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## Tenor of The Times: Blake Wins Monk Sax Competition

By MIKE JOYCE  
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Seamus Blake, a 31-year-old British-born, Canadian-bred, Brooklyn-based tenor saxophonist, emerged from a pack of 15 young reedmen over the weekend to take top honors in the annual Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition. Previous winners of the prestigious event include such now-established jazzmen as saxophonist Joshua Redman and pianists Marcus Roberts and Jacky Terrasson.

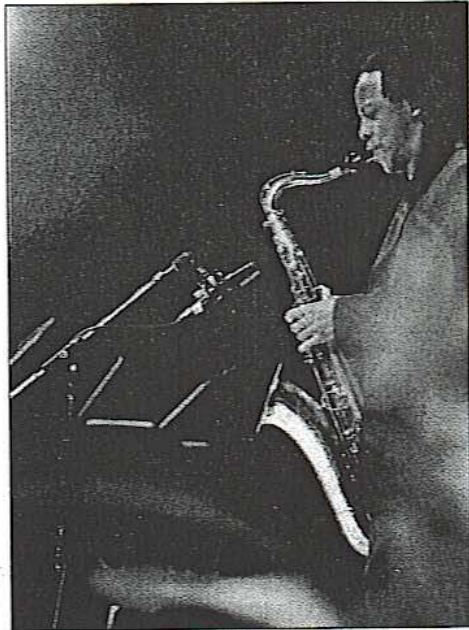
Perhaps the only person surprised by Blake's strong showing at the Smithsonian's Baird Auditorium on Sunday evening was Blake himself. Already a well-regarded musician, he's toured with John Scofield and recorded with the Mingus Big Band. He's also a member of the alternative-jazz grunge band Bloodbad-dies.

Asked backstage what he would do with the \$20,000 in scholarship and prize money, Blake looked a little puzzled. "I wasn't planning on winning, so I don't know," he said. "I'm not really the competitive type, so I usually shy away from these things."

He didn't lack confidence onstage, however. He appeared rather nonchalant, in fact, projecting a strong and fluid tone. During the allotted three selections, he infused Duke Ellington's "The Feeling of Jazz" with a soulful elegance, playfully expanded the harmonic contours of Monk's "Ask Me Now," and brashly exploited the full range of his horn on an original composition, "Vanguard Blues."

Redman, who won the competition in 1991 and who was a judge this year, was mightily impressed.

"Seamus had this musical completeness," said the Grammy-nominated musician after he and his fellow judges—Wayne Shorter, George Coleman, James Spaulding and Don Braden, saxophonists all—tallied their votes. "He had the most beautiful sound, incredible lyricism, total command of harmony, incredible time. And what really stood out was his ability to tell a story. He was playing a pile of ten-



PHOTOS BY DENNIS DRENER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Tenor saxophonist Seamus Blake, left, riffs his way to victory in the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition. Marcus Strickland took third place.

or, but he had his own voice in everything that he did. I was a judge six years ago when Jon Gordon won, and I thought that was an incredible level of competition. But I think this far surpassed it."

Redman, however, said Blake's triumph didn't come as a great surprise. "Seamus was on the scene in Boston when I was learning to play," he recalled. "I consider these guys peers, really—that's why being a judge felt a little strange. Seamus is one of the best players of his generation."

Based in Washington and named after the great jazz pianist, the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz was established in 1986 to "preserve the legacy of jazz performance and education." It provides college-level training and public school-based education programs for students here and abroad.

Saxophonists younger than 36 were eligible to compete this year as long as they had never recorded a solo album for a major label. Half of the award money will go straight to the winners, while the remaining half is earmarked for their educational expenses. In the past, some of the older musicians have used the scholarship money for private instruction with renowned jazz artists.

All told, \$60,000 in prize money was awarded, including \$10,000 received by Jim Robitaille, the winner of the BMI Jazz Composers Competition.

This year's finals, hosted by Herbie

Hancock and Billy Dee Williams, benefited from a tireless rhythm section comprising pianist Eric Reed, bassist Robert Hurst and drummer Carl Allen. But the procession of featured players often seemed more mechanical than necessary. Of the finalists, only Jaleel Shaw stepped to the microphone to personally introduce himself and to credit the composers of the tunes he performed. It seems odd that an organization reaching out to new jazz audiences wouldn't encourage such small courtesies.

On the other hand, the level of play was far more consistent than in some years, thanks to a seasoned crop of players and the focus on saxophone. (This was the institute's third sax competition; others have featured piano, trumpet, guitar, bass, vocals, drums and percussion. Trombonists will finally have their say next year.)

"The saxophonists have always been very strong," said veteran trumpeter and arranger Don Sickler, who's worked closely with the Monk Institute over the years. "I don't know the reason, but the instrument draws a lot of great players. I was really glad to see someone like Seamus, who's been around for a while, get involved with the competition."

At the same time, the institute's educational programs are bringing plenty of young musicians to the fore. A group of them saluted Shorter by performing two of his compositions after he received the

institute's Maria Fisher Founder's Award for his work in jazz education.

Not long afterward, everyone was off to the State Department, where a reception for the institute was hosted by Secretary of State Colin Powell and attended by members of Congress, international dignitaries and the likes of Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan and his wife, NBC News correspondent Andrea Mitchell.

Gathered onstage in the Benjamin Franklin Room, Hancock, Blake, Shorter and company rededicated the newly restored Truman Piano, a White House fixture more than 50 years ago, with a free-wheeling reprise of "S Wonderful." But not before Powell addressed the audience and provoked a lot of laughter by repeatedly stressing how much Republicans really love jazz.

"By the way," he concluded with a smile, "I was born in Harlem. I was raised in New York. I didn't have a choice."

Tenor saxophonist John Ellis, known for his work with guitarist Charlie Hunter, won second prize. Third prize went to tenor Marcus Strickland, who has collaborated with the Mingus Big Band and is currently a member of Lonnie Plaxico's band. The remaining finalists were Shaw, of Philadelphia, and Aaron Fletcher, of Thibodaux, La.

This year's competition, sponsored by General Motors, was videotaped and is to be shown June 30 on BET.