

The New York Times

Copyright © 1999 The New York Times

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1999

A Contest Befitting Monk

Competition Shows Where Jazz Piano Is Today

By BEN RATLIFF

WASHINGTON, Oct. 18 — "Jazz" means entirely different things to different people, but there was no question about the goal of this year's Thelonious Monk International Piano Competition. The competitors were judged as contemporary artists by contemporary

artists; the criteria were hard, and the Critic's process seemed free of nostalgia and commercialism.

Notebook The competition started in 1987 and was for piano for the first three years, then started switching to a different instrument each year. Some people have grumbled that in the 1940's Monk himself, with his slangy rhythmic technique, wouldn't have stood a chance against a judging score card that

favors an even distribution of elements like dynamics, time, swing feel and professionalism.

This year the competition circled back to the piano. The finalists' competition on Sunday night wasn't just surprisingly good; it was also indicative of where jazz piano is now. The Herbie clone, a pianist who wants to sound like Herbie Hancock did in the 1960's, was a common figure among young musicians until recently. One of the judges, Eric Reed, was in the competition himself in 1993, and he remembered that the semifinals that year were full of them. But this year the pianists went in different directions. They were intensely rhythmic and experimented with time and accents; they had concise, clever arrangements.

The contest has gained nationwide recognition, growing into a two-day event at the Kennedy Center

Continued on Page 4



Justin Lane for The New York Times

Eric Lewis performing at the Thelonious Monk International Piano Competition at the Kennedy Center on Sunday night.

Fearsome, but Not Too Much So: A Contest Befitting Thelonious Monk

Continued From First Arts Page

taped for the cable television channel BET on Jazz (to be shown in February), with the presence of the Clinton Administration, especially Vice President Al Gore and his wife, Tipper, who are honorary chairmen of the competition. Even if you think a jazz contest is an oxymoron, this one is an undeniable opportunity. For an experienced pianist who has not recorded for a major label—the competition's only requirement—there was almost no reason not to send in a \$25 competition fee and a five-song demo: the winner this year left with \$20,000, an acquaintance with six judges from the A-list of modern jazz piano (aside from Mr. Reed, they were Geri Allen, Cedar Walton, Danilo Perez, Herbie Hancock and Randy Weston), and his style ringing in the ears of record-company people.

Of the last of those perks may be

wishful thinking. The Monk competition became particularly well known in 1991, when Joshua Redman won the saxophone contest, was subsequently signed by Warner Brothers and became a minor household name. Last year's winner, Teri Thornton, got a contract with Verve on the basis of her performance. But many of the competition's other winners haven't been able to parlay their prize into much of a career.

On Saturday and Sunday representatives from only three major record labels were in town for the competition, and all their rosters are overextended. More surprising, independent jazz labels were barely a presence. Perhaps that's because one can hear most of these players in a more relaxed club setting in New York. Perhaps it's because independent labels assume that the Monk competition is a major-label frenzy. Whatever the reasons, it's curious that the jazz business doesn't take

more interest in its own version of the Van Cliburn.

On Saturday at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater, 12 of the 200 pianists who submitted tapes this year performed for the judges and a sizable audience, who could wander in free to watch and listen. Many of the musicians were constrained and proper, and their uptempo pieces—one was required in each set, along with a medium-tempo and a ballad—tended toward empty show. One pianist inserted a note-for-note Art Tatum solo into his set; the panel recognized it, and that was that. Another pianist, technically fearsome, sounded too much like Oscar Peterson, though it escaped no one that sounding like Oscar Peterson isn't easy.

A handful stood out. Orrin Evans, an outspoken, musically and philosophically iconoclastic pianist from Philadelphia, went in as a favorite among aficionados. Mr. Evans hits the keyboard hard to accent rhythm but leaves plenty of space in his improvising; he connects deeply with bassists and drummers, sometimes driving repeated notes into the maw of the rhythm section and risking an audience's irritation. It's aggressive and could be described as the opposite of a homogenized, decorous, panel-ready style.

"There's always a ton of good piano players," said Mr. Reed at a reception Saturday night at the State Department given by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright. In the palatial Benjamin Franklin Room, Mr. Reed stood near an hors d'oeuvres table adorned by a trumpet-shaped trophy. "Trumpets are hard, drums are hard, and the bass is hard," he said. "But the piano is one of those things where you really have to do something exceptional to stand out. It takes something beyond having technique, being able to swing, being able to play changes. Everybody sounded good, but a couple of them put me to sleep."

All four finalists—Mr. Evans, 24, Eric Lewis, 26, Jacob Sacks, 22, and Sam Yahel, 28—played again, for 10 minutes each. Mr. Yahel was a second-timer; he was among the Herbie clones in 1993. His performance was patient and mature, with a continu-



Orrin Evans, an iconoclastic Philadelphia pianist, in the finals of the Monk competition at the Kennedy Center.

ous development of harmony. Afterward he was calm; he explained that he didn't try to second-guess the judges this year. Mr. Sacks, originally from Michigan and now a New Yorker, said he was shocked that he got as far as he did; he was sure the selection would favor more conventional approaches than he. He loves Keith Jarrett and Paul Bley, and his rhythm and touch made the music malleable. On Herbie Nichols's "Blue Chopsticks" he let himself go; he banged some cluster chords, at first for a little accent and then shortly with abandon, lifting himself up from the bench and pummeling the keyboard.

Mr. Evans was impressive in the semifinals, musically and otherwise: he was dressed in a gold kente cloth shirt and cap instead of the job-interview attire of the rest. In his second showing he made some interesting choices: he allowed a drum solo, which no other finalist had done, and he was barely using his left hand, breaking up harmony more than ever. But the rhythm section got away from him, and his second piece, Monk's "Rhythm-a-Ning," lost focus.

Mr. Lewis is tall and thickset, and he has a heavy sound on the keyboard. On Saturday he came on too strong, carpeting the music with dense tremolos. But in the finals he gave a more balanced performance. His first piece, Monk's "Blue Monk,"

Gore gives a talk, Albright gives a party, and Cosby gives awards.

was a solo slow blues, and he strode a little with his left hand, building up to a climax. His second piece was Monk's "Green Chimneys," a minimal, declarative tune that rhythm sections love, and he used his own time-adding introduction. Again he built it up gradually, grabbing fistfuls of notes and gaining volume; this time the audience burst into cheers during his crescendo.

"I got spiritual and emotional at that point," Mr. Lewis said later, standing alone backstage and gathering himself together. "I just wish I had more definition. I was trying to say something. It's tricky trying to maintain definition when I go up into that area of emotion and sound."

After an intermission, there was an all-star concert loosely dedicated to Herbie Hancock, who received the Monk Institute's Founder's Award. The institute is partly based in Los Angeles, where it directs educational programs around the world and is a constituent of the Music Center of

Los Angeles County (along with the Los Angeles Philharmonic), and this was a Los Angeles version of contemporary jazz. It used some good musicians and some great ones, including Grover Washington Jr., Arturo Sandoval, Wayne Shorter and Michael Brecker, but it was showy and rhythmically challenged. The high point was Stevie Wonder playing about 90 seconds of John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" on electric piano; interesting for Mr. Wonder, but any of the four young finalists could have played it better.

Vice President Gore delivered a speech about jazz and America, and Bill Cosby distributed the awards. Mr. Lewis won, with Mr. Evans, Mr. Sacks and Mr. Yahel coming in second through fourth. (Mr. Lewis's set will be broadcast on "Jazz Set With Branford Marsalis" at 6 P.M. on Sunday, Oct. 31, on WBGO, 88.3 FM, in Newark.) There was no lingering feeling that the contest had funneled into a group of safe bets; all four choices were special musicians, and the two with the most peevish sound came in at the top.

"Rhythm is now," became Randy Weston, one of the panelists, at a backstage party at the end of the night. He seemed particularly pleased: his own style is an offshoot of Monk's, and he had just witnessed a competition that Thelonious Monk might well have won.