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## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

### Jazz Hopefuls, Trying For the Sound of Success

By BEN RATLIFF

WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 — The voice was the chosen instrument for this year's Thelonious Monk International Jazz competition. And the big preliminary question was whether the contest might reflect what's happening to jazz singing outside of the gently pedantic atmosphere of a jazz education organization like the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

Even the most ambitious jazz in-

strumentalists seem to find limits for their audience. Singers can have a much broader appeal. Norah Jones, whose two albums have sold more than 12 million copies combined since 2002, proved that a singer with at least a basis in jazz can give audiences something they didn't necessarily know they wanted. And since the last time vocalists were heard in this competition, six years ago (the instrument changes each year), many other singers have proved that divergent approaches to repertory, instrumentation and rhythm, moving away from canonical notions of the jazz singer, can be extremely persuasive to the jazz-oblivious, without blaspheming the tradition.

But the Monk Institute is a non-profit enterprise, and this competition, in its 17th year and won in the past by musicians including Joshua Redman, Jacky Terrasson and Teri Thornton, isn't about crossing genres; it sets down aesthetic certainties about jazz, asking that they be upheld. This happens through the initial tape-screening process,

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Ronnie James

Gretchen Parlato, winner of the Thelonious Monk competition.

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through the judges' uniform list of criteria and through the high standards of the jazz-singer judges themselves. It's by now an old joke that Monk himself might not have won the competition named after him, but you wonder if Ms. Jones would have gotten beyond submitting a tape.

In the semifinals on Sunday at the Smithsonian Institution's Baird Theater, singers had 15 minutes to do what they wanted. According to the rules of the contest, they all had to be under 30 and without contracts from major record labels, and they all had to perform with the same house rhythm section.

As always, the judges — Dee Dee Bridgewater, Kurt Elling, Flora Purim and Jimmy Scott—had before them sheets to rate the singers according to suggested criteria, including control, dynamics, time, swing feel, taste, concept, originality, interaction with the rhythm section, leadership and stage presence.

These pressurized performances were, in effect, miniature nightclub sets, and the singers had to pace themselves. Kellylee Evans, from Toronto, worked hard for the audience's attention, opening with a smart, slow ballad version of "Love for Sale" and generally acting as if she owned the place.

José James, from Milwaukee, skinny and magnetic, started with a version of "Every Day I Have the Blues" so powerfully suggestive of Joe Williams that the judges reacted physically. Mr. Scott, 79, waved his hands in the air. Ms. Bridgewater, beaming, cooled herself vigorously with a fan. But then the spell broke: Mr. James ended with an unfocused scat solo and dropped out of the running.

You want these competitions to yield thunderous signals of arrival, but that seldom happens: often the musicians have already been on the scene for some years, or the high-stakes artificiality of the event flusters them. But Gretchen Parlato, a little-known Los Angeles singer who recently moved to New York, created a surprise attack. (She has a connection with the Monk Institute, having been chosen as the first singer in its two-year program, from which she graduated in 2001.)

Ms. Parlato, small and serious, said almost nothing onstage, but her talent was so deeply centered and concentrated that the effect might have been the same had she stood behind a curtain. The set included a scat version of Charlie Parker's "Embraceable You" improvisations; an "I Fall in Love Too Easily" that suggested Chet Baker's dry-toned version but superimposed hints of a lavish, Donny Hathaway melisma; and a hard-swinging version of "Chega de Saudade," sung in excellent Portuguese. (Anyone curious can see her perform tomorrow night at the Jazz Gallery, 290 Hudson Street, in the South Village.)

On Monday, in the finals, a concert held at the Kennedy Center and filmed by BET, Ms. Parlato did it again. (Al Jarreau and Quincy Jones were on hand as more judges.) Relatively unmannered, with accurate pitch, she didn't copy older singers or overemote; she just calmly nailed a ballad and a medium-tempo piece with improvisations, interacting with the rhythm section at its own level.

Ms. Parlato won first prize, a \$20,000 check. Ms. Evans came in second, impressing the judges with an original song. Robin McKelle, who teaches at Berklee College of Music, came in third, punching out "Angel Eyes" like a hardened professional,

and Charenee Wade, an impressive Betty Carter-influenced singer from New York, came in fourth.

Because the Monk Institute, based in Washington, cultivates ties to the

## An award presented by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

government, and because various agencies give it support, a disjunctive strangeness arises during these events, as the jazz world meets barricades and metal detectors. There was a State Department reception for the contestants, held by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, at which Herbie Hancock and Ms. Bridgewater sang "Caravan."

At Monday night's concert, Senator Orrin G. Hatch was given the institute's founder's award. And toward the end of the concert's second half — an impressive all-star sequence involving the judges and a few other big names, including Wayne Shorter and Jon Faddis — Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked to present the first prize.