



All jazzed up about the future at the Monk competition

The Thelonious Monk Institute showcases emerging players and celebrates Herbie Hancock as stars join in.

By Don Heckman, Special to TheTimes
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Say this about the Thelonious Monk Institute: It sure knows how to throw a good party. Sunday night's finals of the 20th annual Monk Jazz Competition at the Kodak Theatre had the glitz and glamour of a major award show, with the requisite presence of a star lineup that included Joni Mitchell, Sting, Herbie Hancock, Al Jarreau, Nancy Wilson and Chris Botti, among others. It may not have been the Oscars, but if you are part of the jazz world, you had to be there.

That said, the event, which also included the semifinals on Saturday afternoon at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall and invite-only dinners and receptions, also displayed some of the contradictions -- creative and commercial -- present in 21st century jazz.

The Kodak event was actually a two-part presentation. The first hour was devoted to the finals of the competition, with three young trumpeters -- Jean Gaze from Haiti, Ambrose Akinmusire from Oakland and Michael Rodriguez from New York City -- vying for the first place prize. Although the monetary award is a \$20,000 scholarship (\$10,000 and \$5,000 for second and third places, respectively), the true value of a win is the sort of visibility that has successfully propelled the careers of such previous winners and runners-up as Joshua Redman, Jane Monheit, Marcus Roberts, Jacky Terrasson and Tierney Sutton.

As in the semifinals at UCLA, the quality level Sunday was remarkably high. Each trumpeter had the skills to build a successful career.

It seemed apparent, however, that the final choice would be between Gaze and Akinmusire, who offered very different competitive presentations. Gaze played a soaring, lyrical improvisation based on the standard "I Thought About You." Akinmusire, choosing a far more adventurous path, cruised the outer limits of contemporary improvisation while opening solo patches for the backup trio consisting of pianist Geoff Keezer, bassist Reginald Veal and drummer Carl Allen. The judges awarded first place to Akinmusire.

The second part of the program took a somewhat different tack. The Monk Institute, in association with the L.A. chapter of the Recording Academy, has established the Herbie Hancock Humanitarian Award, with Hancock -- who also is chairman of the Institute's board of trustees -- as its first recipient.

Although the program honoring Hancock broadly surveyed his remarkably eclectic musical history, it focused largely on his pop, rock, funk and electronica efforts, from "Watermelon Man" to "Rockit" rather than emphasize his cutting-edge work with Miles Davis in the '60s, or his ongoing envelope-stretching explorations with longtime friend and partner Wayne Shorter. Nothing wrong with that, in principle. Hancock is a complex creative personality with a broad range of interests. Still, in the context of a jazz competition for young talents still in the heat of youthful imagination, its orientation seemed a bit skewed.

But one could hardly argue with the entertainment aspects of the show, which, from another perspective, made sense, because this event is one of the Institute's principal fundraisers.

Jarreau served as a kind of bridge between the competition and the Hancock tribute, singing with each of the trumpet finalists, romping in his uniquely joyous fashion with George Duke adding subtle piano accents. Nancy Wilson followed, recalling Hancock's film scoring while referencing Thelonious Monk himself with an atmospheric take on "Round Midnight."

The all-star lineup continued without a break, with segments announced by actors Jamie Foxx and Louis Gossett Jr. Roy Hargrove and George Benson played a clattery version of "Cantaloupe Island"; Hubert Laws added "Butterfly"; and, in one of the evening's most engaging segments, the enthusiastic young members of the Debbie Allen Dance Academy surged through a visually effervescent "Rockit."

But the climax of the evening -- an almost-too-brief climax, as it turned out -- began when Hancock took the stage with Shorter, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Vinnie Colaiuta to find ever-new musical territories with "Maiden Voyage." Next, the arrival of Mitchell making a rare guest performance -- and greeted by at least one rock-audience-style shriek from the upper levels -- continued the welcome shift into the more intriguing complexities of Hancock's current musical thinking.

Singing with great warmth and characteristically sly phrasing, countered superbly by Shorter's epigrammatic soprano saxophone lines, she gorgeously illuminated "Tea Leaf Prophecy" from Hancock's new Mitchell tribute album, "River: The Joni Letters" and "Hana" from her own new CD, "Shine." Their short segment left most of the audience, one suspects, hoping for a Hancock-Mitchell tour. Sting's rendering of "My Funny Valentine" backed by the lyrical trumpet of Botti was a brief reference to Hancock's years with Davis.

And the final number -- "Chameleon" -- brought Akinmusire back to the stage, along with Hargrove and fellow trumpeter Terence Blanchard, for an all-star climax and a taste of what winning the Monk Competition can really mean.