Gore introduced the winners.

Blue Note Records executive Bruce Lundvall was saluted for his contributions to jazz, prompting Dianne Reeves to sing a heartfelt "I Wish You Love" in his honor. Other performances included a reunion of the three surviving members of Miles Davis's second quintet, Hancock, Carter and Wayne Shorter; also, McCoy Tyner, Kurt Elling, Jason Moran, Nicholas Payton, Joe Lovano, Terence Blanchard, George Duke and Bobby McFerrin, who brought down the house with his vocal acrobatics on Bud Powell's "Bouncing With Bud."

But no one got a bigger hand than Ben Williams, the new hometown hero.