

NEWS

Aretha Franklin and Dee Dee Bridgewater Saluted at Thelonious Monk Institute International Jazz Piano Competition & All-Star Concert Gala

By Melinda Newman

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Herbie Hancock and Dee Dee Bridgewater perform during the 2018 Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz International Piano Competition at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater on December 3, 2018 in Washington, DC. Photo by Paul Morigi/Getty Images for Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz

Tom Oren won the 30th Thelonious Monk Institute International Jazz Piano Competition on Monday night (Dec. 3) at the organization's annual All-Star Concert Gala, held at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center. The 24-year old from Tel Aviv received a \$25,000 scholarship and a record contract with Concord Music Group for his inventive takes on Cole Porter's "Just One of Those Things" and "Just As Though You Were Here," popularized by Frank Sinatra and Tommy Dorsey.

Oren was one of 13 semi-finalists who competed Dec. 2 before a panel of judges that included jazz pianists Monty Alexander, Joanne Brackeen, Cyrus Chestnut, Herbie Hancock, Jason Moran, Danilo Pérez and Renee Rosnes. The judges whittled the number down to three finalists — Oren, Isaiah Thompson and Maxime Sanchez — all of whom performed Monday before the judges made their final selection. Bassist Rodney Whitaker and drummer Carl Allen accompanied each competitor.

The competition, which focuses on a different instrument each year, was just one-third of a lively, often emotional evening, hosted by actor Blair Underwood, that also included a tribute to [Aretha Franklin](#), who died Aug. 16, and Grammy-Award and Tony-Award winning vocalist/actress [Dee Dee Bridgewater](#), who received the Maria Fisher Founder's Award.

Franklin had been a supporter of the Institute for more than two decades, performing at the annual event a number of times, most recently at the White House for 2016's International Jazz Day. In her honor, a band fronted by Ledisi, Roberta Gambarini, 2015 Jazz Institute winner Jazzmeia Horn and 1994 runner up Lisa Henry ran through a playful medley of Franklin tunes, including "The House That Jack Built," "Chain of Fools," "Baby, I Love You," "I Say A Little Prayer" "(Your Make Me Feel) Like A Natural Woman" and "Respect."

Following the tribute, Hancock, the Institute's chairman, announced that the Institute had established the Aretha Franklin Young Artists Award, which will honor one up-and-coming vocalist each year who will get showcased at an Institute event starting next year.

Horn and 2012 winner Jamison Ross kicked off the salute to Bridgewater with a duet of Billie Holiday's "Lover Man," in homage to Bridgewater's 2009 album, *Eleanora Fagan (1915-1959): To Billie with Love from Dee Dee*. Ledisi followed with a powerhouse version of soul classic "Try A Little Tenderness," which Bridgewater covered on her most recent album, *Memphis...Yes, I'm Ready*, while Deborah Joy Winans honored Bridgewater's Broadway career with "Believe in Yourself," from *The Wiz*.

In her acceptance speech, Bridgewater praised the work of the Institute that has allowed her to travel the globe “to show the joy of this music.” Growing up in Flint, Mich., Bridgewater said she dreamt of being a singer. Her parents listened to jazz, but, at night, she’d wrap the ends of the antenna on her transistor radio in foil and a world of music was brought to her young ears via the stations she could reach throughout the U.S., including WDIA in Memphis, where she was born. “I loved the Grand Ole Opry and Minnie Pearl and Lawrence Welk, Loretta Young and Elvis Presley, but I’d sneak out of the house for some James Brown,” she said.

But the artist most responsible for shaping Bridgewater and her career was jazz singer Betty Carter, who also hailed from Flint. “I’d never seen a woman move like she did or command a band like she did and she even had her own label. All my life, I’ve wanted to be like Betty,” Bridgewater said, adding that she too now ran her own label. She also talked about the joy she derived from mentoring younger artists — “if you’re younger than me, you’re one of my children,” she said — including Theo Coker, who will release his upcoming album on Bridgewater’s label.

After accepting the award from Hancock, Bridgewater joined Hancock and trumpeter and 2007 Competition winner Ambrose Akinmusire in a stunning performance of Mongo Santamaria's "Afro Blue," from her 2007 album, *Red Earth*.

Under the sure hand of musical director John Beasley, the evening included a number of other performances spanning several generations. The Institute's National Peer-to-Peer High School All-Star Jazz Sextet opened the evening with Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground." The Thelonious Monk Institute Ensemble, a septet composed of musicians attending the Institute’s master’s degree program at UCLA, performed Hancock's "Riot." On the other end of the spectrum, spry 92-year old saxophonist Jimmy Heath accompanied vocalist Gambarini on his composition, "Without Song."

The evening closed with an all-star performance of Miles Davis' "Walkin.'" The competition, which started in 1987, has launched the careers of a number of major jazz artists including saxophonist Joshua Redman; vocalists Cécile McLorin Salvant, Jane Monheit and Gretchen Parlato; pianist Marcus Roberts; bassist Ben Williams; and trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire.

Proceeds from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition and All-Star Gala Concert help fund the Institute’s public school education programs in Washington D.C., Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, Newark, San Francisco and the Mississippi Delta.

The Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz was established in 1986 with the mission of training the next generation of jazz artists and preserving jazz as a global art form. All of the Institute's programs are provided free of charge to students, schools and communities worldwide.