

Melissa Aldana Tops the Monk Saxophone Competition

Written by Andrea Canter, Contributing Editor
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Melissa Aldana (photo: Paul Morigi/Getty Images)

At the finals of the Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition at Kennedy Center last night, 24-year-old Melissa Aldana not only won first prize, she became the first woman instrumentalist to win any of the Monk top honors in the 26-year history of the prestigious competition. Aldana finished ahead of the other two finalists, earning the \$25,000 first-prize scholarship with the Monk Institute and a recording contract with Concord Music Group. Fellow tenor player Tivon Pennicott, 27, won second prize and a \$15,000 scholarship; alto saxophonist Godwin Louis, 28, finished third and took home a \$10,000. All three finalists are currently based in New York City. "I'm really good friends with Godwin and Tivon," Aldana said following the competition. "They are like my brothers, so I was really honored to be next to them."

Originally from Santiago, Chile, Melissa Aldana began her music studies at the age of 6. Breaking into the Chilean jazz scene while still in school, she impressed local musicians with her forthright approach to the music. In 2006 she had the opportunity to perform with Randy Brecker, and then met the great Panamanian jazz pianist, Danilo Perez, who invited her to perform at the Panama Jazz Festival and to audition for Berklee College of Music. With the Berklee Presidential Scholarship, Aldana relocated to Boston in fall 2006, where she started to develop her own voice as a composer and studied improvisation and composition with Joe Lovano, George Garzone, Frank Tiberi, Greg Osby and Hal Crook.

Melissa moved to New York in 2009 and has become an increasingly busy member of the New York

jazz scene with her own quartet and as a “sideman” on gigs at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Village Vanguard, The Blue Note, Iridium, Smalls, Jazz Gallery, Birdland, Jazz Standard, Bar Next Door and more, sharing the stage with Benny Golson, Greg Osby, George Coleman, Antonio Sanchez, Marc Copland, Kendrick Scott, Paquito D’Rivera, Joey DeFrancesco, Jeff “Tain” Watts, Francisco Mela, and Joe Lovano, among others. Melissa recently won the 2012 Altazor Award in Chile for best Jazz record of 2010-2012.

Aldana has already released two albums on the Inner Circle label, founded by saxophonist Greg Osby who has previously hired Melissa to perform with his band. Now she has the opportunity to really raise her profile with the Concord recording contract. And she has a project ready for the studio--her Crash Trio with drummer Francisco Mela and bassist Pablo Menares.



Melissa Aldana congratulated by finalists Godwin Louis (left) and Tivon Pennicott (photo Paul Morigi, Getty Images)

Runner-up Tivon Pennicott was born in Marietta, Georgia where he began studying tenor saxophone in high school, garnering recognition early on as an outstanding soloist in the Lincoln Center's Essentially Ellington competition, as well as the Georgia All-state Jazz Band. In 2004, he relocated to Miami to study at the Frost School of Music, where he had the opportunity to perform alongside artists such as Dave Liebman, Randy Brecker, and Maria Schneider. Still in college, Tivon was invited to join guitar legend Kenny Burrell's quintet and appeared on Burrell's 2008 live release, *Be Yourself*; Tivon has continued to work with Burrell throughout the U.S. Relocating to New York in 2009, Tivon has worked with the likes of Nellie McKay, Gregory Porter, Joe Thomas, Ari Hoenig, E.J. Strickland and Esperanza Spalding, with whom he appeared on her acclaimed *Radio Music Society*.

Godwin Louis was born in Harlem grew up in Bridgeport CT and Port au Prince, Haiti. He began playing saxophone at age 9. At Bassick High School in Bridgeport, Connecticut he was selected as a member of the Connecticut All State Jazz Ensemble, opened for Jimmy Heath, and started performing and recording as a sideman all over the tri-state area (CT-NY-MA). During his senior of high school, Godwin studied with Latin jazz icons Arturo O’Farrill and Andy Gonzalez and received the Grace Norton Dudley Music Scholarship, a full scholarship to study at any colleges in the country. He went on to the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he performed and recorded with Terri Lynn Carrington, Cindy Blackman, Ralph Peterson Jr., and Delfeayo Marsalis, and studied with George Garzone, Joe Lovano, Hal Crook, Bill Pierce, and Herb Pomeroy among others. Next, Godwin was one of the six fellows selected for graduate study at the Thelonious Monk Institute for Jazz Performance at Loyola University New Orleans, under the artistic direction of Terence Blanchard, completing the program in 2011. While in New Orleans, he recorded with Dr. Michael White, appearing

on Adventures in New Orleans, Part One (Basin Street Records).

The Monk Competition rotates its focus each year on a six-year cycle. At the finals held at the Eisenhower Theater of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC last night, Aldana's winning performance included Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Mercer's "I Thought About You," as well as her own "Free Fall," with a rhythm section including the bassist Rodney Whitaker, the pianist Reginald Thomas and the drummer Carl Allen. The competition was judged by a panel of saxophonists including Jane Ira Bloom, Jimmy Heath, Branford Marsalis, Wayne Shorter and Bobby Watson. Before announcing the winners, the Monk Institute also presented a series of tribute performances to Shorter, who turned 80 this year, and the late keyboardist George Duke, the previous musical director for the ceremonial concert associated with the Monk Competition.

Aldana is continuing a family tradition--her father and grandfather were also saxophonists; her father Marcos Aldana competed in the 1991 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition. "He said it was really terrible, actually," Aldana said. "He said it was, like, 23 people. He was really scared. It was the year Chris Potter and Joshua Redman were here. But he was like, 'Just be yourself and play, and you'll be fine.'" She already has plans for the scholarship money, noting that "I'm going to take a lot of great lessons with people."