

Young jazz singers get welcome boost from Monk competition

By Jess Righthand, Published: April 25 The Washington Post

Until October 2010, jazz vocalist Cecile McLorin Salvant had never performed at the Kennedy Center. She did not have a recording contract. She was, in fact, thousands of miles away, studying and performing in Aix-en-Provence, France.

But then, until that date, McLorin Salvant had not yet [won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition](#), a spinoff of the prestigious instrumental competition named after the legendary jazz pianist. When she did, all that changed.

On Friday night, the 22-year-old singer — who has since moved to New York and signed with a jazz record label — returns to sing two concerts at the Kennedy Center.

“Before the competition, I was slowly moving forward, but it was a slow process that would have still been very slow,” says McLorin Salvant. “The competition kind of gave me a little boost — a *big* boost.”

The night of the competition finals was not unlike a scene out of “American Idol.” Upon winning a record deal and \$20,000 in scholarship money and cash, McLorin Salvant was approached by agents and managers. In place of Jennifer Lopez and Randy Jackson, judges Dianne Reeves, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Patti Austin, Kurt Elling and Al Jarreau showered her with praise.

But while “American Idol” has crowned so many winners it’s easy to lose track, the winners of the Monk vocals competition form a much smaller club of four. Each year, the Monk focuses on a different instrument, which means there have been only four vocals competitions in the 25-year history of what has become arguably the most prestigious competition in the jazz world. For the winners and some finalists, the Monk has provided an invaluable spotlight that has unilaterally thrust them into the global jazz consciousness.

In an effort to catch singers just starting out in their careers, the competition requires entrants to be 30 or younger and not signed to a major record label. Approximately 10 semifinalists are selected to come to Washington in the fall to vie for the title in two rounds of live performances.

“In the bigger picture, looking back, it was good timing, good luck, and things really just kind of aligned,” says 2004 winner Gretchen Parlato on her participation. (Parlato applied unsuccessfully in 1998, then came back to win six years later.)

Making it as a jazz singer has never been more difficult. The market is saturated with scores of talented, well-educated singers brandishing degrees from the top music schools and putting out their own independent albums.

With record labels’ power to dictate listeners’ choices weakened in recent years, how does today’s jazz artist reach a large audience in one fell swoop? It can’t hurt to be recommended directly by the jazz luminaries who judge the Monk competition each year.

“For mainstream listeners, that’s actually how it works,” says Parlato. “Think of Oprah’s book of the month. If it’s supported by really big people, then the general audience is going to perk up a little bit.”

The winner of the first competition in 1994 was Sara Lazarus, a Delaware-born Harvard graduate with a penchant for swing who, like McLorin Salvant, was also living in France at the time. When she won, she was grateful to receive a kind of validation seldom proffered in the jazz community.