

The New York Times



Jamie Rector for The New York Times
The prize-winning trumpeter
Ambrose Akinmusire

Walking a Tightrope at a Jazz Competition

By NATE CHINEN
Published: October 31, 2007

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 30 — The Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz wrapped up its 20th annual jazz competition on Sunday night with an emblematic scene. At the Kodak Theater in Hollywood the institute's chairman, Herbie Hancock, sported a shoulder-slung synthesizer and a high-wattage smile. He was leading all-star group through the opening salvo from his album "Head Hunters," one of the best-selling jazz titles of all time.

Close behind him onstage were three trumpeters: Terence Blanchard and Roy Hargrove, judges in this year's contest, which focused on their instrument, and Ambrose Akinmusire, the 25-year-old Oakland, Calif., native who won first prize. Together they formed a tight horn section, and a seriously overqualified one. None of them took the solo spotlight, not even Mr. Akinmusire, who had publicly earned the right to it.

The Monk competition has always served a dash of spectacle along with its dose of prestige, in the interest of keeping funds flowing (from government and private sources and from the likes of Cadillac and GMAC Financial Services, the presenting sponsors). But this year was splashier than most. No doubt the setting had something to do with it: The competition customarily takes place in Washington, where red-carpet arrivals tend to be more powerful (possibly) and less glamorous (assuredly). The bigger factor was Mr. Hancock, who received a humanitarian award during the concert, and whose staggeringly broad career provided the evening's theme.

"He's been always connected with tomorrow," Quincy Jones said, introducing Mr. Hancock. Coming from Mr. Jones — the venerable pop producer, erstwhile jazz trumpeter and yet another judge on the heavyweight panel, along with Clark Terry, Herb Alpert and Hugh Masekela — this pronouncement felt consequential. It also seemed to indicate one of the unspoken criteria for the competition, which has favored a spirit of progressivism in recent years.



Jamie Rector for The New York Times

Herbie Hancock at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood with, from left, the trumpeters Roy Hargrove, Ambrose Akinmusire and Terence Blanchard.

The notion of forward motion in jazz has been about as durable as the notion of steadfast tradition; both principles logically inform the music. And given the deterioration of jazz's foothold in mainstream culture, Mr. Hancock embodies a potent ideal: the rare commercial operator who has kept his credibility intact.

Before he walked out to accept his distinction on Sunday, Mr. Hancock took a box seat and enjoyed (or endured) a tour through his pop catalog, as performed by a band led by Rickey Minor, the producer best known (in this town, anyway) as the musical director for "American Idol."

Those highlights spanned glossy funk, fusion and even hip-hop, when Grandmixer DXT scratched his way through "Rockit," the cut he made with Mr. Hancock in the frontier era of MTV. At one point the flutist Hubert Laws spearheaded a quietly smoldering take on Mr. Hancock's "Butterfly." Then the actor Jamie Foxx took over: One of his R&B albums features a sample of the song on a slow jam he calls "VIP."

Of course there are those who would question whether "VIP," or even "Rockit," represents a step forward for Mr. Hancock, who spent the 1960s redefining the modern language of jazz piano. The concert made no effort to address that issue. What it did, finally, was let Herbie be Herbie: in a pastel-hued "Maiden Voyage," with his compatriot Wayne Shorter on soprano saxophone, and in a few songs with Joni Mitchell and Sting. "It's great to have friends," Mr. Hancock said, chuckling, before Sting emerged to croon "My Funny Valentine" alongside the trumpeter Chris Botti. Before that Ms. Mitchell had led a solid charge through a new song, "Hana," and a masterly reading of an old one, "Tea Leaf Prophecy." (Since she was backed by Mr. Hancock, Mr. Shorter, the bassist John Patitucci and the drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, it was a re-enactment of her guest turn on "River: The Joni Letters," Mr. Hancock's gorgeous new album.)

Amid this hoopla one thing was buried: the competition. Perhaps this was inevitable, and a small price to pay for the pomp and publicity. Still, it was a shame, not least because the evening's three finalists were serious musicians. Along with Mr. Akinmusire

(pronounced ah-KIN-moo-SEE-ray), they were Jean Caze, a melodist with a reassuring tone (second place), and Michael Rodriguez, an incisive yet orderly improviser with a modernistic feel (third). In what was either a showbiz concession or some kind of point about versatility, each trumpeter had to play one of his two selections in support of the singer Al Jarreau.

This was simply a bad idea. (No disrespect to Mr. Jarreau.) It robbed the finalists of stage time and seemed to make them ill at ease. Anyone in the hall who heard only this much from the three trumpeters — a majority, it's safe to say — might have reasonably underestimated the skill level of the competition.

The semifinals, held on Saturday afternoon at Schoenberg Hall at the University of California, Los Angeles, offered a much better indication. Mr. Rodriguez was the first of 10 competitors, and he plunged straight into "Yes and No," a theme by Mr. Shorter. His rapport with the superb rhythm section — the pianist Geoffrey Keezer, the bassist Reginald Veal and the drummer Carl Allen — was responsive and sure.

The other competitors were strong, and unexpectedly diverse. Mr. Caze confidently evoked Miles Davis on a pensive ballad, "Old Folks," and a brisk anthem, "My Shining Hour."

But Mr. Akinmusire's three-song set was on another level entirely. Starting off with Mr. Shorter's "Fee Fi Fo Fum," he moved nimbly around the horn, trawling a dark middle register and then easily punching up an octave. He arranged the tune as a shuffle — always a good idea when Mr. Allen is on board — and he never ran out of harmonic options. Later he played Benny Golson's "Stablemates" as a duet with Mr. Keezer, and their high-wire act was bracing, exhilarating. At that point Mr. Akinmusire must have suspected, as the judges did, that the prize was his to lose.

And he must have known, as Mr. Hancock did, that his victory doubles as a testimonial. In 2005 Mr. Akinmusire was one of seven students admitted to the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance, a two-year college program under Mr. Blanchard's artistic direction. One of several educational initiatives under the Monk Institute banner, it has been a resounding success.

How Mr. Akinmusire himself will turn out is an open question, as it should be. His choice of instrument bodes well for any crossover attempt, as his judges in the competition can uniformly attest. Then of course there's Mr. Hancock's endorsement, which can't hurt. Not one bit.