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Pianist Kris Bowers Wins 2011 Thelonious Monk Competition

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[WALTER RAY WATSON](#)



Kris Bowers bows to the audience after performing in the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition. He took home first prize.

Brendan Hoffman/WireImage

Pianist Kris Bowers won this year's Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition on a balmy September night in Washington D.C.

The Los Angeles native is in his second year of a Master's program at The Juilliard School. He edged past talented finalists Joshua White and Emmet Cohen.

Bowers was the last contestant to take the stage Monday night after Cohen and White made their best cases to the crowd and judges. Also at the sold-out event at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts were fans, patrons, Washington dignitaries and many famed musicians here for the 25th Anniversary Gala of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz — including special honoree Aretha Franklin.

Bowers said he kept playing the night over and over in his head. "I can't believe it happened," he said. "I'm still trying to convince myself that it happened. And, yes, it's pretty amazing."



Aretha Franklin sings at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz 25th Anniversary Gala.
Brendan Hoffman/WireImage

From The Womb

In an interview after the competition, Bowers said that before he was born, his parents, a couple of non-musicians, made a decision that he was going to play piano. "They played through headphones

on her belly," he said. "And when I was four, they were showing me where the keys were on the piano."

After moving from the semi-final round, held on Sunday, Bowers said he felt some relief moving to the final round. That's where an initial group of 12 pianists evaporated to just three. He seemed to suggest that making it to the final round was already a safe harbor, as all finalists walk away with a prize.

"I mean, I love those guys [Cohen and White] and I love their playing," Bowers said. "So it was nice to hear them play, and enjoy it — as that. And, I feel like, after yesterday [the semi-finals], I wasn't really as nervous ... At that point it was time to have fun."

Carl Allen is the artistic director for jazz at Juilliard. He's known Bowers for six years — since he started attending the program.

"He's got a very clear concept, vision, ideas," Allen says. "And it's really wonderful because, again, I've seen how he's grown and developed, to see how he's taken different influences over the past few years to really kind of come up with his own thing. It's modern, but there's tradition there as well. It's great to see that combination."

This is the tenth year Allen, a drummer, has served as a backing musician for the Monk Competition. He and bassist Rodney Whitaker served as the house rhythm section behind the contestants.

"I thought that Kris got it," Allen said. "But you know, they're all very talented pianists. You know, the thing that's always the challenge is, conceptually, they're all coming from different places. Conceptually, the judges are coming from different places. So, you just don't know which way the pendulum is going to swing. But I thought they all did a great job."



Joshua White (left) performs with Carl Allen (drums) and Rodney Whitaker (bass) at the Monk Competition semi-finals.

Steve Mundinger/Courtesy of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz

Three And Two

Joshua White was very practical about his second place finish.

"It feels great to have an opportunity to just play and be on a platform where you can showcase what you do and how you think as a musician," he said. "Any opportunity you have like that, especially on this level where there's so many people who can appreciate what you're trying to do — it's a fantastic opportunity. ... I just want to show how I'm feeling and how I'm thinking and present them in a clear manner."

White began studying of classical music at age seven, and eventually began playing music in his church near San Diego, Calif. That practice continues to this day — he plays for his church's adult and children's choirs. He was 18 when he attended a university jazz camp held in San Diego. By 21 or 22, White said he made a choice to pursue jazz, "as a lifestyle."

"I think it fits me pretty well because jazz affords me the opportunity to express myself [in a way] that feels natural," he said.

Emmet Cohen was gracious about his third place finish.

"I did what I do, hope for the best," he said. "It's an honor and a privilege to be chosen as one of the three.

"I can't complain about anything. I just thought I had a great time playing with Rodney [Whitaker] and Carl [Allen] tonight, just eating up this huge party of people I've transcribed for years, it's really cool — like Herbie [Hancock], Danilo Perez, the judges, Renee [Rosnes] I've seen a million times play. Joey DeFrancesco — I play organ, that's my main man. I was real excited to see him! I can't remember all the names — Jane Monheit, I love; Dee Dee Bridgewater; Aretha. It's something else. Not really that many events like this that go on."

When asked what was next for him, he didn't have to look far.

"I go back to Miami at 8 o'clock in the morning, I have to go back to school — this is my last year at the University of Miami," he said. "And playing a senior recital for one of my good friends. I have a lot of homework to do, a lot of orchestration homework to do. But maybe it can wait. We might have a party back at my house tomorrow night to celebrate a little bit."

Careers In Music

Pianist Renee Rosnes — along with Herbie Hancock, Ellis Marsalis, Jason Moran and Danilo Perez — formed a sort of Supreme Court of jazz musicianship for this year's competition. Rosnes openly admitted the difficulty in judging the dozen pianists this past weekend.

"All the players were phenomenally talented — are phenomenally talented," she said. "Listening to each one, I think all of us were really engaged and each person had something unique to bring to the table. It's always a difficult decision when you have this amount of talent in one competition."

She said that all the contestants, especially the three finalists, could look forward to great careers in music.



The judges for the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition. L-R: Renee Rosnes, Jason Moran, Danilo Pérez, Ellis Marsalis, Herbie Hancock.

Steve Mundinger/Courtesy of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz

"It's interesting, when you look back at the [Monk Competition] winners, no matter what instrument was featured that year ... 1, 2, 3, you'll recognize everyone's name," she said. "They're out there working, they all have careers and it's not so important if they came in first or second or third, because what we're saying as judges is we're seeing a lot of talent and promise here. ... This is just a little springboard for them to do what they were going to do anyway."

For Kris Bowers, this year has already been a steady climb of career successes. He's played with newer jazz stars like trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, and is a regular bandmate for the singer Jose James. He can also point to recorded work on Kanye West and Jay-Z's *Watch The Throne*, and was touring just a month ago with hip-hop icons Q-Tip and Black Thought.

He doesn't hesitate to consider what winning this honor means to him, besides the rewards of a recording contract with Concord Music Group and a \$25,000 scholarship.

"It's amazing," he said. "Just that Herbie Hancock knows my name. That's something I thought wouldn't happen in a million years."



Former Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell backstage at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz 25th Anniversary Gala.

Brendan Hoffman/WireImage