CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Picking a Guitarist, Fluent in Monk and More

By NATE CHINEN

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20 — The organizers of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition compare it to the Van Cliburn and Tchaikovsky competitions, appropriately lofty benchmarks for what is heralded as America's classical music. The other useful parallel, "American Idol," goes as tactfully unacknowledged as an elephant in the room.

This year's Monk competition, which focused on the guitar, was especially revealing of jazz's complex and sometimes contradictory negotiation between art music and pop. That push and pull was best personified by George Benson, who received the Maria Fisher Founder's Award from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at the Kennedy Center on Monday night. After accepting the honor, Mr. Benson, in sunglasses and a black velvet tracksuit, performed "On Broadway," his theme song.

The fluid and dizzyingly articulate jazz guitar style that Mr. Benson honed in the 1960's — his Wes Montgomery-derived instrumental voice — was the lingua franca of the competition. Nearly all of the 10 semifinalists who squared off on Sunday at the Baird Auditorium at the Smithsonian showed its influence, adopting Mr. Benson's clarity of tone and crispness of attack.

This might have been a function of a prescreening process that favored technical achievement within recognizable parameters. It could also have been a by-product of the regimented semifinals format. Each guitarist had 15 minutes for three selections, including a Monk composition. And each was required to use all members of the four-piece house band.

That part should have been easy. The band, under the direction of the pianist Bob James, featured several of jazz's most versatile musicians: the bassist James Genus, the drummer Teri Lyne Carrington and the tenor saxophonist Chris Potter.

But some of the guitarists seemed cowed by these veterans, and partic-

Jamie Rose for The New York Times

Russell Malone, left, and Earl Klugh were judges in the competition.

Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition
Kennedy Center, Washington

ularly by Ms. Carrington, whose drumming is as aggressive as it is responsive. A few competitors failed to click with the ensemble because they seemed more intent on courting an ostensibly mainstream judging panel: the guitarists Russell Malone, Earl Klugh, Pat Martino, Stanley Jordan and John Pizzarelli. (Bill Frisell judged the finals but missed the semis to wrap up a Village Vanguard engagement.)

Every guitarist was proficient, and there were moments that broke through the workmanlike conservatism. David Mooney, a New Orleans native, began with a breezy light-funk number, and then moved on to "The End of a Love Affair," swinging with a bluesy bite.

But the most arresting artist was a Norwegian named Lage Lund, who has lately been a fixture on New York's low-rent club scene. (He plays this Friday and Saturday at

Smalls, 183 West 10th Street, Greenwich Village.) Mr. Lund displayed a sophisticated harmonic literacy and a natural sense of phrasing.

He was one of the three finalists, along with Mr. Mooney and Miles Okazaki, to appear at the Kennedy Center on Monday. Mr. Mooney smartly finessed the Monk ballad "Pannonica" but sounded ill at ease on Wayne Shorter's sleeker "E.S.P." Mr. Okazaki nailed a barn-burning romp through John Coltrane's "Countdown," but his lurching rhythmic deconstruction of Monk's "Misterioso" visibly flustered the band. Mr. Lund came out strongest over all, but his diffident poise seemed more aloof than introspective under the glare of the stage lights.

Mr. Lund won first prize, with an accompanying check of $20,000. Mr. Okazaki received second prize, and $10,000; Mr. Mooney came in third, with $5,000. (The prize money comes from General Motors, the competition's major sponsor.) The evening ended with Mr. Lund, the winner, and Mr. Benson, the honoree, gamely digging into "How High the Moon," a bit of jazz classicism that harnessed virtuosity in the service of popular appeal.