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No Nightclub, Just Saxophones, Artfully Competing

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25 — Aaron Fletcher, a 22-year-old saxophonist from Thibodaux, La., hears jazz in his head as splendiferous popular music, the kind that makes an audience cheer along. Loren Stillman, a 21-year-old from Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y., hears it as a rare, exotic form whose notes inflate and wilt and trill, almost a kind of meditation on texture. Eli Digibri, 23 and born in Bat Yam, Israel, hears it as athletic and fractured, even to the point of having key notes expunged from a well-known melody.

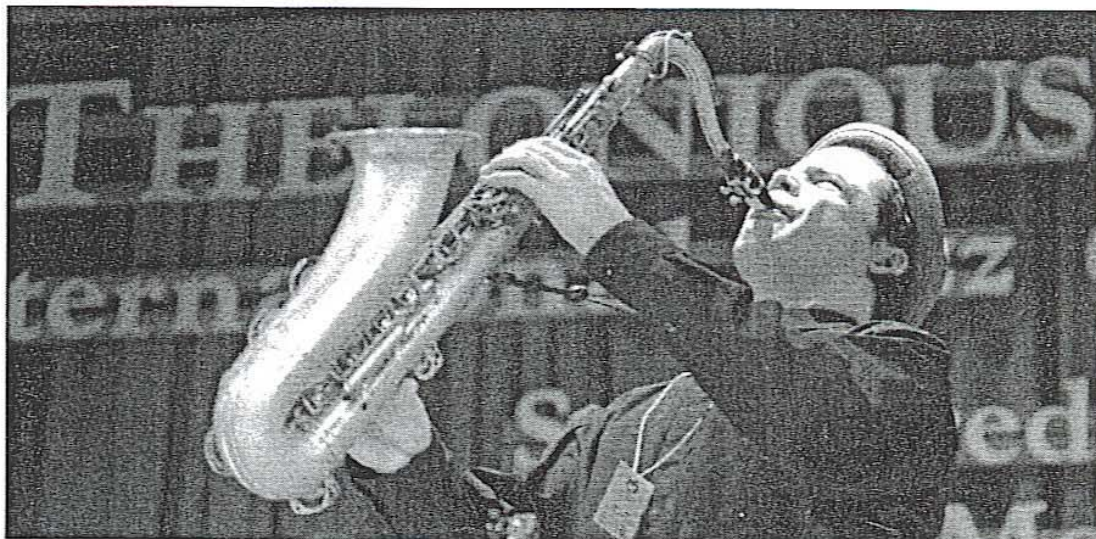
Over the weekend, at the 15th annual Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, they and 12 others aired their imaginations from the stage, playing into video cameras from Black Entertainment Network after being introduced by a somnolent Billy Dee Williams. For the audience at the Smithsonian Institution's Baird Auditorium, it wasn't much like bumping up against a great unknown in a club. But the artificiality of the environment added a new hurdle for the musicians, and most of them got over it.

And "unknown," given the lag between a jazz musician's arrival at maturity and his wider exposure, is a relative term. The cutoff age for this year's competition was 35, with the added proviso that none of the musicians had recorded for a major label. But about a third of these musicians were known at least in the jazz underground, with a few independent-label albums to their credit.

The competition is presented by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, based in Washington. The institute oversees a range of educational programs, from a select two-year college-level institute to a free Internet curriculum for middle and high school students.

In the early '90's the record business was flusher, but now a victory does not necessarily get a musician anywhere near a major-label record contract or even the start of a career. But the contest promises rewards enough: a jury of respected elders, a modest amount of media attention and \$20,000 to the winner. (General Motors was this year's corporate sponsor: a necessity, since all the foundation's programs are free.) But the details of the contest also enter into today's jazz lore, such as it is.

The instrument changes each year in the competition, and this was the third go-round for saxophonists; the



Susana Raab for The New York Times

Seamus Blake, winner of the saxophone competition presented by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

first, in 1991, helped Joshua Redman get his first publicity and his record contract. Ten albums later, Mr. Redman returned this weekend as a judge, along with the saxophonists Wayne Shorter, George Coleman, Don Braden and James Spaulding. As usual, the judges used score cards separating the elements of a performance: swing feel, tone and so on. But each judge had his own priorities, from experimentation to improvisational storytelling to choice of material. (Compounding the fact that you could hear John Coltrane strongly in four out of five finalists, one of them made the fatal mistake of choosing two Coltrane tunes from the same album in his three-song set.)

The winner was Seamus Blake, 31, a New Yorker who was reared in Vancouver, British Columbia; most at the competition, judges and spectators alike, agreed that he had more of everything: melody, harmony, time, coherence, originality. For his regulation set — one uptempo song, one ballad and one blues — he worked over "The Feeling of Jazz," from the album "Duke Ellington With John Coltrane"; Monk's "Ask Me Now"; and a Coltrane-ish original called "Vanguard Blues." He played a constant stream of ideas and logically connected them; he worked in blues preaching, controlled high-register playing and ex-

tended harmonies.

When he was announced as the winner at the end of Sunday's finals, Mr. Blake, a funny mixture of an overgrown kid and an old man — he wears a fedora and a wallet chain and bounces on his toes in a stooped walk — looked as if he might pass out.

Given the fierce competition, he had not expected to win. "I heard about the contest when one of my saxophone students at the New School entered it this year," Mr. Blake said with a shrug a few hours later at a State Department reception for the competition winners.

The Monk Institute has always sought out champions in the government, and a final party at which scruffy jazz musicians rub up against dignitaries has become a tradition. On Sunday, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell was the party's host; Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was there, as was Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve. (Off the dais, Secretary Powell cheerfully admitted that he felt a little out of his element, since he knows more about calypso.)

Mr. Blake leads four different bands, including a jazz-rock band called the Bloombaddies, but they work only sporadically. He wondered how the victory might help his career. "Probably some gigs will fall at

my doorstep," he said. "That's always great, because I haven't been much of a hustler. I moved to New York in 1992, and started playing with Victor Lewis and John Scofield. But I don't get so many opportunities to do my own music as I would like, and I'm sure this will be helpful in that way. Because the dream is to play your own music."

There was concern among the competition's staff and board that Mr. Blake, who has made five albums as a leader, might be too well known to compete. But it's hard to know where to redraw the line. The competition has changed its rules a few times; at first the maximum age was 31, and in the vocals competition of 1998, there was no age limitation at all, on the theory that the voice improves with age. Confining the competition to those who have not made an album is no good, because all musicians seem to be putting out albums themselves; it's no big deal anymore.

Bringing the age limit down to 25 might help to ensure that contestants are hitherto undiscovered. But it might also be an ageist slight next year, when the institute puts on its first trombone competition. There is a musician's joke that the definition of an optimist is a trombonist with a pager, and a lot of trombonists — young and old — are waiting for it to ring.