

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Jazz's Hancock Competition Returns, Crowning an Electrifying Rising Star

Jahari Stampley, a 23-year-old pianist from Chicago, won the prize as the genre's premier coronation ceremony for young talent was held for the first time since 2019.



By Giovanni Russonello
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Jahari Stampley competing at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Competition. Credit: Steve Mundinger, Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz

After a four-year hiatus, the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Competition swung back into action last weekend at the Perelman Performing Arts Center in Lower Manhattan, and even before the judges announced a winner, it seemed possible that a star was being born.

His name is Jahari Stampley, he hails from Chicago and despite being virtually unknown nationally until now, he has a style that is both timeless and unmistakably his own.

But first, what about that hiatus? Did we miss jazz's premier coronation ceremony for young, rising talent?

The competition — which until 2019 was named for Thelonious Monk, and typically switches between instruments every year — has a proven track record of nominating the next jazz stars. But its hibernation lasted through a heavy period, years that have not been especially kind to entrenched institutions or traditions. A lot of old thinking has recently gone out the window.

The net effect has been positive for the music. Jazz's future — actually, its present — looks brighter than it has in at least 50 years. In April 2022, Jon Batiste cleaned up at the Grammys, becoming the first jazz musician below retirement age in decades to win album of the year. Young improvisers like him seem less intimidated than ever by jazz's gloried history, and are dumping their energies into fusions and multimedia projects. It is about time.

The competition has historically done a surprisingly good job of maintaining its relevance, and in the past 20 years or so it has proved a strong predictor of success. Many of its runners-up, as well as most of its recent first-place finishers, have become stars.

But now that the Hancock Competition is back, the question must be asked: What use does the new generation have for a grand contest-cum-gala, where the only keyboard is a grand piano, and the house band is made up of older, neoclassical jazz musicians?

For much of Saturday afternoon, when 11 pianists under 30 competed in the semifinals, there was cause to wonder. Many of the musicians were long on chops but shorter on distinction. Predictably clever tune choices abounded: a lot of Wayne Shorter, Thelonious Monk, even some George Gershwin. At one point I started to wonder if there was a rule against bringing in your own original tunes. (There wasn't.)

The house rhythm section didn't help matters. The drummer Carl Allen is proudly agnostic about most styles of drumming that go beyond a 4/4 swing feel, and over the two-day event he seemed as committed as ever to his principles. So the competitors were subjected to an additional criterion of nuance: They could either double down on the swinging-bop feel or they could do their best to wriggle out of its grasp, while still projecting a crucial appearance of band symbiosis.

Only Stampley seemed to have a real solution, and it wasn't going with the flow. In the semifinals, he played a razor-sharp blues by Buddy Montgomery, a rhythmically stacked Geri Allen tune and a classic Black American spiritual. With his tall, wiry frame hunched over the piano, his style arrived like a lightning bolt. He seemed to have as much in common with pianists steeped in Black classical and 20th-century gospel — like Artina McCain and Courtney Bryan — as he did with the idiosyncratic jazz lineage he has assembled for himself, which appears to include fast-fingered expressionists like John Hicks and Don Pullen.

With a sound built around fluttering, arpeggiated motifs that he carries across keys and the full range of the keyboard, Stampley also refers directly to an African inheritance, redolent of the patterned plucking of a Malian kora or a Zimbabwean mbira.

Most important, his playing felt unforced, as if powered from an internal engine. This was an artist you wanted to hear again, and to know more about.

Stampley, 23, grew up in a musical household in Chicago, has toured with Stanley Clarke and released his debut album last month. He recently completed a tour with his own trio, featuring his mother, D-Erania Stampley, on synthesizers and saxophone, and Miguel Russell on drums and synths. (Stampley plays drums, too, and they all trade off on instruments. He also designs iPhone apps, and did all the visuals for his own LP.)

At the finals, while the other contestants — Paul Cornish, 26, of Houston and Connor Rohrer, 23, of Mechanicsburg, Pa. — wore tailored suits, Stampley came clad in a patterned shirt, loosefitting corduroy pants, white shoes and a head wrap. His energy was both intense and private. He was coping with a deep bereavement: A close friend had died on Saturday. The next night, he chose to play a lovely, modulating Hicks ballad, "After the Morning," as a tribute, and an original, "Prelude Entrence," in his allotted two-tune set at the finals.

Cornish, who won the American Jazz Piano Competition in 2018, more than proved his mettle, sounding impressively contemporary and stylistically chameleonic — but perhaps too chameleonic. To its credit, the contest's all-star panel of judges — Herbie Hancock himself, Bill Charlap, Orrin Evans, Hiromi and Danilo Pérez — wanted something more than versatility.

Rohrer showed his talents well, too, packing welcome dashes of dissonance into clustered harmonies, with a push-and-pull hesitation that made it impossible to be bored. But he might have made a few

too many references to the classic contemporary-piano touchstones: Bill Evans, Hancock and Chick Corea. This too was not what interested the judges.



Herbie Hancock with Stampley, the competition's winner. Credit: Steve Munding, Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz.

As they deliberated, the audience at the Perelman Center heard a set of performances from Lizz Wright, Ambrose Akinmusire and others, and addresses from Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, the vocalist and activist Dee Dee Bridgewater and the actor Delroy Lindo. The Hancock Institute, a multimillion-dollar nonprofit, runs a number of educational programs that — similar to the competition — balance the privileges of a major institution with a commitment to letting young musicians define their own creative directions.

Something cool happened when the Institute's graduate-level students came onstage to play "Actual Proof," a Hancock composition from his

jazz-rock fusion years. This is the institute's first class under the directorship of Akinmusire, a winner of the 2007 trumpet competition and alum of the institute's graduate program. Rather than taking individual solos, the entire rhythm section began improvising together, passing the focus without "trading fours." Then the trumpet, alto and tenor saxophones returned and did the same thing, improvising polyphonically. Nobody soloed. Is this what they teach in schools nowadays?

In years past, when known as the Monk Competition, these proceedings took place at the Kennedy Center's stately Eisenhower Theater in Washington. This year, the institute moved the competition to the newly opened Perelman Center after being offered the main hall. The decision backfired. A new venue also means a newly assembled team of technicians, and the difficulties on Saturday and Sunday were too legion to count. The greatest shame was that the bass was occasionally far louder than the piano. When a whole curtain fell from the rafters midway through Sunday night's festivities, it was almost a relief. Now we could all just laugh about it.

Not long after that, the esteemed vocalist Dianne Reeves came onstage to accept the institute's founder's award. In a speech, she remembered being welcomed with "open arms" by the jazz community as a rising vocalist in the 1970s, and she assured Stampley, Rohrer and Cornish that the community would support them, too. She quoted Abbey Lincoln, the great singer and composer, who liked to say, "Jazz is a spirit."

Sure enough, when Stampley was announced the winner of the contest's \$50,000 prize, those words felt vindicated. His performance had put aside any anxieties about criteria or skill sets, and leaned into making his spirit felt. If jazz in the 21st century has all but shed its sense of definition and exclusion, that hasn't come at the expense of one of its other defining values: meritocracy. On the bandstand, in social media feeds and even in academic settings, musicians themselves remain the major arbiters of who will rise to carry jazz's mantle. It's good to see a competition stubborn enough to stick to that commitment, and flexible enough to welcome the change.

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