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MUSICAL DREAM: "I really just want to make beautiful music — music that people will listen to and feel something," says Los Angeles vocalist Gretchen Parlato. "Because the music that touches me the most always creates some kind of a mood and a vibe."

She does it her way

L.A. vocalist Gretchen Parlato's 'intimate' style of jazz wows the judges at the annual Monk competition.

By **DON HECKMAN**
Special to *The Times*

It's been nearly two weeks since singer Gretchen Parlato's upset victory in the 17th annual Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition in Washington, D.C., but her voice is still breathless from the experience.

"When it happened, I just kept saying, 'Oh, wow. Oh, wow. Wow,'" she recalls. "It was almost surreal. I knew that I had just accomplished this huge thing, but it's really still just sinking in."

She's right about the accomplishment. Winning the competition, sponsored by General Motors, has had an energizing effect on many of its previous winners, a group that includes Marcus Roberts, Joshua Redman and Jacky Terrasson.

Singers such as Jane Monheit and Tierney Sutton got powerful career boosts when they signed recording contracts after finish-

ing among the top finalists in previous competitions.

The competition, which this year was devoted to singers, runs for a week, with a climactic performance by the finalists at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater.

Its goal, according to the institute, is "to launch the careers of young, aspiring jazz artists." The top three finishers take home \$20,000, \$10,000 and \$5,000, respectively.

Parlato's victory was somewhat of a surprise because the 28-year-old Los Angeles native had little prior visibility on the national jazz scene. As a partici-

pant in the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance at USC, she was admired as a "musicians' singer," a phrase that tends to describe vocalists who emphasize musicality over entertainment values.

Parlato takes a broader view. "It's always seemed to me that a jazz singer is someone who understands swing and phrasing and who can sing in tune and have a unique sound," she says. "It's easy to fall into thinking that you have to sound like Sarah Vaughan or Ella Fitzgerald or put on a big show. But I like to think that you can simply sing, honor the tradition and still do it your own way."

Her Southland performances over the last few years have revealed an artist clearly intent on reaching into the musical heart of her music.

Small of stature, modestly dressed, she has tended to blend in visually with her accompanying musicians. But her deceptively low-key interpretations have the capacity to pull listeners into her multilayered, lyrically intimate musical style.

"I'm a very intimate kind of performer," she says. "Seeing that big Kennedy Center stage that I was going to perform on at the competition was really something. So I tried not to think about performing but just focus on singing my songs and conveying what I had to convey, in my own style."

The finalists in the competition encompassed diverse styles, from the charismatic Canadian runner-up, Kellylee Evans, to the heavily applauded third-place finisher, Robin McKelle.

But Parlato, singing as though she were performing in the small Los Angeles clubs she knows so well, clearly had the right stuff to convince the judges — including Quincy Jones, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Al Jarreau, Jimmy Scott, Kurt Elling and Flora Purim — as well as the critical press.

Reviewing the competition, Ben Ratliff of the New York Times wrote that Parlato's "talent was so deeply centered and concentrated that the effect might have been the same had she stood behind a curtain."

Mike Joyce of the Washington Post added his approval of her "sultry rendition of 'More Than You Know' and a lithe, scat-laced, tempo-shifting interpretation of 'I've Never Been in Love Before.'"

Ever musical, she underscores her hope that it was that quality, more than any other, that was the deciding factor in her win.

"When I first thought about this competition," she says, "I never even thought about the fact that we were supposed to put on a really big show. I've often been criticized about not being a bigger performer. And if that was a natural thing for me to do, it would be great. But it isn't. So I decided I'd better just sing a song and say, 'Thank you,' and move on. And hope they felt

that I had something honest and unique to offer."

Parlato's insistence on emphasizing the art in her music may well be traced to growing up in a home where music and art were preeminent.

Her father is a bass player, her mother is a musician, artist and Web designer, and her sister is an artist.

Parlato attended Los Angeles County High School for the Arts and graduated from UCLA with a bachelor's degree in ethnomusicology, with a specialization in jazz studies.

In 2001, she was the first vocalist accepted into the Monk Institute at USC, completing her studies in the program in 2003.

Parlato made her first leap into the wide world of jazz by moving to New York City last fall.

"It feels strange to leave home," she says, "but I just felt that for any kind of an artist, it's a good idea to spend some time in New York. You know, like the song, 'If you can make it there you can make it anywhere.'"

Winning the Monk Competition places her solidly on track toward that goal. Record companies and management offices are already knocking on her door. But it's a goal that she insists must mirror the quality and style of her performances.

"I really just want to make beautiful music — music that people will listen to and feel something," she says. "Because the music that touches me the most always creates some kind of a mood and a vibe. And that's what I'm looking for in my music too."