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**Mainstreaming Monk: The Ellington  
Album**

By Mark Tucker

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## MAINSTREAMING MONK: THE ELLINGTON ALBUM

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He is, I think, a major jazz composer, the first since Duke Ellington.

—Martin Williams (1963, 33)

Monk took much of his style from Ellington and he would like to have been an accomplished pianist who could have articulated in the fashion of Ellington.

—Clark Terry (quoted in Voce 1985)

Ellington defined 101 arranging concepts and focused on sound. The sound was the important thing. Thelonious did the same thing.

—Larry Ridley (quoted in Gourse 1997, 259)

I continue to feel that to properly appreciate Monk's work and his position in jazz history it is essential to understand that he stands in a direct line of succession from Morton and Ellington.

—Orrin Keepnews (1986a, [2])

Duke Ellington's name surfaces often in discussions of Thelonious Monk. The links between the two musicians seem so close as to be self-evident and irrefutable. Both excelled as composers in a musical tradition known for its emphasis on improvisation. Both were distinctive pianists who displayed stylistic affinities—a percussive attack, a penchant for dissonance, a shared interest in Harlem stride. Both belonged to a select group of exceptional figures in jazz—Jelly Roll Morton, John Lewis, and

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Charles Mingus also come to mind—who put their individual stamp on the ensembles that performed their works. Both created unique worlds of sound that set them apart from their contemporaries. Although their personalities and careers may have been poles apart, Monk and Ellington, so the literature on jazz reminds us repeatedly, were kindred spirits.

Ellington thought so, too, apparently. He first heard Monk's music, according to trumpeter Ray Nance, in the summer of 1948. Nance was traveling with Ellington and a small group of musicians on a short tour of England and had taken with him "a portable gramophone." As Nance told Stanley Dance in a 1966 interview: "I was on my way to Bournemouth, Hampshire, by train, and in my compartment I put on one of my Thelonious Monk records. Duke was passing by in the corridor, and he stopped and asked, 'Who's that playing?' I told him. 'Sounds like he's stealing some of my stuff,' he said. So he sat down and listened to my records, and he was very interested. He understood what Monk was doing" (Dance 1981, 139).<sup>1</sup>

In later years, Ellington and his orchestra occasionally appeared at festivals that featured Monk on the same bill. On one occasion, the 1962 Newport Jazz Festival, Monk sat in with the Ellington orchestra to play his own "Monk's Dream" and the Billy Strayhorn homage "Frère Monk," the latter a twelve-bar blues with a vaguely Monkian head and dissonant riff figures, including flatted-fifth chords in the last chorus. Both pieces were recorded by Ellington (without Monk) in September 1962 but not issued until the 1980s. They serve to reinforce the notion of musical kinship between Monk and Ellington—a relationship that Monk himself had invited listeners to consider seven years earlier.

It was July 1955 when Monk—a thirty-seven-year-old pianist and composer still not widely known to the public—made his debut recording for the Riverside label, released under the title *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington* (Riverside RLP 12-201). Backed by bassist Oscar Pettiford and drummer Kenny Clarke, the enigmatic, reclusive Monk interpreted eight compositions by the popular, internationally acclaimed Ellington. Nearly all were standards frequently performed by singers and instrumentalists: "Sophisticated Lady," "I Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good)," "Solitude," "Mood Indigo," "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing," "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart," and the Ellington–Juan Tizol collaboration

1. By July 1948, Blue Note had released three recordings under Monk's leadership: "Thelonious"/"Suburban Eyes" (Blue Note 542), "Well, You Needn't"/"Round about Midnight" (Blue Note 543), and "Off Minor"/"Evonce" (Blue Note 547) (Cuscuna 1983). These were likely the sides that Nance played for Ellington. A year earlier, Ellington had premiered his ultradissonant "The Clothed Woman" at Carnegie Hall, a piece that suggests, in the words of critic J. R. Taylor (1977), "an awareness of Thelonious Monk's emerging blues primitivism."

“Caravan.” The exception was “Black and Tan Fantasy,” a piece dating from 1927 that was closely identified with the Ellington orchestra and seldom played by others. Three years later, in 1958, the album was repackaged and reissued by Riverside with a painting by Henri Rousseau, “The Repast of the Lion,” reproduced on the cover (see Fig. 1). In the jacket notes to that reissue, Orrin Keepnews—co-producer and co-owner of Riverside with Bill Grauer Jr.—stated that *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington* had “proved to be a pioneering album,” inaugurating a series of recordings that “met with ever-increasing success and near-unanimous acclaim” and ushering in a period when “Thelonious’ increasing[ly] frequent appearances at concerts, festivals and night clubs helped bring him more and more firmly to the fore” (Keepnews [1958]).

Figure 1. The 1958 album cover for *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington*. Courtesy of Fantasy, Inc.



Accessible and straightforward, moderate in tone and conservative by design, Monk's Ellington album offers a roughly thirty-five-minute set of pleasurable listening that holds appeal for admirers of both musicians. For historians, however, the recording takes on added layers of significance. It marks one of the rare occasions when Monk addressed the music of Ellington<sup>2</sup>—or any other composer in jazz, for that matter—and thus presents an opportunity to search for points of connection between these two figures. It occurred at a transitional moment in Monk's career, as he moved from relative obscurity into a period of increasing fame and widespread recognition that would peak (during his lifetime) in the mid-1960s. Most notably, the recording attests to the formation in the 1950s of a jazz "mainstream," a critical and historical construct that would prove a powerful force in the way jazz was played, discussed, and sold—so powerful, in fact, that even a rugged iconoclast like Monk could be swept along by its current.

The Ellington album emerged during a difficult and frustrating time for Monk. Four years earlier, in 1951, he and pianist Bud Powell had been arrested on drug charges. (Monk would later declare innocence in the matter.) Powell made bail and was released, but Monk could not and spent sixty days in jail (Gourse 1997, 85–87). Worse was to follow, for after Monk was released from jail, his cabaret identification card was revoked. This card, issued by the New York City Police Department, permitted musicians and entertainers to work in nightclubs serving alcohol (Chevigny 1991, 57–68). Without a cabaret card for the next half-dozen years, Monk performed little in Manhattan. He occasionally took jobs in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and out of town and also appeared sporadically at clubs in Greenwich Village (The Open Door, for example) and Harlem. Mostly he stayed home in his apartment on West 63rd Street with his wife, Nellie, and their two young children. While Nellie worked to support the family, Monk played piano, composed, and socialized with other musicians. His legendary reclusiveness was noted in the program for a concert he gave in Massachusetts in 1955: "Rarely seen, Monk is the Greta Garbo of jazz, and his appearance at any piano is regarded as a major event by serious followers of jazz" (Smith 1958, 68).

Monk's recording activity during the first half of the 1950s was slight. In 1952, he signed with the Prestige label. Over the next several years, he went into the studio only a few times with his own groups; he had one

2. Monk and his quartet recorded the Ellington ballad "I Didn't Know about You" on November 14, 1966; the following year at a concert in Mexico, he was joined by Dave Brubeck in a performance of "C Jam Blues."

record date in 1953 with saxophonist Sonny Rollins, another the following year with the Miles Davis All Stars (which yielded his much-discussed solo on “Bags’ Groove,” included on *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*). In 1954, Monk went to Paris and recorded for the first time as solo pianist.

Monk’s low profile and sluggish career may explain why in 1955 he decided to leave Prestige and try his luck with Riverside, a small, independent label begun by Orrin Keepnews and Bill Grauer in 1953. Now Monk had a chance to make a fresh start by recording his first twelve-inch album. He might have seized the opportunity to unveil new works or to revisit some of his best-known compositions, such as “Round Midnight,” “Well, You Needn’t,” or “Epistrophy.” Instead, he turned to a set of standards by Ellington, a figure whose music Monk had never recorded before and was not known to feature in live performances. To understand how this came about, it may help to recall the general state of jazz in the 1950s as a backdrop for the agenda—both aesthetic and commercial—that Keepnews and Grauer had set for Riverside.

When Monk made his Ellington album in 1955, jazz was characterized both by stylistic pluralism and an emerging sense of consolidation. By this point in the genre’s history, critics had identified and labeled an array of styles, ranging from “traditional” New Orleans jazz and big-band swing to the postwar sounds of bebop, cool jazz, and hard bop. At the same time, there was a dawning sense that these styles all belonged to some vast and overarching jazz tradition. Whereas critics in the 1940s had argued vigorously about what constituted the “real jazz,” in Hugues Panassié’s phrase (1942), in the 1950s this fierce partisanship slowly gave way to a broader, more inclusive conception of the music—a period of détente before free jazz and fusion would explode on the scene in the 1960s, dashing any hope of consensus.

Evidence for this relatively new conception of the “jazz tradition”—at once both heterogeneous and cohesive—took many different forms. It surfaced in historical accounts of the music such as Marshall Stearns’ *The Story of Jazz* (1956) and Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff’s *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya* (1955), as well as in the pages of *The Jazz Review* (1958–1961), a periodical that gave serious consideration to jazz from all eras. It was also reflected in the television special “The Sound of Jazz” from 1957, which placed older and younger musicians side by side—for example, Henry “Red” Allen, Count Basie, and Billie Holiday next to modernists such as Monk and Jimmy Giuffrè. The development could also be seen in a new term—*mainstream*—that entered the jazz vocabulary in the second half of the 1950s. The term *mainstream* denoted a kind of “common practice” in

jazz. It was apparently introduced into jazz parlance by the British-born critic Stanley Dance (Collier 1988, 75).<sup>3</sup> For Dance, mainstream referred to jazz that did not fit either the “traditional” or “modern” (i.e., bebop) categories. In 1958, he produced a series of albums for the Felsted label that appeared under the rubric “Mainstream Jazz.” In the jacket notes to one of these albums, Dance defined mainstream as “jazz of a ‘central’ kind, a music not inhibited by any particular instrumental combination, but emphasizing the twin virtues of communicable emotional expression and swing” (Dance 1958). The “mainstream” figures that he cited include bandleaders Ellington and Count Basie, pianist Earl Hines, saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, and trumpeter Buck Clayton. The “swing” label, in fact, could have covered all these figures, but because their careers by now stretched beyond the “swing era” into the 1950s, Dance suggested “mainstream” as a replacement.<sup>4</sup>

Very soon, however, the term mainstream became more inclusive than Dance had intended, as he acknowledged in 1998: “It wasn’t long before I realized that bebop had become mainstream, so I quit using the term I’m credited with coining altogether.” This development in part reflects the age of bebop and the degree to which its stylistic conventions had been assimilated by younger musicians. But looking at the careers of some of the first generation of bebop musicians during the 1950s, it is clear that a general mainstreaming process was affecting the reception of an idiom that only a few years earlier had seemed strange, daring, and controversial. Charlie Parker, for example, had begun recording with strings and winning critics’ polls. Dizzy Gillespie was selected by the State Department in 1956 to take a big band overseas on a mission of Cold War

3. Although Dance may have played a leading role in popularizing the term *mainstream*, it had already turned up earlier in jazz criticism. For example, Orrin Keepnews (1948, 5) wrote, “It may serve to clarify Monk’s relative position along the main stream of modern music to point out that he is engaged in developing an essentially original piano style.”

4. The full text of Dance’s definition—included in a sidebar on the jacket notes entitled “Mainstream Jazz . . . What It Is”—reads as follows:

Primarily, it is a reference term for a vast body of jazz that was at one time in some danger of losing its identity. Practically, it is applied to the jazz idiom which developed between the heyday of King Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton on the one hand and that of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie on the other.

The tag originated during the recent period when jazz seemed to be entirely divided between Traditional (alias Dixieland, alias New Orleans, alias Two-Beat) and Modern (alias Bop, alias Cool, alias Progressive). Among those this division left out in the cold were musicians like Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Count Basie, Coleman Hawkins and Buck Clayton. Since all good jazz, of whatever kind and era, theoretically swings, “Swing” was hardly an adequate label for them. Hence “Mainstream” for jazz of a “central” kind, a music not inhibited by any particular instrumental combination, but emphasizing the twin virtues of communicable emotional expression and swing. Yes, swing, without which jazz “don’t mean a thing.” (Dance 1958)

cultural diplomacy. Sarah Vaughan had graduated from the bop-tinged bands of Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine to record pop songs with lush orchestral backgrounds for Columbia and, later, Mercury. Such increasing recognition and commercial success, however, had eluded Monk; by 1955, he had not budged from his position on the far shores of mainstream jazz practice.

Riverside owners Keepnews and Grauer, meanwhile, were starting to respond to the consensus politics taking shape within the jazz community. Passionate fans of traditional jazz, they had launched their record label in 1953 with reissues of music by Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and other early jazz figures, together with contemporary performances by Dixieland revival bands. In 1954, however, Riverside began reaching out to young "modern" players, beginning with pianist (and Monk protégé) Randy Weston in an all-Cole Porter album (*Cole Porter: In a Modern Mood*). With Weston, Keepnews and Grauer adopted the successful "songbook" formula recently introduced by producer Norman Granz in albums by the Oscar Peterson Trio that were devoted individually to Porter, Gershwin, Ellington, and other leading American songwriters (de Wilde 1997, 103). This kind of "tribute" album (more recently called "concept album") marked an early phase of a canonization process that would gain momentum in the years to follow, serving as the prototype for songbook albums by Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan and remaining popular in the 1990s (witness the string of single-composer compact discs recorded by saxophonist Joe Henderson for Verve, treating the music of Billy Strayhorn, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Miles Davis, and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*).

The songbook album thus became a tool for mainstreaming jazz. For Riverside, it presented a way to seek common ground among different groups of listeners: connoisseurs of "modern" jazz who might want to give Weston a hearing, "traditionalists" who liked jazz treatments of older popular songs, and perhaps even Cole Porter and musical theater fans curious to hear fresh instrumental versions of familiar repertory. Such middle-of-the-road programming became Keepnews and Grauer's initial strategy for Monk, as well. The stakes were higher, though, because Monk—unlike the emerging artist Weston—had already developed a reputation (among aficionados, at least) as someone whose music was difficult and uncompromising. Keepnews (1957) acknowledged this in the liner notes to Monk's third Riverside album, *Brilliant Corners*, writing that "we at Riverside feel very strongly that the whole emphasis on the exceedingly far-out and 'mysterious' nature of Monk's music has been seriously overdone in past years" and explaining that the decision to have Monk record only standards on his first two albums "was fully



deliberate, a plot to seduce non-followers of Monk into giving him a hearing." Keepnews insisted that "there was no musical compromise, but there was at least the handle of a familiar melody to begin with." Nearly thirty years later, in his notes for a reissue box set of Monk on Riverside, Keepnews (1986a, [43]) elaborated on this point, suggesting why Ellington in particular had been selected for Monk's Riverside debut:

[Grauer] and I had decided that our initial goal was to reverse the widely-held belief that our new pianist was an impossibly obscure artist; therefore, we would start by avoiding be-bop horns and intricate original tunes. We proposed an all-Ellington trio date; certainly Duke was a universally respected figure and major composer with (as my 1948 article had noted) a valid musical connection with Monk. He agreed without hesitation, despite claiming to be largely unfamiliar with Ellington's music.

This explanation raises a number of questions that deserve individual attention.

Did Keepnews and Grauer suggest that Monk make the Ellington album? In an interview conducted by critic Ira Gitler (1957, 20), Monk and his manager, Harry Colomby, imply otherwise—or at least seek to dispel the impression that Monk had been coerced into the project:

Gitler: Since you went with Riverside, you have recorded one LP of Ellington tunes and another of "standards" [*The Unique Thelonious Monk*]. I enjoyed them very much, but I prefer to hear you play your own music. . . . How did you feel about doing the two Riverside albums?

Monk: I wanted to do it. I felt like playing, that's all. I know that Duke started playing some of his numbers more than he had as I recall.

Colomby: Some critics said it was Riverside's idea.

Gitler: I remember that. Knowing Monk, I know he wouldn't do anything he didn't want to do.<sup>5</sup>

In this exchange, Colomby and Monk defend the vaunted principal of artistic freedom in jazz: no one, they assert, could tell Monk what to play.<sup>6</sup> Keepnews (1986b) has emphasized the same point: "Some unfriendly reviewers . . . felt we had 'forced' him to play Ellington (which should show how little they understood Thelonious and his artistic stubborn-

5. Harry Colomby, however, was not Monk's manager when the Ellington album was recorded. According to writer and Monk expert Peter Keepnews (1999), Colomby assumed this role "in late 1955, probably November."

6. This was especially important for a "modern," postwar jazz musician to emphasize. Earlier figures were perceived as willing (and expected) to put the public's wishes before their own—part of the accommodating entertainer persona that bebop musicians had rejected.

ness).” Nevertheless, it does seem likely that the idea for Monk to play Ellington, as Keepnews maintains, came from Riverside’s owners. Given his precarious status as performer and recording artist in 1955, Monk must have realized that it was to his advantage to accept the suggestion.

What was the rationale for Monk’s Ellington project? Keepnews had stated that Riverside’s “initial goal was to reverse the widely held belief that our new pianist was an impossibly obscure artist; therefore, we would start by avoiding be-bop horns and intricate original tunes.” But even when Monk played standards in a trio setting, the results did not always prove readily accessible or promote “easy listening.” This is apparent from earlier recordings that Monk had made for Blue Note and Prestige. On “These Foolish Things” (Prestige 7751), for example, with Gary Mapps on bass and Max Roach on drums, Monk states the melody forcefully in the right hand, adding minor-second dissonances to acidify the tune and lampoon the sentiment (see Ex. 1). Nothing so extreme or daring occurs on the Ellington album. Why? Was it because the Ellington pieces did not invite such a harshly mocking approach? Or was it because Monk was reining in his adventurous tendencies in an effort to reach a broader audience? Whatever the reason, it is clear from Monk’s previous recordings that simply “avoiding be-bop horns and intricate original tunes” would not guarantee tamer, more conventional performances. It is also likely that other factors—Monk’s comfort level during the Ellington record date, his personal chemistry with bassist Pettiford and drummer Clarke, and his new working relationship with Keepnews and Grauer at Riverside—strongly shaped the outcome of his performances in the studio.

What was Monk’s “valid musical connection” to Ellington? Keepnews had separated Monk from the other beboppers, claiming that the pianist carried on the tradition of earlier great jazz figures from the past, especially Ellington. Both musicians, Keepnews (1948, 5) writes, had “created a band style molded around his own ideas,” preferred to work with the same musicians instead of pick-up groups, and believed in regular rehearsals. As a result, Monk’s records “sound purposeful and coordi-

*Example 1. Thelonious Monk, “These Foolish Things” (1952), first chorus, mm. 1–4 (piano only)*

nated instead of like a cutting duel between comparative strangers." In Keepnews' view, then, Monk's "connection" to Ellington had more to do with general principles of working with a band than with shared musical traits or a common vocabulary.

How well acquainted with Ellington's music was Monk when he recorded the album in 1955? Did he know it primarily as a listener, or had he also previously learned and performed a number of works by Ellington as a pianist? Answers to these questions are elusive. Keepnews quotes Monk as saying that "no written music [had] sounded right" to him when he was developing as a musician. Keepnews qualifies the remark in the same sentence, however, adding his opinion that Monk had "obviously listened intently to the Ellington band of that day [i.e., the 1930s]" (20). Journalist Ira Peck (1948) quotes Monk introducing Ellington's name while discussing his own work at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem: "In order to play we had to make up our own tunes. Just like Duke Ellington had to make up his own music and sounds to express himself." When asked about big bands that same year by writer George T. Simon (1948, 35), Monk makes no mention of Ellington: "[Stan] Kenton tries too hard for effects, though some of them are good. Actually, the only good-sounding band I've heard in years is Claude Thornhill's. I'd like Diz[zy Gillespie]'s band if they played the music right." It is not clear from these journalistic accounts how closely Monk was following Ellington's career in the 1940s, although Monk's comment to Simon, if accurate, suggests distance from Ellington's musical world.

That distance also surfaces in Keepnews' account of Monk's approach to the Ellington record date, which unfolded in two sessions (on July 21 and 27, 1955) in the living room/studio of noted engineer Rudy Van Gelder in Hackensack, New Jersey. Keepnews (1986a, [4]) remembers the selection of individual pieces as follows: "I insisted that Thelonious pick out the specific repertoire, and eventually he requested several pieces of sheet music. But when we finally arrived at the studio, he proceeded to sit down at the piano and hesitantly begin to work out melody lines, as if he were seeing the material for the first time!"

In describing the recording process, Keepnews (1986b, [1]) again emphasizes Monk's seeming unfamiliarity with Ellington's music: "I still recall with painful clarity that a great deal of studio time first had to be spent in basic preparation, with Thelonious sitting at the piano reading sheet music and slowly picking out the notes of the Duke Ellington compositions he had agreed to record. . . . [A]lthough Monk began each time as if the tune were totally strange, within a relatively short time he had carved out his own firmly individualized version." Given the repeated claims of critics who have pointed to Monk's close ties to Ellington, it is

surprising to imagine the pianist encountering “for the first time” such chestnuts as “Mood Indigo,” “Solitude,” “Sophisticated Lady,” and “Caravan” at his debut session for Riverside. Perhaps he was simply working out new harmonizations at the session—such as the arresting beginning to “Black and Tan Fantasy,” with its substitute chords, rhythmic displacement, and chromatic inner-voice motion (see Ex. 2). On the other hand, Keepnews speculates that Monk may have been dissembling, feigning a lack of preparation as a kind of psychological game to play with his new producer: “I will never know,” Keepnews (1986a, [4]) writes, “to what extent he was actually learning on the spot, but I’m certain that at least in part he was deliberately testing, demonstrating that he was in command, and probing at this new producer to see how he would react.” A sense of friction also comes across in Keepnews’ memory of drummer Kenny Clarke “displaying his own impatience at Monk’s making all of us wait for him” by holding up the comics section of a Sunday paper and “[sitting] there behind it, reading and pointedly ignoring the rehearsing pianist” (Keepnews 1986b, [1–2]).

Even if Keepnews had not recounted the strained circumstances of this record date, the performances themselves suggest how problematic the pairing of Monk and Ellington proved to be. Monk sounds uncharacteristically careful and restrained, even tentative in spots, as in the halting, unaccompanied opening to “I Got It Bad (and That Ain’t Good),” where he pauses midway through the bridge (1’09”), as if to take his bearings, searching memory for the right melodic path to take. On “Black and Tan Fantasy,” Monk begins and ends with thematic material from Ellington’s composition, but in the middle, he solos on three choruses of the twelve-bar blues without attempting integration; there is an audible separation

*Example 2. Thelonious Monk, “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1955), opening, mm. 1–6 (piano only)*

between the outer, Ellington-derived sections and the Monkian interior—a split-screen approach that seems peculiar for a player who reputedly believed that solos should incorporate themes and motives from the composition. It does not help matters much that Clarke’s accompaniment throughout the two sessions is dutiful and workman-like. Fortunately, bassist Pettiford sounds more committed to the tunes, some of which he had performed with Ellington himself when serving as bassist in the orchestra in the mid-1940s and for brief stints in 1953 and 1954. It is revealing that Pettiford takes the first solo on the album (on “It Don’t Mean a Thing”), an unusual practice in Monk’s groups. Overall, compared to the dynamic, energized, imaginative readings of Tin Pan Alley standards on Monk’s second Riverside album (1956)—featuring Pettiford once again, but with Art Blakey on drums—the Ellington album sounds flat and listless.

Monk’s playing does show flashes of inspiration from time to time, however, and there are moments of haunting beauty, too, as in the solo rendition of “Solitude” and in the unusual introduction for “Mood Indigo” (see Ex. 3). In the latter, with its surging, syncopated bass lines, Monk offers a clever harmonic gambit: initially E-flat minor appears to be the tonic, followed by moves to the subdominant A-flat major; but in measure 5, Monk suddenly reveals A-flat as the true tonic, thus turning E-flat minor (retrospectively) into an unconventional, minor dominant preparation.

Monk launches “I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart” with a whimsical introduction based on a motive (taken from the melody) that unexpect-

*Example 3. Thelonious Monk, “Mood Indigo” (1955), introduction and beginning of first chorus*

edly comes to rest on a “wrong,” chromatically altered scale degree ( $e\flat$  in the key of E-flat) before the theme begins (see Ex. 4). Some of Monk’s most engaged soloing and comping can be heard on “I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart,” as in the limber double-time lines he tosses off following Pettiford’s solo (beginning at 3’36”) and the playful tension between consonance and dissonance that he sustains throughout this chorus.

In a few instances, Monk finds common ground with Ellington—the insistent repeated-note figures of “It Don’t Mean a Thing” (recalling the hammering motive of Monk’s own “Thelonious”), the sweet melancholia and gentle left-hand stride of “Solitude,” the quasi-“classical” arpeggiated flourishes that punctuate “Sophisticated Lady” (recalling Ellington’s grandiose concert-hall gestures). Monk’s interest in chromatic counter-melodies and inner-voice activity, similarly, recalls one of Ellington’s chief stylistic hallmarks.

What strikes the listener more than these points of connection, however, is a sense that on some fundamental level Monk is not completely comfortable with Ellington’s music; missing is that edge of creative urgency and in-the-moment immediacy that characterizes so many of his other recordings. Perhaps his detachment results from not knowing the tunes better or not playing them often enough over a substantial period of time (as he did with his own compositions and a select group of Tin Pan Alley standards [see DeVaux 1999, this issue]). Contrary to what he would tell Ira Gitler (i.e., “I wanted to do it”; 1957, 20), Monk may have been ambivalent (or indifferent) about making the Ellington album but agreed to Riverside’s idea, believing it might help jump-start his career.

*Example 4. Thelonious Monk, “I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart” (1955), introduction and beginning of first chorus*

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the introduction, starting with a treble clef staff containing a triplet of eighth notes (B $\flat$ , A $\flat$ , G $\flat$ ) marked *mf*, followed by a series of eighth notes (G, F, E, D, C, B $\flat$ , A $\flat$ , G $\flat$ ) and a final half note (G). The bass clef staff is mostly empty, with a "(drum fill)" label. The second system starts at measure 5, with the treble clef staff playing a melodic line (G, F, E, D, C, B $\flat$ , A $\flat$ , G $\flat$ ) and the bass clef staff providing a rhythmic accompaniment with a triplet of eighth notes (B $\flat$ , A $\flat$ , G $\flat$ ).

Plunging into the jazz “mainstream” this way—after eight years of being able to record, as a leader, exactly what he pleased—was difficult for Monk. His subdued mood on *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington* may be taken as a form of begrudging protest.

Some writers have taken precisely the opposite view, claiming that the pairing of Monk and Ellington was fortuitous and completely successful. Bill Coss (1956, 27) called it “a rewarding adventure” that “should go far toward making friends for Monk.” Gerald Lascelles (1956, 24) concurred, pronouncing the combination “as near perfect as one could ever achieve,” an “immaculate blend of modern interpretations of classic jazz themes.” More recently, jazz pianist and author Laurent de Wilde (1997, 104–105) has echoed the enthusiasm of these earlier critics: “The music speaks directly to Monk, and is part of his instinctive heritage. . . . Monk slips on Duke’s music like a custom-made glove. . . . It is hard to believe that Monk didn’t write any of these compositions . . . a flawless diamond of a session composed almost entirely of first takes—a producer’s dream.”

In the course of his rave review, however, de Wilde concedes that “there is something restrained or modest about this album.” Other critics have gone further with this line of criticism. In a broad survey of Monk’s recordings, Gunther Schuller (1958, 24) observes that the Ellington album suffers from “an over-all dullness”: “I think it was an illusion on the part of Orrin Keepnews to think that he could get Monk to reach a wider audience through the use of standard tunes. A musician of Monk’s individuality and artistic integrity is never easily accepted by a large audience, and it seems fruitless to try to achieve this—at least on the audience’s terms.”<sup>7</sup> Nat Hentoff (1956, 24) shares Schuller’s misgivings about the project: “It does Monk little good to force him to adapt to a program for which he has little empathy as a pianist-writer. . . . I don’t think Monk dug this session so much.” The British critic Max Harrison wishes Monk had recorded different compositions by Ellington—such as “Rockin’ in Rhythm,” “The Saddest Tale,” or “Ko Ko”—instead of the “slighter

7. Schuller’s view that artistic quality and mass popularity are incompatible is echoed in an anecdote that saxophonist Coleman Hawkins (1956) related to Bill Grauer and Paul Bacon. Discussing his celebrated 1939 recording of “Body and Soul,” Hawkins recalled a question that Monk had frequently posed to him: “Thelonious Monk said to me . . . he used to say it quite often, back in the 52nd Street days, but about six months ago, he mentioned to me . . . he says, ‘You know, you never did explain to me,’ [he] said, ‘how did these people, these old folks and everybody, go for your record of “Body and Soul”?’ [I] said, ‘Monk, I don’t know.’ . . . He says, ‘That’s one thing I’ll never understand. I don’t see how they went for it.’ He said now, ‘‘Cause I’ve listened to the record,’ he said, ‘and I could understand if you played melody . . . ‘cause that’s what they like, those kind of people, that’s what they like, they like melody.’ He said, ‘They sure won’t listen to anything else that’s jazz!’ . . . So I just told him, ‘That’s one of those cases, you know? That’s just one of those rare cases.’”

pieces" that appear on the album. Harrison (1959, 19–20) expresses regret that Monk ended up merely improvising on a set of Ellington tunes instead of engaging with them as a composer. He also hints at the pianist's unfamiliarity with (or distance from) the repertoire, noting that "rarely does Monk master any of this material."

Looking back on the first two albums of standards that Monk made for Riverside—the second, *The Unique Thelonious Monk*, was issued in 1956—Orrin Keepnews (1986b, [3]) acknowledges the adverse criticism of those reviewers who charged Riverside with "denying Thelonious full creative freedom." But he takes this reaction as proof that Riverside's strategy to demystify the pianist has succeeded. Phase two of the company's marketing strategy for Monk could commence: "[W]e felt that our first purpose had been achieved. Riverside could now safely turn to recording him with horns, in original compositions." The album *Brilliant Corners*, accordingly, contains four originals and only one standard (a piano solo on "I Surrender, Dear") and features a quintet with saxophonists Sonny Rollins and Ernie Henry (with trumpeter Clark Terry replacing Henry on one piece). In the liner notes, Keepnews (1957) stresses not Monk's accessibility but the opposite: "Thelonious Monk remains among the most challenging, provocative, and disturbing figures in modern music. . . . Monk's music is decidedly not designed for casual listening. . . . Monk and his music demands the most difficult thing any artist can require of his audience—attention." In describing the making of *Brilliant Corners*, Keepnews emphasizes the challenges posed by Monk's compositions and the demands that Monk placed on performers: "These musicians worked hard. . . . Monk is a hard task-master. . . . In the end, [the session] wasn't 'impossible'—merely far from easy." At this point, Keepnews, in his dual roles as producer and annotator-publicist, felt no need to position Monk in the continuum of the jazz "tradition" that had produced Morton and Ellington. Instead, he reintroduced Monk as the uncompromising jazz modernist. Having displayed mainstream credentials in two albums of standards, Monk was free (once again) to play his own music.

It is tempting to take Keepnews' explanation at face value and to view the Ellington album as part of a successful audience-development campaign that helped build a following for Monk during one of the lowest points of his professional career. By 1957, that audience, as Keepnews proudly noted, included "critics, an ever-increasing number of musicians, and a thoroughly hearteningly large number of just plain jazz lovers—willing to make the effort and to reap the rewards of digging Monk." Both Monk's audience and his reputation would continue to grow after he regained his cabaret card in 1957 and took a long-term engagement at the Five Spot the following year, winning critical accolades in the process.



But the “mainstreaming” of Monk in the mid-1950s must also be seen as part of the larger transformation of the jazz public occurring during this time. Although he was addressing different repertory, Monk himself changed not at all between the Ellington album and *Brilliant Corners*. Instead, what was changing was the conception of the “mainstream,” which, by the latter part of the 1950s, was becoming broad and deep enough to accommodate Monk’s bracing modernism. By exhibiting “communicable emotional expression” and “swing,” Monk’s music met Stanley Dance’s twin criteria for “mainstream jazz” (Dance 1958), even while presenting listeners with more dissonance and complexity than they encountered in the work of many other jazz artists. The political landscape of jazz was shifting. As Monk and the other modernists of his generation moved toward the middle, Dance and the older “swing” artists found themselves pushed right of center.

Beyond its historiographic importance, though, the Ellington album also reaffirms Monk as a strong-willed, free-thinking artist. In its neutral affect and half-hearted delivery, the record conveys a message of resistance—to commercialism, to critical notions of kinship and tradition within the jazz world, and most of all, to the power leveled by those in the music business who controlled the means of production and distribution. In making the Ellington album bland and unexceptional, Monk announced that he would not be pushed into the mainstream—let the mainstream come to him instead. He challenged anyone to wrest from him the artistic freedom that he claimed as his and his alone. Monk realized that he could pay no greater tribute to Ellington than to declare absolute musical independence.

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