



D.C. Native Wins 2009 Thelonious Monk Competition

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By Michael J. West

Washington bassist **Ben Williams** took first place last night in the 2009 **Thelonious Monk International Jazz Bass Competition** at the [Kennedy Center](#). His victory was a given after his incredible performance; your humble correspondent went looking to make book on Williams at intermission, and nobody would take the bet. But the D.C. audience put a load of extra enthusiasm into its standing ovation—in fact the ovation started with the second-place announcement.

Williams, who grew up in Michigan Park, graduated from [Duke Ellington School of the Arts](#), and has played with D.C. jazz stalwarts including **Allyn Johnson**, **Nasar Abadey**, and **Thad Wilson**, was awarded a record deal with Concord Music Group and a \$20,000 scholarship. Williams has already completed his master's degree at Juilliard, "But ohh, don't worry," he says. "I got plenty of bills from school that these will go toward nicely." (Second place winner **Joe Sanders** received \$10,000, with \$5,000 for third-place **Matt Brewer**.)

The competition began Saturday with the semifinals, held at the Natural History Museum's Baird Auditorium. Fifteen bassists from around the world were required to play a program of three tunes each, with the backing duo of pianist **Geoffrey Keezer** and drummer **Carl Allen**. Aside from the finalists, contestants included Chinese-Australian [Linda Oh](#); an eighth grader from the Bronx, **Daryl Johns**; and another D.C. bassist, **Corcoran Holt**. Also included was Dutch player **Clemens van der Feen**—who was so stylistically original and advanced that it was a genuine shock when his name wasn't on the finalists' list. But you will be hearing more from this guy.

The finals round required each contestant to play only two selections, giving them less time to make an impression. But the challenge was greater still: One of the two songs put the bassist behind vocalist **Dee Dee Bridgewater**, a fearsome predicament for anyone since she's both a tremendous talent and a born ham. Brewer and, especially, Sanders showed their nervousness playing with Bridgewater, who traded them eight-bar phrases with energetic abandon. (Sanders was also shaky on his first tune, slightly off pitch on his arco intro and clumsy with the rhythm later on; his second-place finish was a major upset.) Williams, however, followed her every melodramatic move with ease, practically daring her to turn up the intensity with his fierce rhythm and legato phrasing. Halfway through the second song, his victory was already obvious.



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Of course, the jazz world is already hearing a lot from Williams; he's a regular member of pianist **Jacky Terrasson's** trio, and also of vibraphonist **Stefon Harris'** group Blackout – where until recently he played with another Washingtonian, pianist **Marc Cary**, and together brought go-go rhythms to Harris' new album *Urbanus*. (Williams will return to the Kennedy Center with Harris on November 14.) Still, this win should increase his profile, and bring him closer to the star status he richly deserves. It's a feather in the cap of D.C. jazz, too.