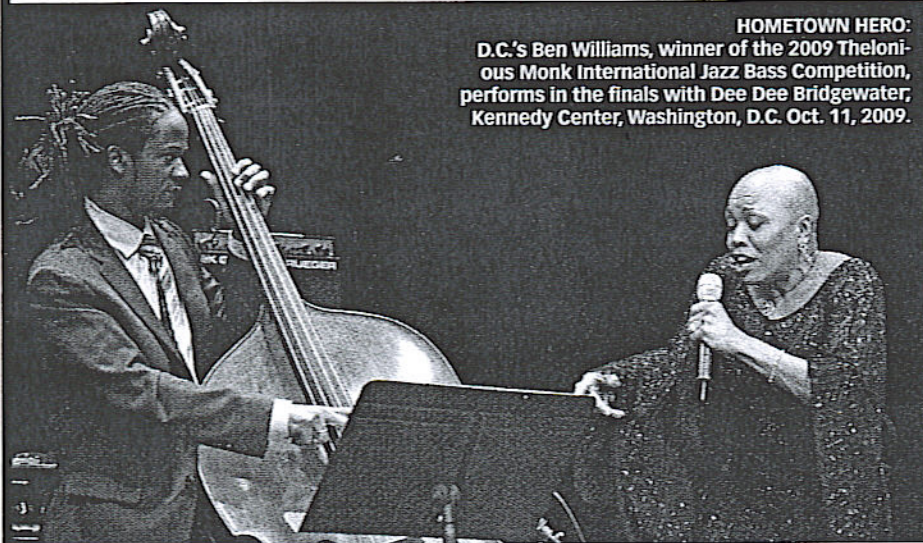


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HOMETOWN HERO:
D.C.'s Ben Williams, winner of the 2009 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Bass Competition, performs in the finals with Dee Dee Bridgewater, Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. Oct. 11, 2009.

Bemsha Bass

Jazz star power (and some low end) at this year's Monk Competition

There is a certain school of jazz programming with a great compulsion to pile on the all-stars—to make every festival and gala concert bow under the weight of the music's history. After a while, if you attend enough of these things, you become desensitized to star power and yearn for a great working band.

But the lineup of Blue Note Records alumni occupying the Eisenhower Theater stage at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center on Oct. 11 was undeniably impressive. They were there to pay homage to label head Bruce Lundvall, who was accepting the Maria Fisher Founder's Award with an uncommonly graceful and gracious speech. (Dianne Reeves' follow-up performance of "I Wish You Love," sung to Lundvall with wishes of "unreleased Clifford Brown" recordings, was also exceptionally heartfelt.) The A-listers—among them Herbie Hancock, Reeves, Terence Blanchard, Kurt Elling, Joe Lovano, John Scofield, McCoy Tyner and Wayne

included Carter, Charlie Haden, Dave Holland, Robert Hurst, Christian McBride and John Patitucci.

Nonetheless, the three finalists rose under the scrutiny of their heroes, particularly D.C.'s own Ben Williams, a member of Stefon Harris' Blackout project. Each of the three finalists, whittled down from 15 at semi-finals held the prior day, performed two tunes: one instrumental and one standard with guest vocalist Bridgewater. A rhythm section of pianist Geoffrey Keezer and drummer Carl Allen provided solid yet unobtrusive accompaniment.

In second and third place were, respectively, Joe Sanders, 25, of Milwaukee, and Matt Brewer, 26, of Oklahoma City. Sanders opened the competition with delicate arco work on Lionel Loueke's "Benny's Tune" before attacking "A Foggy Day" with Bridgewater; Brewer

took to "All Blues" with the singer, after performing his original "So Far," an ethereal tune he gave a lengthy rubato introduction. Brewer wasn't the only young composer present, as the 2009 Monk composition grand prize went to Joe Johnson, who performed his ambitious, Wayne Shorter-flavored "Shepherd's Song" with a dream-team frontline of Lovano and trumpeter Nicholas Payton.

Williams won the bass competition with two barnburners, Oscar Pettiford's "Tricotism" and a read of "Caravan" with guest Bridgewater. He simply owned the bass, demonstrating the square intonation and stout, fluid technique associated with players like Ray Brown and McBride. His solos were arresting things full of dexterity and fresh harmonic ideas; when it came time to spar with Bridgewater on "Caravan," he showed deeper listening and a desire to interact with

Shorter—were also there to take part in a 70th anniversary concert for Lundvall's label, the second half of a program beginning with the 2009 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Bass Competition. As far as all-star roundups go, the Blue Note half proved a model in organization, efficiency and common sense.

Some highlights: "Moanin'," swung hard by Blanchard, Lovano, T.S. Monk, James Genus and Jason Moran, with unnecessary vocalese from Dee Dee Bridgewater; a sterling take on "You Taught My Heart to Sing" by Reeves, with accompaniment from McCoy Tyner in Hank Jones mode; and a version of "Speak No Evil," somewhat distracted by guitarist Lionel Loueke's technical difficulties, featuring original-recording players Shorter, Hancock and Ron Carter. The closing, obligatory, everyone-onstage blowout, "Alright, Okay, You Win," was a fun, celebratory photo op that didn't wear out its welcome. Hancock, a Monk chairman, also made for the evening's most effective host, beating out Tipper Gore, who read teleprompter text as one run-on sentence, and honorary chairman Billy Dee Williams, whose sly-dog persona has turned toward self-caricature.

The juxtaposition between the celebrities (jazz or otherwise) and the actual competition is always stark; this year, given the nature of the instrument in question, it was probably even more jarring. The contest, which rotates disciplines each year, assesses players' technique, tone, musicality and sheer *nerve*. Case in point: This year's panel of judges

the singer's theatrical scarring. He wasn't thrown by her phrases, but saw them as an opportunity for rhythmic synergy. For his efforts, the 24-year-old bassist received a \$20,000 scholarship, a recording contract with Concord Music Group and a future booking at the Kennedy Center. Scholarship prizes for second and third place ran \$10,000 and \$5,000.

Just as the evening ended with that beautifully tempered, star-packed blues, it began with a band of equally appropriate design. Aided by house drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, Jason Moran and bass phenom Esperanza Spalding represented the best case scenario for the competitors: young, smart musicians making good livings with dynamic music that honors and ascends jazz tradition. It was proof that all the heated competition wasn't necessarily for naught. **EVAN HAGA**