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Jazz's New Gig: Go Along and Get Along

By PETER WATROUS

WASHINGTON, Nov. 26 — For its 10th anniversary, the Thelonious Monk Institute gave itself a party. Not a simple party, either: with participants like Stevie Wonder, K. D. Lang, Bill Cosby, Tony Bennett, Natalie Cole and other entertainment stars, it was a party aimed directly at television — it will be broadcast on Dec. 28 on ABC — and at the heartland. It will be the first time in nearly three decades that jazz has been on network television in this fashion.

Behind the scenes, there was much hand-wringing and soul-searching about jazz capitulating to the pressures of television. But the event, which coincided with the institute's annual competition for young players and composers, underscored the peculiar state of jazz today. The music is being exposed to a public beyond its traditional boundaries, and as a result it is being forced into a role — as mainstream entertainment — that it consciously abandoned long ago.

Monday night's gala at the Kennedy Center, with dancers and comics and pop stars, undermined the original purposes of the institute's competition. Early in its life, the competition drew jazz's best young talents, and the winners were virtually guaranteed a recording contract and a career. It used to be informal. Now it is formal, with the judging sessions this year closed to critics for the first time. The stakes are so high and losing can be so adverse to newly blooming careers that many young jazz musicians avoid it. This year's winner, a smooth, smart saxo-



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Jon Gordon, the winner of the Thelonious Monk Institute saxophone competition, with Kenny Baron on piano, at the Kennedy Center.

phonist from New York named Jon Gordon, was given a few minutes on the show. He won't make it onto national television.

But Mr. Gordon will take home \$20,000, twice last year's prize. He's not guaranteed much more; jazz record sales are flat and the major labels aren't signing new musicians. So while there is impressive interest at the upper reaches of official American culture — the Monk Institute is closely tied to the White House, and this year's reception was held at Vice President Al Gore's residence — the winner of the contest can bank his money but that's all.

Still, even divided, jazz is clearly a big attraction, and Jerry Florence, vice president for consumer marketing at Nissan Motors, has put money on this horse to reach a specific audience. Nissan underwrote most of the nearly \$3 million the contest and television show cost.

"We've obviously done a lot of research," Mr. Florence said, "and we've found that the demographics of people who buy our car is the same as the jazz demographics."

Joshua Redman, the saxophonist who won the Monk competition in 1991, was a judge this year along with Wayne Shorter, Joe Lovano, Jimmy Heath and Jackie McLean. Mr. Redman, who has become the most influential young jazz musician since Wynton Marsalis, takes a realistic view of the competition's role.

"I'm clear on the contradictions of having a competition in jazz," he said. "But in American culture, competitions are what people want. They draw a lot of attention, and believe

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me, this wouldn't be on television if it hadn't originally been a competition. The interest wouldn't be there, and it's really obvious how important it is to have the show be aired."

The concert was indeed a show built for television. To attract a wider audience, the pressure was to put on vocalists and stars. And the stars showed up. Bill Cosby was the master of ceremonies. The comedian Sinbad did a routine about jazz. Ms. Lang sang a tribute to Peggy Lee

with Grover Washington Jr., and there was a Latin tribute with Tito Puente and Jon Secada. Wynton Marsalis played a tribute to Louis Armstrong, and Mr. Redman and Stevie Wonder played Mr. Wonder's "Sir Duke."

"Entertainment is part of jazz's history," said Tom Carter, the president of the Monk Institute. "We're celebrating the institute and the influence jazz has had on American culture at large. We were overwhelmed by the amount of stars that wanted to do it, so clearly jazz has touched a significant portion of the

entertainment world. And finally, the beauty is the musicians."

For the performers, who were paid union scale and thus essentially donated their time, it was a type of cultural advocacy. The musicians were there to do their best for something they love. At parties after the concert, the musicians were unanimous and euphoric in the belief that the compromises to get on television were clearly worth the benefits.

"When I was a kid in Detroit, radio was my eyes and ears," Mr. Wonder said. "I listened to jazz all the time, taking chords from the pianists, lis-

tening to harmonies. And the singers, Ella and Sarah. I remember Carmen McRae's version of 'Alfie.' People would hear the way I played piano and say: 'Damn, Stevie, that sounds like Monk. You got ears!' So being here is more than a pay-back, its an honor to be part of it, a pleasure. And it's long overdue to get something like this on television."

Mr. Secada, who has a master's degree in jazz singing from the University of Miami, was there because of the institute's emphasis on jazz education; the institute runs a handful of important educational projects.

"I think jazz in any form is great on television," he said. "It's so rare. But I taught for five years, and I

know how important education is. With more specials like this, maybe jazz will return to high schools, maybe music budgets will be restored. It's very important for the life of the country."

Beyond the television special, there was finally the drama that comes from the competition. As usual, there was controversy: Joel Frahm, a tenor saxophonist from New York who often plays at Augie's and Smalls, appeared to be an obvious contender for first place, some of the judges said, and many of the critics in the audience agreed. But Mr. Frahm didn't even make it to the finals because generational and esthetic gaps scuttled his candidacy.

It was thrilling for the judges to

hear so much talent. "I judged the last saxophone contest in 1991," said Jimmy Heath, speaking of a contest that included Mr. Redman, Tim Warfield, Chris Potter and Eric Alexander. "And I think that this year had more talent, more skill. Some time ago I judged another contest with Dizzy Gillespie. He and I were talking about how many great young musicians were out there, and he said, 'You know, the music is in god hands.' I agree with him. There are so many young musicians out there who really know what they're doing. It makes me optimistic, because whatever happens with audiences or record companies, the musicians will always be there. And they know what they're doing."