

DownBeat Magazine

Melissa Aldana Wins Monk Competition

On Sept. 16, Melissa Aldana made history by becoming the first female instrumentalist to win the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The 24-year-old tenor saxophonist took home the \$25,000 scholarship and guaranteed contract with Concord Records, while tenor saxophonist Tivon Pennicott won the second place \$15,000 scholarship, and alto saxophonist Godwin Louis placed third, winning a \$10,000 scholarship.

Aldana, who has released two albums on the Inner Circle label, was a second-generation contestant: Her father, Marco Aldana, participated in the 1991 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition.

All three finalists at the 27th annual Monk Competition demonstrated an understanding of jazz sax history, while also exhibiting a flair of individuality. All three now work in New York.

Aldana, who hails from Santiago, Chile, distinguished herself by fashioning darker tones on the tenor while still exploring the full range of her instrument; she showed guts, too, by daring to play "I Thought About You" with just drummer Carl Allen and bassist Rodney Whitaker, leaving out pianist Reginald Thomas as a chordal safety net. The gambit worked, with the arrangement highlighting her mellifluous tone and unique phrasing that alternated between ornate filigrees and sustained notes.

Thomas came aboard during a romp through "Free Fall," a midtempo original that was as intricate as it was compelling. "I really tried to relax and just play whatever I do all the time," Aldana said. "That kept me really calm."

Her daringness won over the panel of judges: Branford Marsalis, Jane Ira Bloom, Jimmy Heath, Wayne Shorter and Bobby Watson. "The thing that was apparent to us was that Melissa was a young artist, who, in addition to having embraced a great deal of tradition, has made important steps in developing her own personal sonic vocabulary," explained Bloom. "We all sensed that from her original music and in her interpretations of traditional material."



Judging from the audience's standing ovation during the semifinals, Louis was originally the people's choice. He, too, displayed enormous individuality, buttressed with jazz tradition. Born in Harlem, yet raised in Haiti and Connecticut, Louis said that he tried to distill his West Indian heritage and experience as the son of preacher into his performance. A gospelized electricity sparked through his reading of Monk's "Reflection," Johnny Mandel's "The Shadow of Your Smile" and most explicitly in his mesmerizing reading of "Walk With Me Lord."

Louis honed a sleek alto tone that never lost its appeal. His dance-like rhythmic agility and suspenseful displays of tension and release immediately captivated the crowd. As his semifinals performance progressed, he showed a capricious nature, toying with dissonance and shredding choice notes, which gave his performance a hint of the rough-hewn vitality associated with such icons as Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Arthur Blythe.

At the finals, Louis didn't enthrall as much. He nailed it with a stunning reading of Hoagy Carmichael's "Skylark," and initially was going strong on the hymnal original "Our Father." However, he lost his footing toward the end, making small but noticeable missteps. "I wished that we maybe had more time to rehearse [the song]," Louis said. "But at that point, I wasn't thinking in terms of competition, because I had competed yesterday. I wanted to show the artistry side of myself."

Pennicott's penchant for the blues earned him placement in the top three. At the finals, though, he seemed too tightly wound during his otherwise delightful reading of Sonny Rollins' "Strode Road." Toward the end, the song overstayed its welcome as Pennicott delivered an inchoate cadenza, overstuffed with superfluous runs and overblowing techniques. He recovered on his splendid rendition of Charlie Chaplin's "Smile," alternating between soaring phrases and clipped, raspy wails. "I really thought about the lyrics and about placing certain notes in places that meant something to me," Pennicott said, regarding his performance of "Smile." "I tried to add a certain dissonance to it and have fun with it."

Past winners of the Monk Competition include vocalist Gretchen Parlato, saxophonist Joshua Redman, bassist Ben Williams and trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire. For more information on this year's competition, visit the Monk Institute [website](#).

—John Murph
