

Recap: The 2009 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition (With Audio)

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by Michael Katzif



2009 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition winner Ben Williams performs with Dee Dee Bridgewater. (Steve Mundinger)

Sunday night at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., many of the most notable figures in jazz looked toward the future and celebrated the storied past. Convening in the immaculate Eisenhower Theater, the [Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz](#) awarded Ben Williams first prize in the 2009 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Bass Competition.

Each year, the competition highlights a different instrument, and this year's weekend-long event saw 15 bassists perform at the semi-finals, held at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History on Saturday. Before a panel of distinguished judges -- including Ron Carter, Charlie Haden, Dave Holland, Robert Hurst, Christian McBride and John Patitucci -- the top three musicians then played in Sunday night's finals.



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On his two tunes -- "Tricotism" by Oscar Pettiford, and the Juan Tizol classic "Caravan" -- Williams wowed the audience with his nimble fingering, melodic soloing and creative rhythmic approach. Ultimately, his musical prowess earned him the top spot.

By winning first place in the competition, Williams will receive \$20,000 toward college-level music scholarships, and a recording contract with Concord Records. Williams is a native Washingtonian who attended D.C.'s [Duke Ellington School of the Arts](#), and later matriculated to Michigan State and Juilliard, where he is finishing his degree. He has since become an in-demand bassist in New York, playing in the bands of Stefon Harris and Marcus Strickland, and on an upcoming Jacky Terrasson record.

Take a listen to Ben Williams' performances from last night:

"Tricotism," featuring Geoffrey Keezer, piano; Carl Allen, drums.

"Caravan," featuring Dee Dee Bridgewater, voice; Geoffrey Keezer, piano; Carl Allen, drums.

Joe Sanders, a New Yorker by way of Milwaukee, Wis., took second place and a \$10,000 scholarship; Matt Brewer, originally from Oklahoma City, Okla., took third and a \$5,000 scholarship. The concert also showcased Kansas City, Mo. bassist and composer Joe Johnson's "Shepherd's Song," the winning work of the Monk Institute's 2009 International Composers Award. Johnson performed the piece accompanied by Nicholas Payton (trumpet), Joe Lovano (tenor sax), Geoff Keezer (piano) and Carl Allen (drums).

Starting from the stellar opening tune "Look No Further," performed by the trio of Esperanza Spalding (bass and vocals), Jason Moran (piano) and Terri Lynne Carrington (drums) -- complete with Spalding's delightful scat singing -- it was clear the night was all about showcasing jazz's newest talents. But the competition portion of the evening was only a small part of the festivities.

The concert also took time to honor Blue Note Records, celebrating its 70th anniversary this year. Herbie Hancock presented current CEO Bruce Lundvall with the Founder's Award among a full stage of Blue Note artists, past and present. Lundvall spoke graciously, and hurriedly, about his life in music: "I'm 79 years old, but still have the body of a 73 year old," he said. He then stood in the wings of the stage as Dianne Reeves sang "I Wish You Love," accompanied by George Duke (piano), James Genus (bass) and Terri Lynne Carrington (drums).

The second half of the program served as a Blue Note showcase, a who's who of jazz paired in inspired combinations:

--"Little Sunflower," performed by Kurt Elling (vocals), Jimmy Heath (tenor saxophone), Earl Klugh (guitar), Genus (bass), Carrington (drums).



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--"Moanin'" performed by Dee Dee Bridgewater (vocals), Terrence Blanchard (trumpet), Lovano (tenor saxophone), Moran (piano), Genus (bass) and T.S. Monk (drums).

--"You Taught My Heart To Sing," performed by an intimate duo of Reeves and pianist McCoy Tyner.

--Wayne Shorter's "Speak No Evil," performed by Shorter himself (soprano saxophone), Nicholas Payton (trumpet), Herbie Hancock (piano), Lionel Loueke (guitar), Ron Carter (bass), Carrington (drums).

--An a capella rendition of "Hallucinogen," by Bobby McFerrin.

--"Bouncing With Bud," performed by McFerrin, Hancock, John Scofield (guitar), Genus and Carrington.



Ben Williams (center, on bass) with jazz masters Nicholas Payton, Wayne Shorter, Jimmy Heath and Joe Lovano. (Steve Mundinger)



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The rare fusion of such top-tier talent made the night unforgettable. For people in the audience, there was a palpable sense of past and present intermingling; a sense of passing the torch to the next generation. This was especially true for the show-stopping closer. After awarding the three young bassists, the musicians all took the stage at once for an all-star jam on "All Right, OK, You Win" alongside the night's winner Ben Williams.

"All Right, OK, You Win" featuring: Ben Williams, Terrence Blanchard, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Terri Lyne Carrington, George Duke, Kurt Elling, James Genus, Herbie Hancock, Jimmy Heath, Earl Klugh, Lionel Loueke, Joe Lovano, Bobby McFerrin, Jason Moran, Nicholas Payton, Dianne Reeves, John Scofield, Wayne Shorter, Esperanza Spalding, McCoy Tyner.