

Black Music Research Journal

Center for Black Music Research

Columbia College Chicago

Volume 19, #2 (Autumn 1999)

Evidence: Monk as Documentary

Subject

By Krin Gabbard

© 1999 Krin Gabbard

Reprinted by permission of the *Black Music Research Journal*

All rights reserved

EVIDENCE: MONK AS DOCUMENTARY SUBJECT

KRIN GABBARD

For those familiar with Thelonious Monk only through recordings, the experience of first seeing him perform on film can be startling. The outrageous hats, the splayed fingers, the sucked-in cheeks, the spastic dancing—all of it suggests a character with a story that goes well beyond the music. Yet for many years, Monk has been consistently presented as an inscrutable figure who could *only* be known through his music.¹ At least one filmmaker simply gave up trying to make sense of his puzzling exterior: when Bert Stern filmed the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival for *Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1958), he kept cutting away to shots of yacht races during the pianist's performance of "Blue Monk"; Monk is onscreen for less than thirty seconds. More ambitious filmmakers have extended a more searching gaze in three documentaries that provide strikingly different approaches to how Monk might be understood. The title of Matthew Seig's 1991 documentary is itself significant; *Thelonious Monk: American Composer* presents a dedicated artist and family man who created a spir-

1. With one exception, Monk's English-language biographers and commentators have concentrated more on his music than on his life. Like many books devoted to a single jazz artist, Fitterling's (1997) book is more of an annotated discography than a biography of Monk. The jazz pianist Laurent de Wilde (1997) is most comfortable giving his impressions of the music, weaving in biographical material in a kind of poetic counterpoint. Another jazz pianist, Ran Blake (1988), wrote the entry on Monk for *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* and appended a good bibliography. As of this writing, the most useful source of information about Monk's life remains Gourse's biography (1997), which is filled with anecdotes and material culled from interviews, although in many ways it is a sketchy portrait of both the man and the musician.

KRIN GABBARD is professor of comparative literature at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He is the author of *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) and the editor of *Jazz among the Discourses* (Duke University Press, 1995) and *Representing Jazz* (Duke University Press, 1995).

itually rich music rooted in a great tradition. In Charlotte Zwerin's *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser* (1988), Monk is bizarre and unpredictable, functioning as an artist primarily because of the highly professional support of sidepersons, the steadfast dedication of his wife Nellie, and the patronage of the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter. The Monk prominently featured by Jean Bach in the film *A Great Day in Harlem* (1995) is a trickster who carefully choreographed how the world would see him.

The Life and the Music: Meditations on Integration

Although some writers of biography would like to turn their prose into a window with an unobstructed view of their subjects, they can never deliver the semblance of truth that is available to the documentary filmmaker.² Biographers in general and jazz biographers in particular face additional problems as they attempt to integrate the work of the subject with the life of the subject. Writers who examine a collection of biographical material eventually produce nuanced language to explain how the work relates to the life and vice versa. If documentary filmmakers are to justify the inevitable truth claims inherent in their work, they must rely on some combination of "voice-of-God" narration, archival footage, and talking heads to present their subjects. In the "classical" and "modernist" documentary, narration is scrupulously avoided. John Grierson, perhaps the father of documentary cinema, simply turned his camera—and later his sound equipment—on his subjects in the 1920s and 1930s and recorded their activities (Winston 1995). In the modernist documentary—which probably begins with *Point of Order* (1964), Emile de Antonio's careful selection of early television footage to expose the malevolence of Joseph McCarthy—narration was written out as pretentious and awkward. In the jazz documentary of the 1980s and 1990s, we are likely to watch people being interviewed, often in front of carefully composed backgrounds and with no real evidence that anyone is doing the interviewing. When the documentary subject is a living person, filmmakers will train the camera on the subject and hope for moments of self-revelation. Even if there is no self-revelation, the mere presence of a camera and film crew ensures that the subject will at least seem to be transparent.

When the documentary subject is a black jazz musician, transparency is much less inevitable, and the task of revealing the life through the work

2. The problems raised by documentary cinema's inevitable claim to truth dominate much writing on the subject. Among many useful volumes, see Rosenthal (1988), Renov (1993), and Barnouw (1993). The best single work on biographies, autobiographies, and documentaries about jazz musicians is Harlos (1992). Also see the chapter on the "Jazz Biopic" in Gabbard (1996).

and vice versa becomes more complicated. For one thing, jazz archives are not nearly as full as archives for the Civil War and baseball, to pick two examples from Ken Burns' mammoth portfolio. (Burns' anticipated multipart series on jazz promises to provide a revealing comparison to his programs on less-controversial subjects that lend themselves more easily to documentary treatment.) Jazz filmmakers often have to improvise with a limited amount of stock footage, stills, and interviews. The Cotton Club Dancers, filmed for *Black and Tan*, Dudley Murphy's 1929 film with Duke Ellington, appear again and again in films that make reference to the Jazz Age. Throw in some well-chosen recordings from the period, add a few interviews with survivors and/or journalists, and the result is your generic documentary about Harlem, jazz, or the Jazz Age. The segment on the 1920s in Ric Burns' ten-hour *New York: A Documentary Film*, shown on PBS in November 1999, is only the most recent example of this practice.

Attempts to yield the "truth" about black subjects are further complicated by a technology that was designed by and for white people. As the African-American director and cinematographer Ernest Dickerson has pointed out, white filmmakers assume that they have the proper lighting if white faces show up clearly in the frame, often at the expense of clarity for the black faces (Dyer 1997, 98).³ With the "standard" technology and technicians, black subjects are problematic from the outset. Clint Eastwood's *Bird* (1988), with cinematography by Jack N. Green, offers a telling example of how mainstream cinema finds visual metaphors for the constructed inscrutability of black Americans. As I have argued elsewhere (Gabbard 1996, 88-90), the irrational behavior of Charlie Parker (played Forest Whitaker) in *Bird* must be clarified for the audience by white characters such as Parker's sideman Red Rodney and his common-law wife Chan Richardson. For example, when the institutionalized Parker attacks a white inmate for no apparent reason, the audience must wait for Richardson to explain to a psychiatrist that Parker has given up drugs and alcohol and thus needs to feel something, even if it is the pain of a fight. The dark, impenetrable surface of Parker/Whitaker is made all the more opaque by lighting and camera work that keeps him almost constantly in the shadows.⁴

But as jazz scholars know, many of the most important black artists are

3. Dickerson was cinematographer on all of Spike Lee's films from *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) through *Malcolm X* (1992). He has also directed *Juice* (1992), *Surviving the Game* (1994), and *Bulletproof* (1996).

4. Paul Smith (1993, 241) compares the lighting of Eastwood's body in many of his films to the lighting afforded Whitaker in *Bird*: the way that Parker/Whitaker signifies "decadence and dissolution" bears a significant relationship to "the ways in which Eastwood's own body both represents and signifies whiteness."

notoriously opaque, often speaking in their own metalanguage and scrupulously avoiding the kind of self-revelation that the interviewer seeks. An emblematic moment occurs in Lester Young's famous 1959 interview with François Postif when Young asks permission to speak freely with his "nasty" words (Porter 1991, 177). Young's hesitancy to use the language with which he is most comfortable is typical of jazz musicians who have perhaps sought out musical expression in order to *avoid* certain kinds of verbal communication. Accordingly, some films about jazz artists resemble ethnographic films that construct "an exotic whose culture is open to inspection by the invisible camera and its scientist/operator. The truths displayed produce an order, a history, and thus a narrative about the relationship of the 'primitive' to 'progress,' self to other" (Rabinowitz 1994, 12).

The evasive, "signifying" style of self-presentation exhibited by black artists in ethnographic films and in interview situations is often typical of white jazz musicians as well. Consider Chet Baker in Bruce Weber's 1988 documentary *Let's Get Lost*, in which the trumpeter often seems to be putting on an act to charm the infatuated filmmaker. In general, however, the kind of symbiosis between documentarian and subject seen in *Let's Get Lost* seldom happens when the director is white and the subject is black. The gulf is too great to cross, whether the cause is technology, the different worlds of the filmmaker and the musician, or the self-presentation of the jazz artist. In some cases, the relationship between the music and the life is simply impossible to fathom, no matter how close the biographer gets to the subject and no matter how hard the filmmakers work to bring specific sets of meaning to carefully arranged bits of film and music. I am referring here to works about Monk but also to those about Charlie Parker. I will briefly address Parker in this context, if only because the scholarship on him is a bit farther along than it is for Monk (although the "Brilliant Corners" symposium, held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1998, and this issue of *Black Music Research Journal* may represent the beginning of a new wave of Monk scholarship).

John Gennari (1997) has written an intriguing essay on the work of Ross Russell, the man who recorded Charlie Parker for Dial Records in the late 1940s and who subsequently made two attempts at interpreting Parker's life, first in the novel *The Sound* (1961) and then in the biography *Bird Lives* (1973). Gennari brilliantly reveals how the cultural upheavals that took place between the two works helps to explain the vastly different ways in which Russell accounts for the life and art of Parker. Whereas Red Travers, the character carefully modeled after Parker in *The Sound*, is a manipulative and self-destructive hipster king of the 1950s, the Parker

of *Bird Lives* is a “black power hero” consistent with the racial politics of the early 1970s. More important, Gennari shows how Russell was obsessed by the gap between the brilliance of Parker’s music and the wretchedness of his personal life. (Gennari quotes Ralph Ellison [1964, 229], who characterized Parker as “one whose friends had no need for an enemy, and whose enemies had no difficulty in justifying their hate.”) Russell was never able to bridge this gap except by falling back on readily available discursive practices of the two eras in which he was writing.

Stanley Crouch (1997), who is writing his own biography of Charlie Parker, has stated that the relationship between Parker the man and Parker the musician is mysterious to him. He quotes pianist Lennie Tristano, who said that Bird would have been a brilliant musician if he had been born in China hundreds of years ago. I doubt that many jazz scholars would agree with Crouch’s assertion that the life experience of the musician does not necessarily shed light on the music. I recommend Mark Tucker’s biography of the young Duke Ellington (1991), Robert O’Meally’s book on Billie Holiday (1991), and Scott DeVeaux’s work on Coleman Hawkins and Howard McGhee (1997), exemplary texts that show how an artist’s music and life interrelate. Documentary filmmakers have also sought this integration in biographical accounts of artists such as Parker or Monk. For better or worse, however, the filmmakers fall back on well-established discourses that have long been available to jazz biographers.

Thelonious Monk: American Composer

Matthew Seig’s documentary *Thelonious Monk: American Composer* is part of what might be called “The Lincoln Center Project,” with its goal of establishing a canon of African-American genius composer/musicians all linked by a history of apprenticeships and direct influences. Although Jazz at Lincoln Center is relatively young, the canonizing practices that it has promoted were already present in the late 1950s in the journal *The Jazz Review* and in subsequent books such as Gunther Schuller’s *Early Jazz* (1968) and Martin Williams’ *The Jazz Tradition* (1970). Embryonic signs of the project appeared in the popular media as early as 1957 when Monk was invited to perform on the CBS television broadcast “The Sound of Jazz.” Although Monk appeared as a remote figure concealed behind dark glasses, the producers at CBS placed an appreciative Count Basie as a privileged spectator at the opposite end of the piano, thus associating Monk with a key figure from the early history of the music.⁵

5. The intention was probably to make Monk’s music less threatening and obscure by associating him with the revered and popular Basie, who also played piano in a spare, per-

In Seig's film, Monk's music is linked with great predecessors from the outset. We are told that James P. Johnson lived in Monk's childhood neighborhood and was an inspirational figure to him. Duke Ellington and Coleman Hawkins, two of the most celebrated artists in the jazz canon, appear in still photos with Monk and are held up as key influences on the younger musician. Monk's work at the Five Spot with John Coltrane in 1957 is meant to show that the pianist had a major effect on the next generation of geniuses, as the earlier geniuses had inspired him. Just as the Virgil of T. S. Eliot's "What Is a Classic?" (1944) looks backward to Homer and forward to Dante, Monk is an essential link in a chain of great musicians, his art inconceivable without them.

Seig's treatment of Monk is consistently reverential. In one of several appearances, Monk's son, T. S. Monk Jr., speaks of a strong tradition of education, religion, and respect for elders that formed part of his father's upbringing and made him a serious artist. We see footage of Monk walking gracefully past the camera, pausing patiently to indulge the questions of a reporter. The dominant "authenticating voices"⁶ throughout the film are those of Randy Weston and Billy Taylor. Weston is the voice of jazz authenticity, speaking eloquently of the spirituality in Monk's music and the values it embodies. Taylor is the articulate intellectual who designates Monk as a unique artist and a central figure in the history of jazz.⁷ As with the symbolic appropriation of Basie in "The Sound of Jazz," moments in Seig's film attempt to domesticate the music, insisting that Monk was much more in the mainstream than some have supposed. Footage of Monk playing the old pop song "Just a Gigolo" is offered as evidence.

Not until Seig's sixty-minute film is half over does the narrative turn to conflicts in Monk's life and describe his arrest for possession of drugs. Taylor tells the camera that the suspension of Monk's cabaret card was a racist act: "Too many black people [in New York] were working downtown." T. S. Monk, however, is more reassuring, reminiscing about his

cussive style. Nevertheless, the placement of Basie did not please Monk. He later complained to his personal manager, Harry Colomby, that Basie was "looking at" him while he was playing. According to Colomby, Monk eventually vowed that "the next time he plays somewhere I'm going to look at him." (Not surprisingly, this information is *not* in Seig's film but in Zwerin's.)

6. I have borrowed this term from William Kenney (1991), who applies it both to whites who edited and wrote introductions to slave narratives in premodern eras as well as to Rudy Vallee, who wrote a preface to Louis Armstrong's first autobiography.

7. Orrin Keepnews, who produced the many recordings Monk made for the Riverside label in the 1950s and 1960s, is also a talking head in Seig's film, but he is called on more to address the specifics of Monk's life than to speak to the larger significance of the man and his music.

father playing “Mr. Mom” while Nellie Monk supported the family during the years that her husband was severely restricted in his ability to work in New York clubs. We hear that Monk used the time to write music and play games with his two children. Mention of the family’s financial problems serves as a cue to introduce Baroness Pannonica “Nica” de Koenigswarter, the wealthy European jazz enthusiast who befriended and gave financial support to Monk, Parker, and other musicians in New York. Orrin Keepnews compares her to a medieval patron of the arts, and Weston praises her for recognizing Monk’s genius. There is no discussion of her personal relations with Monk. After less than a minute of screen time, the baroness is never mentioned again.

Drummer Ben Riley appears in the film shortly after the halfway mark and recalls the strange circumstances under which he suddenly became a member of the band during what he thought was a brief job at a recording session. Although, Riley says, Monk never once spoke to him during the session, Monk turned to Riley at the end and astonished him by telling him to get his passport ready because “We’re leaving on Friday.” But even this incident appears to show how tightly Monk focused on his music to the exclusion of mundane affairs. Riley also explains that Monk’s dancing was his way of enjoying the music while his sidemen performed. According to Riley, Monk always knew exactly when it was time to return to the piano no matter how involved he became with his dancing.

Throughout Seig’s program, there is no mention of Monk’s affection for unusual hats, although we see many of them. Weston refers to his lurching dance style as “ballet.” The program winds down with a few statements on Monk’s refusal to play during his last years. Weston says that Monk should have lived in a place where an artist’s needs were completely fulfilled, but because he never had such a place, he simply gave up: “I felt spiritually that he just shut the door.” In order to further emphasize Monk’s role in a thriving tradition, the penultimate moments of the program are devoted to the music of Sphere, a quartet consisting of two former Monk sidemen (Charlie Rouse and Ben Riley), plus two musicians who had never worked with Monk (Kenny Barron and Buster Williams). The group began its career by recording only tunes by Monk, who died—coincidentally and poignantly—on the group’s first day in the recording studio. The program ends with stirring video footage of Monk playing “Oska T.”

The creation of a jazz canon with a list of great artists in a coherent tradition has been a necessary step in the growth of jazz studies as a legitimate discipline (Gabbard 1995). And as DeVaux (1991) has argued, it is probably unfair to deconstruct a canonical view of jazz history so soon

after it has been constructed. On the one hand, African-American artists have made monumental contributions to music even though they have been neglected, marginalized, and exploited throughout the first century of jazz history. There is also no question that jazz musicians have been profoundly influenced by earlier jazz musicians. Seig's film is a valuable collection of personal reminiscences and performances that would not have been possible without the canonizing practices of grant-giving agencies and a growing audience of serious and devoted listeners. On the other hand, the film and the project that it represents borrow a template from traditions of European art and music that has almost always excluded the music of the Other. In *Early Jazz* (1968, 134–174), for example, Gunther Schuller used a European model to construct Jelly Roll Morton as "The First Great Composer" even though this model inadequately describes a music that grows out of improvisations and group interactions and that is seldom performed as a stabilized text. Much the same can be said about the implications of Seig's title, *Thelonious Monk: American Composer*. Furthermore, both Morton and Monk surely learned a great deal from musicians outside the world of jazz, as have many of the artists in the jazz canon. By concentrating only on the great soloists and composers, the canonizing project also ignores contributions from crucial figures in jazz and other musics and thus distorts jazz history. (Nevertheless, at Lincoln Center the project has been extraordinarily successful if only because it now costs as much to go to a jazz concert as it does to go to the ballet or the opera.)

Although it was originally broadcast on the Bravo cable channel, Seig's film is one of the several programs on jazz musicians featured in a PBS television series titled, appropriately, *American Masters*. These programs presented such artists as Ellington, Parker, Coltrane, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and Monk as significant figures whose lives are consistent with their achievements as artists. As Seig does with the title of his film, Kendrick Simmons and Gary Giddins say a great deal at the outset by naming their 1987 Parker documentary *Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker*. The programs in this series do not actually conceal troubling incidents in the biographies of Monk, Parker, or Billie Holiday, but they often border on the kind of hagiography that has until recently been afforded only to canonical figures from classical music.

Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser

Although hardly an anticanonizing film, Charlotte Zwerin's *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser* contains much that might seem to have been purposefully omitted from Seig's film. The same T. S. Monk who had

spoken so warmly of a caring father to Seig's camera talks soberly to Zwerin about "when you look your father in the eye and you know that he doesn't exactly know who you are." From the outset, the Monk here is a much different figure than the one presented by Seig. Zwerin does not hesitate, for example, to confront the close relationship between Monk and Nica de Koenigswarter. Harry Colomby, Monk's personal manager from 1955 to 1967, explains that Nellie never felt threatened by her husband's dependence on Nica: "They were splitting duties." We also see a good deal of Monk at his most difficult, first at a 1967 recording session for Columbia Records and later when he and an octet are on tour in Europe.⁸ At the record date, Monk arrives wearing a three-cornered hat that resembles a mortar board. He also sports a set of wire-rimmed glasses without lenses. Monk explains that the hat was given to him in Poland and that he is wearing "invisible glasses." The quartet plays "Ugly Beauty" until producer Teo Macero stops them. Monk becomes querulous, cursing and complaining because Macero did not record the band as it was rehearsing.⁹

In the segment devoted to the European tour, we learn that Monk neglected to write music for his large ensemble until the last possible moment. We see him awkwardly stopping trumpet soloist Ray Copeland in the middle of a solo while a confused audience looks on. In footage presumably shot backstage after the concert, Monk paces nervously and eventually strikes an air-conditioning unit in an angry gesture. Later, we see members of the octet struggling to understand what Monk wants; the most satisfying performance footage in the segment is not by the collective ensemble but by individual soloists. Although Bob Jones' voice-over tells us that audiences were highly appreciative as the tour continued, a great deal of the footage presents Monk at his most bizarre. At one point, he wanders in an airport, spinning about for no discernible reason except perhaps to amuse the camera crew tracking his every move. Other moments show that Nellie has taken over the daily responsibilities of

8. The recording session in fact took place in December 1967, *after* Monk's tour of European cities in October and November of 1967.

9. The scene at the recording session is difficult to follow. The editing does not make clear how much time has elapsed between the various segments of the footage, and Monk's speech is indistinct. Teo Macero seems to be mocking Monk at the same time that he goes out of his way to be enthusiastic about his presence in the studio. Commenting on an earlier draft of this article as it was prepared for publication, editor Mark Tucker suggested that the presence of the camera in the studio transforms the two into something of a comedy team: the sly Monk with his sardonic grin and the broadly slapstick Macero with his desperate attempts at being hip and funny. Ultimately, the sequence seems designed to reveal the power struggle between the musician and the producer as well as the demands that the recording industry awkwardly imposed on an artist who was both a serious musician and an eccentric personality.

travel so that her husband can be free to concentrate on his music. But even Nellie is presented as somewhat eccentric when Bob Jones, the band's road manager, reports that she brought back empty Coke bottles in her suitcase so that she could redeem them for the deposit.

In addition to Colomby, the most favored witness in Zwerin's footage is Charlie Rouse, who spent many years playing tenor saxophone in Monk's groups. In contrast to Randy Weston and Billy Taylor in Seig's film, Colomby and Rouse speak more openly of a Monk who was difficult and enigmatic. Rouse is not a natural raconteur like Weston, but his terse comments tend to be more revealing than the grand statements that Weston makes in *Thelonious Monk: American Composer*.

Zwerin begins her film by showing Monk dancing and spinning while the other members of the quartet perform "Evidence." When his time to solo comes, Monk runs to the piano and begins playing with great animation, perspiring profusely, pounding his foot, and bouncing on the piano bench, still very much the strange figure who was spinning and cavorting a few seconds earlier. After the opening performance footage, Monk speaks, something he does in only one brief scene in Seig's film. Bob Jones reads from an encyclopedia that gives Monk's vital statistics. When Jones says, "It appears that you're famous, Thelonious," the pianist mutters, "What does that mean?" Jones tells him that the book also lists popes and presidents, to which Monk replies, "I'm famous. Ain't that a bitch?"

The placing of Monk in a great tradition, which is the principal goal of Seig's film, is handled with much greater dispatch by Zwerin. After the introductory performance footage and the conversation about fame with Jones, the voice-over narration of Samuel E. Wright is heard for less than five minutes, touching on Monk's childhood, his connections to James P. Johnson and jazz history, his apprenticeship with Coleman Hawkins, and his role in the birth of bebop. When Rouse tells the camera that many of Monk's compositions have become classics, the statement is confirmed by footage of Tommy Flanagan and Barry Harris playing a two-piano version of "Well, You Needn't." In this ninety-minute documentary, Monk's troubles are introduced early: the arrest for drugs and the loss of the cabaret card are mentioned before the first fifteen minutes have elapsed. In the next few minutes, Colomby talks about Monk's gig at the Five Spot with Coltrane, and the history lesson is effectively over. We then see black-and-white footage of Monk spinning around while Nica sits on a set of stairs in the background, chatting with someone off-camera. Finished with his spins, Monk looks at the camera and says, "Someone else did that, they'd put 'em in a strait jacket. People say, 'Oh, that Thelonious Monk. He's crazy.'" Hearing applause somewhere off

camera, Monk then bows slightly and says, "Thank you." The rest of the film features a good deal of performance footage, but Monk's eccentricities and psychological problems are consistently in the foreground.

Most of the black-and-white footage that dominates Zwerin's *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser* was shot by Christian and Michael Blackwood in 1967 and 1968 for a Monk documentary that was never completed. Co-producer Bruce Ricker first located the footage and discovered that it was in excellent condition. He and Zwerin brought it to the attention of Clint Eastwood, who bankrolled the film and served as its executive producer. Although portions of Zwerin's film are compatible with the canonizing tendencies in recent jazz writing, most of it derives from the familiar narrative of the revolutionary jazz artist laid low by prejudice, controlled substances, and an audience of philistines. Dorothy Baker can probably take the lion's share of credit for first finding the proper balance of pathos and tragedy in the life of a neglected jazz artist. The inspiration for Baker's novel, *Young Man with a Horn* (1938), was the white trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke, who drank himself to death in 1931, but the same narrative has dominated accounts of the lives of Holiday, Parker, Young, and others.¹⁰ The jazz documentaries of Seig, Toby Byron, Gary Giddins, and their collaborators would not be so relentlessly positive if they were not responding to this older narrative.

Designed for the high-culture aesthetics of Bravo and PBS, the documentaries of Seig and the others inevitably celebrate jazz as a great American art form. Charlotte Zwerin, by contrast, was working in the tradition of independent cinema with its refusal to be slick, demure, or self-congratulatory. She is not afraid, for example, to show us Monk when he is angry, childlike, and even incoherent. *Straight No Chaser* may be most disturbing when it chronicles Monk's mental illness. The psychologist Martin Margulis (1996) quotes T. S. Monk, who said that doctors wanted to administer electroconvulsive therapy to his father but that the family would not give permission. Although the psychiatric reports on Monk have never been made public, Gourse (1997, 117) interviewed a psychiatrist who observed Monk for a month but found no convincing evidence of either manic depression or schizophrenia. Gourse reports that several authorities suggested that Monk may simply have taken too many drugs, only some of them by design. On at least one occasion, Monk was given LSD without his knowledge, and Timothy Leary may have shared peyote with him in the early 1960s (120). Gourse also quotes a doctor who

10. Russell's *Bird Lives* (1973) is an excellent example of the romantic narrative of the self-destructive black genius suffering from exploitation and the ignorance of audiences. In cinema, a similar course is taken by director Sidney J. Furie in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) and by Bertrand Tavernier in *Round Midnight* (1986). Laurent de Wilde (1997) appropriates the same discourse to explain Monk's refusal to play during the last years of his life.

believes that Monk was misdiagnosed and probably suffered brain damage from various drugs administered to him during his several periods of hospitalization (278).

Speaking to Zwerin's camera about his father's episodes, T. S. Monk says, "He would generally close up, introvert, and then he would get excited. And he may . . . pace for four days, or something like that. Then eventually he would get exhausted." For the Monk family, these episodes must have been heartbreaking and financially devastating.

But romantic myths of mental illness are also available to anyone wishing to tell Monk's story in a different fashion. Christian Blackwood began filming Monk the same year as the release of Frederick Wiseman's extraordinary documentary *Titicut Follies* (1967), which was shot inside a state mental hospital in Massachusetts. The mid-1960s was a period of extreme reaction against the psychiatric profession, dramatically reversing a period of largely uncritical acceptance of Freud and the industry that grew up around his work.¹¹ The message of Wiseman's film about life inside a mental hospital is that the keepers are as crazy as the patients.¹² Although Wiseman did not exactly romanticize mental illness, much of the popular entertainment of the mid- to late-1960s did—for example, books such as R. D. Laing's *Sanity, Madness, and the Family* (1964), and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and films such as *King of Hearts* (1966) and *A Fine Madness* (1966). To one degree or another, Christian Blackwood undoubtedly succumbed to this revisionist view of mental illness as he pursued Monk. In this context, the Monk of Blackwood's black-and-white footage is a free-spirited eccentric whose music is a natural expression of what the psychiatric establishment might call mental illness. In 1967, it was not just the jazz cognoscenti who would have regarded Monk's behavior as something other than insanity.

Zwerin, who both directed and edited *Straight No Chaser*, picked and chose among the many hours of Blackwood's footage. On some level, she too was fascinated by Monk's strange behavior and saw it primarily as part of a complicated artist's temperament. By 1988, however, American culture had a much less romantic view of mental illness. Zwerin has tried to place Monk's madness in a larger context, in which the beauty of the music tends to mitigate if not justify his weird deportment. For example, she included a scene in which Monk lies in a hotel bed trying to order

11. After a period in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Hollywood presented highly sympathetic portrayals of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in at least twenty-five feature films, the industry dramatically changed its practices and began portraying psychiatrists as unprofessional, incompetent, and/or vindictive (see Gabbard and Gabbard 1987).

12. For an excellent study of Wiseman's work, see Grant (1992).

chicken livers from a baffled European waiter. The scene is immediately followed by Monk's beautiful performance of "Ruby My Dear." Zwerin's tolerance for Monk's eccentricity is not at all incompatible with the familiar liberal humanist account of a black artist destroyed by a corrupt American culture. In the footage that she herself brought to the film, Zwerin shows T. S. Monk attributing Monk's emotional problems to the internalization of years of critical misunderstanding and popular neglect. Clint Eastwood embraced a version of this narrative in his well-intentioned but dark film about Charlie Parker that was released the same year that Eastwood made Zwerin's Monk film possible. For Zwerin and Eastwood in Hollywood in the late 1980s, the paradigm shift toward the Lincoln Center Project was still a few years away. If Matthew Seig's documentary presents the music as the triumphant achievement of a beautiful man steeped in a great tradition, Zwerin's *Straight No Chaser* suggests that the music came from a tortured soul who found beauty in spite of his sufferings.

But Monk does not always appear to be suffering in Zwerin's film. Some of his most bizarre conduct seems to take place for the sake of the camera. After spinning about in an airport, Monk smiles broadly and knowingly as Blackwood's camera closes in on his face. Similarly, one wonders if Monk wore the "invisible glasses" to the recording studio only because he knew that he was being filmed. Macero and the recording engineer at the session treat the fashion statement as highly unusual, even for Monk. One may also speculate about the extent of Monk's naïveté early in the film when he expresses surprise at the news that he has become famous. Although he was suffering breakdowns during this period, Monk does not appear irrational in his terse exchange with Jones. He was probably feigning ignorance.

Appropriately, Zwerin's film ends not with the most moving example of Monk's lyricism but with the pianist knocking out a delicately ironic version of "Sweetheart of All My Dreams" on an out-of-tune piano. In these last moments when Monk is on camera, Zwerin shows him simultaneously serious and playful as he explores the ancient tune on what sounds like a child's toy piano.

A Great Day in Harlem

It is the more knowing, more playful Monk of *Straight No Chaser* who emerges as an important character in *A Great Day in Harlem* (1995), a documentary about the famous photograph of fifty-seven jazz musicians posing in front of a Harlem brownstone in 1958. Jean Bach, who produced and directed *A Great Day in Harlem*, appears to be uninterested in

either of the two master narratives that drive the films of Seig and Zwerin. She focuses instead on the stories of several musicians and what happened when they arrived one summer morning to have their picture taken. The resulting photograph, captured by Art Kane for *Esquire* magazine, has become a unique document in the history of jazz. Although Bach's film devotes a few moments to the authenticating voice of Nat Hentoff (perhaps because Matthew Seig served as co-producer), the jazz artists are usually portrayed not so much as genius composer/musicians but as tricksters. As Burton Peretti (1995) has observed, jazz artists, when allowed to speak for themselves, are often fond of spinning tales about how they resourcefully overcame danger and humiliation. Others just seem to love a good story. Milt Hinton, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Golson, Eddie Locke, and Johnny Griffin all have moments of screen time in which they display great wit and comic timing. With Bach directing and Susan Peehl editing *A Great Day in Harlem*, even the dour Hank Jones becomes a jokester, pointing out who in the photograph has or has not put on weight since 1958.

Monk probably receives more attention than any other artist in the photograph. Within the first ten minutes of the sixty-minute film, we meet Robert Altschuler, the publicity man at the Riverside record company at the time of the photograph, who was assigned the task of bringing Monk to the photo session. Before Altschuler can begin his story, however, Johnny Griffin appears and compares Monk to Jomo Kenyatta, explaining that the pianist wore such an imposing facade that people were afraid to speak to him. In partial explanation of Monk's unapproachability, Art Blakey says that he loved and admired Monk because he had "higher morals than any man I ever met. . . . He always told the truth. If you wanted to know something, and you asked him a question, . . . he's going to tell you the truth, and that's what people don't like. That's why they were afraid of him."

Throughout Bach's film, stories about one figure drift seamlessly into stories about others. The narrative itself has a trickster quality. The subject of Monk is dropped shortly after Blakey's testimonial, but the story of his trip to the photo shoot is picked up again about five minutes later. After we see Monk performing "Blue Monk" from "The Sound of Jazz," Altschuler reappears and continues his story of driving to the West Side to find Monk. Once again, however, the story is interrupted by various participants who talk about the complicated logistics of getting everyone into position. When Altschuler appears once again, he says that Monk made him wait for more than an hour, leading him to worry that they would miss the shoot. When Monk finally came down to the car, Altschuler tells us, he made no explanation for his tardiness but made a

striking appearance in a yellow sports jacket. The camera then picks up Dizzy Gillespie talking about how Monk seldom spoke, in part because Nellie often did his speaking for him. On one occasion, after Nellie had answered a question addressed to her husband, Gillespie told her, "Nellie, Monk speak English . . . in a weird way, but he speak English." Griffin reappears to say that Monk could listen quietly to a group of musicians gossiping and "running their mouths" and then destroy everything they had said with "three or four words."

Finally, Altschuler explains why Monk was late. Gigi Gryce, who had accompanied Monk uptown for the occasion, later told Altschuler that Monk had been trying on different clothes in order to stand out as much as possible among the other musicians. As Altschuler speaks, the camera shows a montage of photographs displaying the wide variety of distinctive outfits that Monk wore in public over the years. When the camera cuts back to the main photograph, Altschuler points out that Monk made himself even more conspicuous by standing next to the two beautiful pianists, Marian McPartland and Mary Lou Williams. This clever character is practically unrecognizable after the films of Zwerin and Seig.

In directing *A Great Day in Harlem*, Bach joins a surprisingly large group of women who have directed jazz documentaries. Practically a genre unto itself, the list includes *But Then . . . She's Betty Carter* (Michelle Parkerson, 1980), *Toshiko Akiyoshi: Jazz Is My Native Language* (Renee Cho, 1983), *Mary Lou Williams: Music on My Mind* (Joanna Burke, 1983), *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin' Women* (Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, 1988), *Bix: Ain't None of Them Play Like Him Yet* (Brigitte Berman, 1981), *Maxwell Street Blues* (Linda Williams, 1980), *Listen Up: The Lives of Quincy Jones* (Ellen Weissbrod, 1989), *Ernie Andrews: Blues for Central Avenue* (Lois Shelton, 1986), and *Ornette: Made in America* (Shirley Clarke, 1986), as well as Charlotte Zwerin's film.¹³ It may be that the neglected art of jazz coupled with the neglected art of the documentary provides the path of least resistance for a woman seeking to break into the patriarchal industry of filmmaking. One might also speculate about differences between these unusual women's films and the "official" jazz biographies that appear on PBS and Bravo, virtually all of them written, produced, and directed by men and virtually all devoted to elevating the stature of favored jazz artists. Susan McClary (1991, 17) is surely right when she argues that music has historically been regarded as feminine and that male musicians have retaliated by, for example, insisting upon the "objectivity, universality, and transcendence" of certain music. Male critics, musicologists, and filmmakers have also tended to make lofty claims for jazz artists that

13. I thank Christopher Harlos for compiling a first draft of this list.

women may not feel obliged to echo. Jean Bach has brought a playful, noncanonizing tone to her film, but I will not insist on gender-specific explanations for why this is the case. I will, however, point out that Bach has been a serious jazz devotee in New York City for many years and that she has portrayed the musicians in *A Great Day in Harlem* not as abstractions but as men and women she has come to know firsthand.

Even though Bach tells her stories with a light touch, there remains a solemn, almost ceremonious air about the photograph around which she builds her film. It may have been there from the beginning. The weathered faces of older jazz artists such as Willie "The Lion" Smith, Miff Mole, Zutty Singleton, Luckey Roberts, and Henry "Red" Allen give the photo a distinctly austere look, in spite of Monk's bright sports jacket and the clowning of Gillespie and Roy Eldridge in the right-hand corner. With few exceptions, the artists in the photograph represent the music's past rather than its future. John Coltrane and Miles Davis, busy changing jazz history in 1958, are absent. So are the larger-than-life figures of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Benny Goodman, who might have given a timeless dimension to the photograph. But the carefully composed black-and-white photography and the nineteenth-century brownstone in Harlem where the musicians were posed make even jazz modernists such as Charles Mingus, Gerry Mulligan, Sonny Rollins, and Monk seem part of an ancient tradition. To her credit, Bach does not exploit the corresponding sense of loss that is built into the photograph: a listing of deceased artists is virtually absent from the narration. Only Art Farmer raises the subject, and even then the tone is affirmative rather than nostalgic when he tells us, for example, that "Lester Young is here now."

A Great Day in Harlem is fond of its tricksters, crucial figures in the African-American literary and cultural criticism of the 1990s. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988), in his seminal book *The Signifying Monkey*, has explored the roots of trickster mythology and the central role that the character has played in both African and African-American cultures. But producer-director Bach probably took the image of Monk as trickster from musicians rather than from scholars. After all, she knew Monk and many of the other important figures in jazz history. Her personal acquaintance with musicians and the trust she has won with them over time is evident in many of the interview segments in *A Great Day in Harlem*. Perhaps Bach's ability to put her subjects at ease allowed a different Monk to emerge in her film, one who carefully chose how and when to exercise control and who was entirely capable of guile and a false facade of madness. Miles Davis (1989, 187) has also described Monk in this way: "He was a great put-on artist, too, and that's the way he kept people off of him, by acting crazy like he did." Whether or not the trickster Monk

produced trickster music is never explicitly addressed by Bach in *A Great Day in Harlem*. On the three occasions when the subject of Monk comes up, the film presents the scene from "The Sound of Jazz" in which he plays "Blue Monk" wearing dark glasses and a sporty cap, very much the eccentric jazz musician. Simply through this juxtaposition, the stories told by Altschuler, Griffin, Blakey, and Gillespie can be conceptualized as attempts to link Monk's character with his music. But this does not appear to be Bach's goal. She seems much more interested in reproducing the warmth, humor, and human immediacy that she experienced among jazz artists. Nevertheless, the image of Monk as a trickster feigning craziness must be tempered by the knowledge that, at different times in his life, Monk suffered from and was treated for mental illness.

In *A Great Day in Harlem*, Monk receives abundant praise from those who knew him, much of it for his wit as well as for his morality. Only Altschuler makes a brief reference to Monk's reputation for being "difficult." The subject of mental illness is never raised, even though Monk had already been hospitalized as recently as 1955. It is also true that the film's trickster narrative applies only to one day in Monk's life. The films of Seig and Zwerin are much more ambitious in attempting to account for virtually all of Monk's life and music. But all three films adopt narratives for Monk that are as different as they are easy to trace through other texts about jazz artists. There is obviously sufficient truth in all these narratives to have kept them alive and eminently available for filmmakers interested in Thelonious Monk.

There is no denying that Monk was indeed a unique artist influenced by other important artists, that he was a sensitive man crippled by racism and critical neglect, and that he was sufficiently clever to orchestrate his own image. But despite the compelling ways in which these three films present Monk's life and music, as a group they can tell us as much about the theory and practice of jazz documentary as they do about Thelonious Monk himself. By turns brilliant, mad, and playful, Monk held up a trickster's mirror to his observers, reflecting back whatever they brought to the work of observation.

I thank Mark Tucker, Peter Keepnews, and Stanley Crouch for their invaluable contributions to this essay.

 FILMOGRAPHY

- Bird*. 1988. Directed and produced by Clint Eastwood.
- Bix: Ain't none of them play like him yet*. 1981. Directed by Brigitte Berman.
- Black and tan*. 1929. Directed by Dudley Murphy.
- Bulletproof*. 1996. Directed by Ernest Dickerson.
- But then . . . she's Betty Carter*. 1980. Directed by Michelle Parkerson.
- Celebrating Bird: The triumph of Charlie Parker*. 1987. Directed by Kendrick Simmons and Gary Giddins.
- Ernie Andrews: Blues for Central Avenue*. 1986. Directed by Lois Shelton.
- A fine madness*. 1966. Directed by Irvin Kershner.
- A great day in Harlem*. 1995. Directed by Jean Bach. Produced by Jean Bach and Matthew Seig.
- Jazz on a summer's day*. 1958. Directed by Bert Stern.
- Juice*. 1992. Directed by Ernest Dickerson.
- The king of hearts*. 1966. Directed by Phillippe de Broca.
- Lady sings the blues*. 1972. Directed by Sidney J. Furie.
- Let's get lost*. 1988. Directed by Bruce Weber.
- Listen up: The lives of Quincy Jones*. 1989. Directed by Ellen Weissbrod.
- Malcolm X*. 1992. Directed by Spike Lee.
- Mary Lou Williams: Music on my mind*. 1983. Directed by Joanna Burke.
- Maxwell Street blues*. 1980. Directed by Linda Williams.
- Ornette: Made in America*. 1986. Directed by Shirley Clarke.
- Point of order*. 1964. Directed by Emile de Antonio.
- Round midnight*. 1986. Directed by Bertrand Tavernier.
- She's gotta have it*. 1986. Directed by Spike Lee.
- Surviving the game*. 1994. Directed by Ernest Dickerson.
- Thelonious Monk: American composer*. 1991. Directed by Matthew Seig.
- Thelonious Monk: Straight no chaser*. 1988. Directed by Charlotte Zwerin.
- Tiny and Ruby: Hell divin' women*. 1988. Directed by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss.
- Titicut follies*. 1967. Directed by Frederick Wiseman.
- Toshiko Akiyoshi: Jazz is my native language*. 1983. Directed by Renee Cho.

 REFERENCES

- Baker, Dorothy. 1938. *Young man with a horn*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Barnouw, Erik. 1993. *Documentary: A history of the non-fiction film*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blake, Ran. 1988. Monk, Thelonious. In *The New Grove dictionary of jazz*, edited by Barry Kernfeld, 2: 121-123. London: Macmillan.
- Crouch, Stanley. 1997. Telephone communication with the author, December 12.
- Davis, Miles, with Quincy Troupe. 1989. *Miles: The autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- DeVeaux, Scott. 1991. Constructing the jazz tradition: Jazz historiography. *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3: 525-560.
- . 1997. *The birth of bebop: A social and musical history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- de Wilde, Laurent. 1997. *Monk*. Translated by Jonathan Dickinson. New York: Marlowe.

- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. New York: Routledge.
- Eliot, T. S. 1944. *What is a classic? An address delivered before the Virgil Society on the 16th of October 1944*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Ellison, Ralph. 1964. *Shadow and act*. New York: Random House.
- Fitterling, Thomas. 1997. *Thelonious Monk: His life and music*. Translated by Robert Dobbin. Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley Hills Books.
- Gabbard, Krin. 1995. Introduction: The jazz canon and its consequences. In *Jazz among the discourses*, edited by Krin Gabbard, 1–28. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- . 1996. *Jammin' at the margins: Jazz and the American cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gabbard, Krin, and Glen O. Gabbard. 1987. *Psychiatry and the cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. 1988. *The signifying monkey: A theory of Afro-American literary criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gennari, John. 1997. Pulp addiction: Tracking the Bird obsession in Ross Russell's *The Sound*. *Brilliant Corners: A Journal of Jazz and Literature* 2, no. 1 (Winter): 38–51.
- Course, Leslie. 1997. *Straight, no chaser: The life and genius of Thelonious Monk*. New York: Schirmer.
- Grant, Barry Keith. 1992. *Voyages of discovery: The cinema of Frederick Wiseman*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Harlos, Christopher. 1992. The jazz life-text: Autobiography and biography in jazz art. Ph.D. diss., Duke University.
- Kenney, William Howland. 1991. Negotiating the color line: Louis Armstrong's autobiographies. In *Jazz in mind: Essays on the history and meanings of jazz*, edited by Reginald T. Buckner and Steven Weiland, 38–59. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Kesey, Ken. 1962. *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*. New York: Signet.
- Laing, R. D. 1964. *Sanity, madness, and the family*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Margulis, Martin. 1996. Studies in madness: The role of cognitive style in the effects of mental illness on the creative genius of jazz pianists Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell. *The Thelonious Website*. <http://www.achilles.net/~howardm/psych1.html> (December).
- McClary, Susan. 1991. *Feminine endings: Music, gender, and sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- O'Meally, Robert. 1991. *Lady Day: The many faces of Billie Holiday*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Peretti, Burton W. 1995. Oral histories of jazz musicians: The NEA transcripts as texts in context. In *Jazz among the discourses*, edited by Krin Gabbard, 117–133. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Porter, Lewis. 1991. *A Lester Young reader*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. 1994. *They must be represented: The politics of documentary*. London: Verso.
- Renov, Michael, ed. 1993. *Theorizing documentary*. New York: Routledge.
- Rosenthal, Alan, ed. 1988. *New challenges to documentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Russell, Ross. 1961. *The sound*. New York: Dutton.
- . 1973. *Bird lives: The high life and hard times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker*. New York: Charterhouse.
- Schuller, Gunther. 1968. *Early jazz: Its roots and musical development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Paul. 1993. *Clint Eastwood: A cultural production*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tucker, Mark. 1991. *Ellington: The early years*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Williams, Martin. 1970. *The jazz tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Winston, Brian. 1995. *Claiming the real: The Griersonian documentary and its legitimations*. London: British Film Institute.