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Tearing Down the House At a Jazz Competition

By PETER WATROUS

WASHINGTON, Sept. 26 — Musicians call it "getting house," working the audience into a frenzy, and on Friday night at Baldr Auditorium at the Smithsonian Institution here, the 63-year-old singer Teri Thornton, competing in the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition, not only got house but large building, zip code and city. Ms. Thornton, who last released a recording in 1963 and now lives in the actors' retirement home in Englewood, N.J., won first prize in one of the best fields of competitors that the Monk Institute has seen in years. She did it by singing well and by digging into some of the best aspects of black entertainment culture, the parts that make audience members and performers join in the same experience.

"Teri just came out here and said, 'This is my stage,'" said Nienna Freelon, a singer and one of the judges for the competition. (Joe Williams, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Dianne Reeves and Diana Krall were the others.) "She just booted everybody else off. I was waiting for the hair on the back of my neck to stand up. And when she started singing, I got that tingling feeling you get when real music is being made."

This year's competition, the 12th, featured vocalists, and, as important, featured new rules. Previously the competition had age limits — usually around 30 — meant to keep the competition spry and to draw attention to it as a showcase for young musicians. After the last vocal competition, in 1993, the Monk Institute had to field about 100 complaints from older singers who felt excluded. In other years, competition has focused on particular instruments.

"It was a mess," said Shelby Fisher, the

executive producer of the competition. "So we decided to change the age limit. Things take longer to mature than other instrumentalists, so we've adapted." A result was that plenty of music was sung, and a new level of professionalism infused the competition.

"It's not an accident that the older performers were really making music instead of showing off their technique," said Ms. Fisher. "The admission of older performers changed the whole environment of the semifinals and made them much better. When they sang, they understood what they were saying. They were telling a story. In the last competition, when a 20-year-old sang 'Sophisticated Lady,' it sounded a bit silly. But when Everett Greene, 64, sang the blues, you knew that he knew what he was singing about."

The semifinal round, with 15 singers chosen from some 300 applicants and held at Washington's best-known jazz club, Blues Alley, on Thursday, was rife with elders turning their performances into exhibitions of experience. Mr. Greene, a large man, sang in a nearly forgotten baritone style that had the women in the audience talking back.

"I used to dream about angels," she sang. "Ohhhhh," responded the women. Mr. Greene smiled.

When Ms. Thornton came out, the house erupted in applause, and she sang of love and longing and her abilities resonated through the club.

But singing was nothing compared with her performance for the finals. Ms. Thornton, who won \$20,000 for her debut, came out, said that the performance was dedicated to her sister, the singer Betty Carter, sick with cancer. [Ms. Carter died on Saturday at her home in Brooklyn. An obituary ap-

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pears today.] Ms. Thornton then talked a bit about how she herself had recently beat cancer (she didn't say that she had summoned the strength to perform just last week), and began to wreck the house.

Ms. Thornton started with a standard, then dismissed the pianist Norman Simmons on the piano. She sat down, began an Afro-Cuban piano figure and started singing "I've Got You Under My Skin," all the while laughing with audience members and turning on the piano bench to face them. She finished, received her standing ovation, got up and said, "Well, this isn't politically correct, but too bad," and began a jump blues of her own, using a dry voice and plenty of humor — "I'm going to call out the posse and have him brought back to love" — that sealed her fate. She received another standing ovation, this time with roars.

"I could not allow an opportunity of this magnitude escape without doing my very best," said Ms. Thornton, who left her career behind until recently to bring up her children. "The stage is my great love, and I like to entertain, and it's good to feel that the love is reciprocated."

All of which left the second-place winner, 20-year-old Jane Monheit, from New York, in a tough spot. She had to follow Ms. Thornton and clear away the wreckage, which she did by singing the ballad "Detour Ahead" in a pure, clear and cool voice. Ms. Monheit sounded honest, talented and controlled, and her performance had the record company executives

and agents in the audience rustling around in their briefcases for spare contracts to sign her up. Ms. Monheit, at her young age, has so much promise that the executives were already trying to figure out how to frame her talent, how to make her more than just a jazz singer. Jazz records don't sell much anymore.

"I've been to about 10 of the contests," said Jeff Levensen, vice president for jazz at Columbia Records. "And this one is one of the best I've been to in a long time, with a really high level of competitors. But I'm worried that so few of the performers were interested in advancing the craft. While the older performers were gifted, I was hoping for something new, somebody that knew the past, but was ready to move forward. I didn't hear it tonight."

If any of the three finalists showed vanguard tendencies, it was Roberta Gambarini, an Italian singer with flawless American diction and a tremendous ability to scat. She opened the finals with a performance of "On the Sunny Side of the Street" that set the level for the rest of the show. First she sang Sonny Rollins's solo on the piece, then Dizzy Gillespie's solo, then ended her rendition with Sonny Stitt's improvisation. It had the band smiling.

At the reception afterward, good cheer permeated the conversations. There was the sense that something good had happened, and the record executives were there figuring out the right tack to take with Ms. Thornton and Ms. Monheit. Should they announce now or wait until next week in New York? Others weren't thinking that way. "I'm really proud to be a



Shana Raab for The New York Times

Teri Thornton at the Thelonious Monk jazz vocals competition.

link in the chain," Ms. Freelon said. "This contest made me proud to be a singer."

"And there were so many different

ways of singing, and thinking, too," she continued. "This was a good crop. I don't think jazz singing is leaving us anytime soon."