

Style

Aretha Franklin steals the show at Monk Institute anniversary gala

By **Matt Schudel**

September 13, 2011

There were rambling moments and unnecessary stage turns during Monday's gala celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater. But every minute of the 3¹ / 2-hour program was worth it just to hear the evening's honored guest, Aretha Franklin, sing jazz.

Early in her career, before she became the Queen of Soul, Franklin was an aspiring jazz singer, and she returned to those forgotten roots Monday, on a night when the audience wasn't sure whether she would appear onstage at all.

As a galaxy of jazz and R&B stars — Chaka Khan, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Dianne Reeves, Jane Monheit and Kurt Elling among them — serenaded her from the stage, Franklin sat in the audience under a glowing spotlight. Considering her [recent health problems](#), everyone would have understood if she had stayed in her seat for the entire evening.

But when former secretaries of state Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell presented her with an award, Franklin walked onstage and spoke graciously about the Monk Institute. Over the years, she has quietly contributed to the institute's education efforts and has funded a program for jazz singers.

As musicians assembled behind her, Franklin mentioned that James Moody, the jazz saxophonist and vocalist, had attended one of her concerts in California not long before his death last year. Then she launched into "Moody's Mood for Love," bringing bounce, gusto and improvisational inventiveness to the tricky jazz standard that Moody

created as a saxophone solo more than 60 years ago. Franklin was in great voice and danced around the stage, clearly reveling in the music and the moment.

Another surprise came when an unannounced Jennifer Hudson walked onstage in a sleeveless blue gown. She sang the 1972 Franklin hit “Oh Me, Oh My (I’m a Fool for You, Baby)” with a fervor that brought the crowd to its feet.

The high-wattage star power threatened to overshadow the reason why the celebration is held in the first place: the annual Monk competition is for young jazz artists.

The three finalists in the piano competition — Kris Bowers, Joshua White and Emmet Cohen — showed in their performances how the language of jazz can speak to and be refreshed by every generation. Bowers, a Los Angeles-born student at the Juilliard School of Music, took the top prize after performing a soulful, hymnlike tune and a deeply swinging version of Monk’s “Shuffle Boil.” He didn’t try to dazzle anyone, except with his subtlety. (All three finalists visited President Obama in the White House on Tuesday.)

The Monk Institute can be forgiven its annual dalliance with bold-faced names, if only because jazz has no other evening quite like it. For the jazz world, it’s like the Academy Awards and the finals of “American Idol” rolled into one. And even Aretha showed that the complex, endlessly inventive music has her deepest respect.