
The Future of the Beat

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By Larry Blumenfeld

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Moments after Justin Brown sat behind a drum kit on Saturday afternoon, the mood at the National Museum of Natural History's Baird Auditorium shifted. His bass drum kicks nudged the rhythm forward and back on the bebop standard "Au Privave." When he took a solo, it expressed narrative arc more than technique. The ninth of 12 semifinalists to perform at the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Drums Competition, Mr. Brown had upped the ante, not so much by displaying skills—he did that, but so did others—as by bringing the house band together as a well-tuned vehicle fueled by clear rhythmic ideas. Above all else, that's what good jazz drummers do, each in a personal way.

Mr. Brown and two of the three semifinalists that followed him, Colin Stranahan and Jamison Ross, made the cut into Sunday night's final round. Where the semifinals were a laid-back affair, the finals were folded into a glittery Kennedy Center gala, enabled by a State Department alliance and the sort of corporate support jazz generally clamors to find. Again, Mr. Brown impressed. Mr. Stranahan, up next, took a bold approach. He used ruminative cymbal washes to introduce Dizzy Gillespie's "Con Alma," then changed up beats in pace with the fleet harmonic shifts of John Coltrane's "Countdown." It was daring stuff, especially in a competition, and it worked.



Steve Munding

From left: Herbie Hancock, Justin Brown, Colin Stranahan and Jamison Ross.

Mr. Ross, an imposing figure with a disarming smile, was the last to perform. He slapped a tambourine to begin the 5/4 blues "Magnolia Triangle," written by James Black, one of the drum heroes of New Orleans, where Mr. Ross now lives. He played with swagger. He relaxed into and then never left a soul-jazz groove for his closer, the original "Shrimp and Grits." His set was unaffected by influences—traditional Afro-Latin and Middle Eastern rhythms, say, or hip-hop and electronica beats—that inform the playing of many young jazz drummers. Yet it exuded easeful command. It pleased the crowd. And it won over a panel of judges whose

jazz-drumming authority spans generations and styles: Ben Riley, Jimmy Cobb, Peter Erskine, Carl Allen, Terri Lyne Carrington and Brian Blade. Mr. Ross took first place, which includes a \$25,000 award and a recording contract with Concord Music Group. (Second place went to Mr. Brown, third to Mr. Stranahan.)

Mr. Ross, 24, grew up in Jacksonville, Fla. Mr. Brown, 28, who hails from Richmond, Calif., and Mr. Stranahan, 26, from Denver, Colo., both live in New York City. They were among the drummers—from six states as well as Israel, Germany and Slovenia—selected from hundreds of entrants, all under the cutoff age of 30. At the semifinals, requirements included making use of the full house band (pianist Geoffrey Keezer, bassist Rodney Whitaker and saxophonist Jon Gordon, the 1996 Monk winner) and playing a Thelonious Monk composition. (Three chose "Evidence," which showcases through its melody the art of rhythmic displacement. Mr. Brown used it for an extended full-kit essay; Mr. Stranahan staggered its phrases against rigid beats on snare and hi-hat to achieve novel tension.)

Afterward, the finalists embraced like the old friends that they are, having met via organized jazz programs: Mr. Stranahan and Mr. Brown met through the Brubeck Institute, and Mr. Ross at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Essentially Ellington high-school band competition. These institutional presences didn't exist when the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz was founded 26 years ago. Its annual competition began the following year, when such an event was, to some, controversial. Even last month, a post on pianist Ethan Iverson's "Do the Math" blog sparked online debate over whether jazz competitions support or inhibit creativity. Through their postcompetition work, some former Monk winners—trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and percussionist Pedrito Martinez, for instance—make a case in the affirmative. Monk competition judges create their own criteria for excellence. After the semifinals, Mr. Riley, 79, said: "I'm looking for a feeling. Everyone has technique, but it's how they express themselves that matters." Noam Israeli, a 24-year-old Israeli drummer who played with distinction on Saturday, said: "I think they're looking for honesty and a sense of completeness."

The Monk Institute's programs now include international outreach tours and an elite postgraduate program whose alumni include Mr. Stranahan. Its competition, which rotates instruments annually, is a highly visible way to burnish reputations. Yet these finalists are professionals, already on the rise. The night after the finals, Mr. Brown played Manhattan's Jazz Standard, supporting pianist Gerald Clayton (a Monk finalist in 2006). On Tuesday, Mr. Stranahan took the Village Vanguard stage in guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel's Standards Trio. Mr. Ross works with both saxophonist Wess Anderson and singer Carmen Lundy.

On Saturday, T.S. Monk, Thelonious Monk's son, filled stage changeovers with stories of his beginnings as a drummer, alongside his father. On Sunday, he shared host duties with pianist Herbie Hancock, the institute's chairman, and others including Tipper Gore (who plays drums) and Helen Mirren. The gala carried a theme, "Women, Music, and Diplomacy," and included an

award presentation to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who has long championed the institute. She spoke about jazz's influence during Soviet rule in her birthplace, Czechoslovakia, and its relevance for cultural diplomacy today. Less expected was her turn at the drum kit, joyfully wielding mallets. That bit of theater followed more serious-minded performances by notable players, many of them female, including singers Patti Austin and Gretchen Parlato, and capped by Aretha Franklin, scatting on "My Funny Valentine" and reaffirming soul eminence on "Respect."

A closing full-cast rendition of Monk's "In Walked Bud" was something of a trainwreck, with stellar drummers taking turns—except for the chorus claimed by Mr. Riley, who memorably and regularly played that tune with Monk. It was a reminder that, with just several bars and well-placed beats, the right jazz drummer can lend order and meaning to any moment.

Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz for the Journal. He recently won the Jazz Journalists Association's Helen Dance-Robert Palmer Award for writing in 2011.