

Black Music Research Journal

Center for Black Music Research

Columbia College Chicago

Volume 19, Number 2 (Autumn, 1999)

New Monastery: Monk and the Jazz

Avant-Garde

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Journal*

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NEW MONASTERY: MONK AND THE JAZZ AVANT-GARDE

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The musician who once terrified us all no longer seems to disturb a soul. He has been tamed, classified, and given his niche in that eclectic Museum of Great Jazzmen which admits such a variety of species, from Fats Domino to Stan Kenton.

—André Hodeir on Thelonious Monk, circa 1959

A 1972 press release announcing the reissue of Thelonious Monk's Prestige recordings included the following observation:

[I]n the early Sixties, with the emergence of "avant-garde" jazz and the appearance of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor, Monk's music no longer seemed quite so strange. He was finally able to whittle away at the "Mad Monk" tags that had been laid upon him by smug critics and listeners who had neither the equipment nor the desire to comprehend. There was even the introduction to polite society in the form of a *Time* magazine cover story in 1964, and Monk finally and without compromise began to receive the widespread attention and adequate financial remuneration that was his due. ("Thelonious Monk" 1972)

Although hyperbole is unavoidable in any press release, there is a kind of truth here. At the very moment that Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and others were bringing about a revolution in "modern jazz," Monk's career finally began to soar. After enduring almost two decades of confused and often vicious criticisms from writers and musi-

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cians alike, by the early 1960s, Juilliard students were studying his compositions, Martin Williams (1963; 1964) had insisted that he was a "major composer," and French critic André Hodeir (1986, 164) had hailed him as the first jazz artist to have "a feeling for specifically modern esthetic values" (see also Kotlowitz 1961; Lapham 1964). By 1961, Monk had established a more-or-less permanent quartet consisting of Charlie Rouse on tenor saxophone, John Ore (later Larry Gales) on bass, and Frankie Dunlop (later Ben Riley) on drums. He performed with his own big band at Town Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Monterey Jazz Festival, and the quartet toured Europe in 1961 and Japan in 1964. He left the Riverside label for a more financially lucrative contract with Columbia Records in 1962, and by the mid-1960s, his quartet reportedly earned nearly \$2,000 a week for a gig (see de Wilde 1997, 171–178; Gourse 1997, 153–211; Ponzio and Postif 1995, 201–267; Williams 1963; Williams 1964).

The mainstreaming of Monk and the emergence of the jazz avant-garde—or what has been called "free jazz" or the "New Thing"—was not merely coincidental. In several respects, both musically and politically, these developments were interdependent if not mutually constitutive. The emergence of the jazz avant-garde during the early 1960s did indeed change the field of reception for Monk as well as for other musician/composers (e.g., Charles Mingus) who only a decade before were considered too "far out" and experimental. However, the shifting critical response to Monk's music vis-à-vis the avant-garde partly reflected the changing political landscape—one in which black nationalism, Third World solidarity, and even the more localized struggles against racism and exploitation in the music industry challenged Cold War liberalism. In this war of words, conservative and some liberal critics embraced Monk as a foil against the free jazz rebellion, while defenders of the avant-garde often sought to claim Monk as one of their own. Given Monk's complicated, often iconoclastic relationship to the history of modern jazz, it should not be surprising that all of these constituencies could legitimately lay claim to him. Whereas Monk, like most musicians of his generation, expressed disinterest if not outright hostility to free jazz, artists identified with the avant-garde found his music to be a major source of ideas and inspiration. Indeed, as I demonstrate below, no matter how much Monk tried to distance himself from these new developments, he helped give birth to the jazz avant-garde. And yet, as has been the case with all cultural progeny, these young musicians not only built on but challenged Monk's musical conceptions altogether.

Criss Cross: Monk Meets the Avant-Garde

The term *avant-garde* obscures as much as it reveals. There have been

many self-proclaimed avant-garde movements in music and in the arts more generally, and depending on how one defines avant-garde or the specific historical context in which these movements emerged, one might argue that jazz's unique position as neither "folk" culture nor a product of mainstream Western arts institutions, combined with its ever-changing improvisational character, renders the entire genre avant-garde. Or one could point to the apparent, although largely unacknowledged, role that black improvisational music has had on American and European avant-garde composers such as John Cage (Lewis 1996). If we simply limited our scope to avant-garde developments in jazz itself, one could easily include the work of Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, or Thelonious Monk at particular historical junctures. But for the purposes here, I will limit the definition to a particular generation of musicians (e.g., John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon, Albert Ayler, Eric Dolphy, and Sun Ra and his Arkestra, to name a few) who emerged in the late 1950s and developed a self-conscious movement in the 1960s (see, for example, Carles and Comolli 1971; Jost 1994; Litweiler 1984; Radano 1985; Radano 1993; Such 1993; Szwed 1997; Wilmer 1980). Of course, it is impossible to lump all of these artists together; terms such as *avant-garde* or *free jazz*—like the word *jazz* itself—simply cannot contain the diverse range of music that they have produced. Nevertheless, most of these artists not only identified themselves as part of a new movement, but their work taken collectively reveals some common elements. By moving away from traditional sixteen- and thirty-two-bar song structures, standard chord progressions, and the general rules of tonal harmonic practice, they opened up new possibilities for improvisation by drawing on non-Western music; experimenting with tonality, flexible parameters, and variable rhythms; and developing forms of collective improvisation based on linear rather than harmonic qualities. The music may or may not have a tonal center; it may have a fixed pulse or some recurring rhythmic pattern, or the music may be suspended "out of time"; and there may be composed themes or pre-arranged rules for improvisation. In other words, free jazz is hardly chaos, and it certainly is not uniform. By some accounts, free jazz was to music what abstract expressionism was to painting, because it embraced the abstract features of postwar modernism (see Block 1990; Block 1993; Jost 1994; Litweiler 1984; Pekar 1963; Reeve 1969; Such 1993).

Yet at the birth of the free jazz movement—indeed, before there really was a movement to speak of—a few critics and musicians recognized some of these elements in Monk's music. Monk had been on the scene since the late 1930s, developing a reputation among musicians as an innovative—if not strange or difficult—pianist and composer. Like many

artists ahead of the mainstream, Monk's distinctive sound (discussed below) generated both a small but enthusiastic following and a somewhat marginal existence in the commercialized world of jazz during the 1940s and early 1950s. Although he did not record as a leader until 1947 (when he was 30 years old), he had already by that time penned some of the most distinctive compositions in the history of modern jazz, including "Round Midnight," "Epistrophy," "Well, You Needn't," and "Ruby, My Dear." His career suffered a major setback in 1951, when he was falsely arrested for possession of drugs. Deprived of his cabaret card—a police-issued "license" without which jazz musicians could not gig in New York clubs—Monk barely worked in his hometown for the next six years. Aside from a few jobs in the neighborhood clubs in Brooklyn and the Bronx and sporadic appearances in a couple of Manhattan venues, he was forced to take out-of-town jobs to survive (see Fitterling 1997, 30–70; Goldberg 1965, 30–37; Gourse 1997, 32–102; Ponzio and Postif 1995, 41–153).

It is significant that as soon as Monk's cabaret card was reinstated in 1957, he secured a long-term engagement at the Five Spot with a quartet consisting mainly of saxophonist John Coltrane, bassist Wilbur Ware, and drummer Shadow Wilson.¹ That Monk made his triumphant return to the New York scene at the Five Spot, leading one of the most celebrated quartets in the history of modern jazz, put him squarely at the center of the avant-garde revolution. First, the venue had become a haven for the post-war avant-garde both on and off the bandstand. Originally a tiny, nondescript bowery bar at 5 Cooper Square inherited by the brothers Joe and Iggy Termini, the Five Spot became a neighborhood hangout for abstract expressionist painters, sculptors, Beat poets, and genre-crossing artists such as painter/saxophonist Larry Rivers. The performers who appeared just prior to Monk's engagement represented a fairly diverse group, stretching from the subtle experimental works by composer and French horn player David Amram and the "hard bop" and Afrodiasporic music of pianist Randy Weston to the kinetic, extremely abstract sounds of

1. Monk actually opened at the Five Spot on July 4, 1957, with a trio consisting of himself, Frankie Dunlop, and Wilbur Ware; Coltrane did not join the group until July 18. Wilbur Ware stayed on until the second week of August, when he was fired for failing to appear. Ahmed Abdul-Malik subsequently replaced Ware, and Shadow Wilson replaced Frankie Dunlop, who at the time was having problems with the musicians' union. There were also other replacements and various artists sitting in, including drummers Max Roach, Art Blakey, Willie Jones, Philly Joe Jones, and Kenny Dennis; French horn player Julius Watkins; and alto saxophonist Sahib Shihab (Porter 1998, 109–110).

Larry Rivers takes credit for persuading the Termini brothers to hire Monk, although his account is questionable. For example, he claims that Monk was the first black musician to perform there and that Rivers suggested Monk because "jazz is black." He makes no mention of Cecil Taylor or Randy Weston, who performed there in 1956 (Rivers 1992, 341–342).

pianist Cecil Taylor and bassist Buel Neidlinger. While Monk's Five Spot appearance attracted fans from all over the city, he also inherited an audience attracted to experimental music (see Gourse 1997, 132–137; Ponzio and Postif 1995, 174–175; Porter 1998, 109–110; Weston 1999; Wilmer 1980, 47).

Monk's return also coincided with larger national and international cultural developments that helped create the kind of audiences that would patronize places like the Five Spot. Bohemia and elements of a self-proclaimed postwar avant-garde produced some of Monk's most dedicated followers. They represented an audience that could find the boundary-crossing and genre-breaking work of abstract expressionist painters, conceptual artists, and atonal composers both intellectually engaging and politically relevant. Included in this group were young black writers such as LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Frank London Brown, Ted Joans, Jayne Cortez, and others who discovered in Monk a startling modernism as well as a direct link to the rich traditions of black music making. All of these artists contributed profoundly to the modernist, multimedia qualities that have come to characterize the new music and that resonate powerfully with Monk's own performance practices. For some of his followers, for instance, the way Monk danced around the piano while his sidemen continued to play rendered Monk more than a jazz musician—he became a performance artist (Kelley 1997; Joans 1995).

The avant-garde writers and artists of the postwar generation, particularly the Beats, held a special reverence for Monk and black jazz musicians. In some respects, their attraction to Monk was partly linked to a larger crisis in masculinity during the 1950s. As Norman Mailer argues in his controversial essay "The White Negro" (published in *Dissent* the same year that Monk opened at the Five Spot), black men—particularly the hipsters and the jazz musicians—offered an alternative model of masculinity in the age of the gray flannel suit, suburbia, and other emasculating forces. Beat artists often characterized jazz musicians as emotionally driven, uninhibited, strong black men capable of reaching into their souls to create a pure Negro sound (Panish 1997, 56–66; see also Ehrenreich 1983, 56; Mailer 1957, 332–358; Monson 1995, 396–422; Ross 1989, 65–101). To their ears and eyes, Monk had the perfect combination of abstract qualities and unbridled, authentic Negro sound (and also an extremely stylish wardrobe). He was a towering figure at six feet, three inches, with a large upper body and dark brown skin. He was black masculinity in its most attractive and threatening form, and his tendency to dance around the bandstand to his own music put his body on display in a unique way. Moreover, even musicians and critics at the time interpreted his dissonant harmonies, startling rhythmic displacements, and

swinging tempos as distinctively "masculine." This is precisely how Steve Lacy described Monk's music in the pages of *The Jazz Review*. He not only stated that Monk's music possessed, among other traits, a "balanced virility," but in the context of a discussion about Sonny Rollins he observed that "[Rollins'] masculinity and authority can only be matched in jazz by that of Thelonious Monk" (quoted in Lacy 1964, 269, 271). In the liner notes to his first all-Monk album, *Reflections*, Lacy also characterized Monk's music as "masculine" (quoted in Gitler 1958). Gitler concurred, calling Lacy's remark "an interesting and pointed observation in the light of the numerous effeminate jazz offerings we have heard in the past five years. The inner strength of songs like *Ask Me Now* and *Reflections* demonstrates that it is not slow tempos and low decibels which necessarily indicate an effeminate performance."

By "effeminate offerings," was Gitler referring to the so-called cool jazz movement coming primarily from white West Coast musicians, the chamber music/jazz fusions of the Modern Jazz Quartet, or the romantic lyricism of Bill Evans? My guess is that Gitler equated effeminate performance with consonance, steady, often slow tempos, major keys, a light touch, and a romanticism that one associates with the balladeer. Although most of Monk's compositions—as well as the old standards he favored—were written in major keys, he virtually unhinged the major tonalities on which the tunes were built by adding minor seconds to melodic lines and emphasizing tritone, dominant, and minor ninth intervals in his improvisations and melodies. Critics used words like "assault," "pulverize," "savage," or "playing havoc" to describe what Monk did to pop tunes; they tended to see his interpretations as delightfully iconoclastic or as deliberately terroristic acts of disfiguring the romanticism of standards such as "Just a Gigolo" and "Darn That Dream" (Hodeir 1986, 166–167; Mehegan 1963, 4).

Ironically, in Western classical music parlance, consonance, major tonalities, and romanticism would be gendered masculine and Monk's music "feminine," because of its dissonance, its tendency to float away from tonal centers, and its employment of cadences in which the functionally dissonant chord (i.e., the dominant) resolves into a "weak" bar or beat. The discourses of Western music theory, however, are not neatly applicable here precisely because black vernacular musics are understood through different historical filters and systems of meaning. Gendered constructions of music, as with anything else, are always racialized. For example, as Susan McClary (1991, 7–19) argues, dissonance in Western classical music is gendered female precisely because it is imagined as disruptive—at best a voice of resistance, at worst a voice of hysteria. On the other hand, in the 1950s and 1960s, part of the attrac-

tion to black music was its disruptive capacity, its resistance to order and the dominant culture, and its rebelliousness. Rebellion in this age was inextricably tied to masculinity, and black men were regarded by this growing generation of “white Negroes” as the role models of manhood.²

Monk’s masculinity, evident in his music and his body, was only one aspect of his attractiveness. The cultural avant-garde was also drawn to Monk’s image as a visionary, seer, mad artist, and nonconformist—in part, a construction of the popular press dating back to the 1950s. By the early 1960s, when the Beat poet and hipster were fused together in popular media and parodied—and a new counterculture sought spiritual, cultural, and intellectual alternatives to suburbia—in walked Monk. Writer Barry Farrell (1964, 84) linked Monk with Jack Kerouac and the Beats: “[Monk’s] name and his mystic utterances . . . made him seem the ideal Dharma Bum to an audience of hipsters.” Many musicians looked upon Monk as a guru. Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and pianists Randy Weston and Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), to name a few, echoed Steve Lacy’s assessment of Monk as “a teacher, a prophet, a visionary” (Lacy 1995).

But Monk turned out to be a most unwilling guru. Although he had always helped young musicians, inviting them over to his tiny apartment on West 63rd Street and providing valuable advice in his quiet way, Monk was not very receptive to the music of the avant-garde. He usually kept his opinions to himself, but on those rare occasions when he did have something to say about the new music, it was not very flattering. When asked by an interviewer in 1961 about Ornette Coleman, he claimed not to have listened to the saxophonist’s work but added, “I don’t think it’s going to revolutionize jazz” (quoted in Gourse 1997, 175). Nat Hentoff (1995, 74) relates a similar story. One night, Hentoff and the Baroness Pannonica (Nica) de Koenigswarter—long-time patron of jazz musicians

2. My arguments here draw mainly from McClary (1991). McClary’s analysis is far more nuanced than what is presented here and, in fact, can account for black/white opposition because she maintains that the Other need not always be interpreted as female. Rather, the dissonant Other can stand for anything that is an obstacle and must be brought into submission. On the other hand, these readings of masculinity in jazz position the black voice as heroic and ultimately masculine. Charles Ford’s study of Mozart’s operas offers an alternative approach to gendering music that might better explain dissonance as masculinity. For him the dominant modulation—the leap to the augmented fourth (tritone interval)—is a masculine move because it connotes struggle and striving. He also suggests that metric dynamism is masculine, whereas “decorative stasis” connotes femininity (Ford 1991). Both of these elements are characteristic of Monk’s music—composed and improvised (see also Green 1997, 117–121). Whether any of these readings are “right” has no bearing on my point, however, which is to introduce ways in which critics and/or musicians make gendered meanings out of harmonic and rhythmic elements. One excellent example of a gender analysis of music that consistently accounts for race and class is Davis (1998).

and a close friend of Monk's—were listening to Coleman's records when Monk entered: "Suddenly he interrupted a record. 'That's nothing new. I did it years ago.' Monk got up and started to go through the piles of Nica's records, without envelopes, stacked on the floor. He found what he wanted, played his old performance, which made his point, and said, 'I think he has a gang of potential though. But he's not all they say he is right now. After all, what has he contributed?'" In other, more public contexts, he was much less charitable: "I think he's nuts" (quoted in Coleman 1993). He seemed especially frustrated with the avant-garde's interpretation of his music, although he certainly did not hear all or most of what these artists were trying to do with it. As bassist Buell Neidlinger recalled:

When I was with [clarinetist] Jimmy Giuffre, . . . we opened for Ornette Coleman at the Jazz Gallery and we played a lot of Monk tunes. But Thelonious hated the way we played his music. He was working at the Five Spot and the Baroness would drive him over. She'd sit in the car while he came into the kitchen to get a hamburger or a whiskey and storm around. There was a big, metal fire door that he used to slam during our numbers. Of course, when Giuffre played Monk's music, the chords were all wrong. (Quoted in Silsbee 1987, 8)

Besides slamming doors, Monk occasionally voiced dismay over the direction of the music, as in a conversation he had with singer Delores Wilson arranged by the *Toronto Telegram*. When Wilson criticized modern composers for "going so far out" and losing the basic "soul expression" of opera, Monk concurred: "I agree with you wholeheartedly because in jazz they're doing the same things, what they call avant-garde, they do anything, make any kind of noise. A lot of young musicians are doing that." Even more interesting was Wilson's own characterization of Monk's music, which she believed embodied the romanticism of earlier Western musics: "I just want to go and be moved by the beauty of it, I want to feel it. Mr. Monk does that beautifully with his music. There is soul, there is expression, but some of our modern composers are now just trying for just plain sound" (Bassell 1966). For someone whose playing had been compared to the sound of a jackhammer, this is a surprising assessment.

For young musicians drawn to free jazz, Monk's criticisms must have hurt, or at the very least, surprised them. Monk, after all, was their man. The avant-garde not only claimed him as one of their main progenitors and leaders but actively sought to canonize him. They regarded him as perhaps the most important forefather of what some called the "New Thing" in jazz (Goodman 1976, 72). Indeed, the first wave of the avant-

garde performed more tunes by Monk than by any other composer outside their immediate circle. These artists also wrote what amounted to tributes to Monk—Coleman, “Monk and the Nun”; Eric Dolphy, “Hat and Beard”; Andrew Hill, “New Monastery”; Charles Mingus (a reluctant but very important figure in the free jazz movement), “Jump Monk” and “Monk, Bunk, and Vice Versa”; and Grachan Moncur III, “Monk in Wonderland.”³ For saxophonist Steve Lacy and trombonist Roswell Rudd, Monk was such an important composer and improviser that they eventually formed a band in the early 1960s devoted to studying and playing only Monk’s music. Graduates of the Manhattan School of Music and Yale University, respectively, both understood that they were engaged in the canonization of Monk by forming what Lacy (1995) described as a repertory band: “What Roswell and I wanted to achieve at that time was a repertory band. But they thought we were crazy. And we started as a repertory band, and we played Ellington, Strayhorn, Kurt Weill, and Monk. And then we started really getting more interested in the Monk thing, and it turned into a band that only played Monk. But the idea from the get go was repertory. And at that time it was unheard of.”

Who Knows? (E)Race-ing Monk in an Era of Black Liberation

The divide between Monk and the jazz avant-garde reflected not simply different musical tastes or a misunderstanding. It was also a matter of politics. Conservative and Cold War-liberal critics drove a wedge between Monk and the avant-garde by promoting Monk as a foil against the radicalization of black musicians. Ironically, some of Monk’s most enthusiastic supporters during his meteoric rise to fame commented on his disinterest in race or politics as a particularly attractive feature of his life and work.

The context for such a response is very important. The emergence of the avant-garde in the early 1960s coincided with the sense of betrayal that white liberals felt from an increasingly militant, uncompromising Civil Rights movement, a rise in black nationalist sentiment reflected in groups such as the Nation of Islam and the Revolutionary Action Movement, and growing protests over U.S. foreign policy in the Third

3. Examples of avant-garde recordings of Monk’s music or tributes to him include Cecil Taylor’s 1956 recording of “Bemsha Swing” on *Jazz Advance*; New York Contemporary Five’s 1963 recording of “Monk’s Mood” and “Crepuscle with Nellie” on *Archie Shepp: The New York Contemporary Five*; Don Cherry and John Coltrane’s 1960 recording of “Bemsha Swing” on *The Avant-Garde*; Andrew Hill’s 1964 recording of “New Monastery” on *Point of Departure*; and Charles Mingus’s “Jump Monk” (1956) on *Mingus at the Bohemia* and “Monk, Bunk, and Vice Versa” (which Mingus sometimes called “Monk, Funk, and Vice Versa”) on *Epitaph*. Lead sheets for Mingus’s tunes can be found in Sue Mingus (1991).

World. The same crisis occurred in the world of jazz—a world that many white critics believed ought to be color-blind. Critics who were uncomfortable with the increasing militancy of musicians identified with the “New Thing,” particularly black musicians, declared war on the new music and its proponents. And they attempted to enlist anyone, willing or not, who would stand up for “real” jazz—swinging and free of politics. Critic Ira Gitler (1962) published a highly defensive critique of black protest politics in jazz in the guise of a review of Abbey Lincoln’s album *Straight Ahead*. Gitler attacked Lincoln’s militant politics, criticized the fact that there were no white musicians on the date, and called her “misguided and naïve” for her support of African nationalism. For Gitler, this album and the current trends in jazz were precursors to a powerful black separatist movement. He warned, “[W]e don’t need the Elijah Muhammed [sic] type thinking in jazz” (24).⁴ The major record labels also attempted to silence musicians who were openly critical of American racism or supportive of black liberation. In 1959, Columbia Records—which was soon to be Monk’s label—refused to issue Charles Mingus’s original version of “Fables of Faubus,” which included a biting call-and-response between Mingus and drummer Dannie Richmond criticizing Governor Orval Faubus, President Eisenhower, and the entire white South for the school integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas. Columbia’s executives believed that they would lose a good portion of their southern market if they released the song with the lyrics (Priestley 1984, 119). Furthermore, the fact that the interracial avant-garde was dubbed the “New Black Music” by critic/poet LeRoi Jones (1967, 15–16, 172–176, 180–211) made the white critical establishment and some musicians, including some who were sympathetic to free jazz, uncomfortable.

Although the avant-garde was by no means united on political issues or even uniformly interested in politics, some of the most vocal proponents identified with the Black Freedom movement and/or were organizing to fight racism, exploitation, and inequity in the music industry itself. For many black musicians of the 1950s and early 1960s, both inside and out of the avant-garde, the emancipation of form coincided with the

4. The controversy led to a panel discussion on “Racial Prejudice in Jazz” that included Gitler, Lincoln, Nat Hentoff, Max Roach, and *Down Beat* editor Don DeMichael. The exchange turned quite nasty, with Gitler defending his review (and defending the fact that he never interviewed Lincoln but based his critique on Hentoff’s liner notes) and DeMichael raising the issue of “Crow Jim”—the idea that white musicians were being discriminated against. Of course, white critics nervous about the presence of black nationalist sentiment in jazz directed most of their criticism at artists identified with the avant-garde (see for example, Gitler 1965, 8; Hentoff 1966, 36–39; Jones 1963, 143–152). In other words, the white critical insistence that jazz ought to be “color blind” is hardly new (see Gennari 1991; Gennari 1993; Kofsky 1998, 83–122 ; Panish 1997).

movement for African freedom. The convergence of these political and aesthetic forces, combined with a search for spiritual alternatives to Western materialism, led to the formation of collectives such as Abdullah, The Melodic Art-tet, the Aboriginal Music Society, and the Revolutionary Ensemble. The new wave of musicians also formed collectives for economic security, developing structures for cooperative work that anticipated the Black Arts movement's efforts of the late 1960s (see Baker 1986; de Jong 1997; Hunt 1974; Jost 1994, 107–121; Kelley 1997, 18–19; Litweiler 1984, 183–187; Neal 1965; Porter 1997, 176–206; Thomas 1995; Weathers 1973; Wilmer 1980, 213–227). One of the most visible institutions was the Jazz Composers Guild, an interracial collective intended to protect musicians' interests and heighten the public's awareness of exploitation and racism in the jazz industry. It was formed from the infamous "October Revolution in Jazz," a series of avant-garde jazz concerts at the Cellar Café on New York's Upper West Side, which were organized by trumpeter Bill Dixon in 1964. The participants included Dixon; a quartet led by John Tchicai and Roswell Rudd; the Free Form Ensemble; bassist Ali Jackson and his trio; and many others. Some of the more prominent musicians—Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Steve Lacy, Sun Ra, and pianist Andrew Hill—took part in a midnight panel discussion on music and politics. Overall, it was a huge success, although the infusion of politics disturbed even the more sympathetic critics (Levin 1965; Morgenstern and Williams 1964; Wilmer 1980, 213–215).

For many of these musicians, collectives were necessary in order to ensure their survival. They paid a dear price not only for their artistic integrity but also for their activism. A good number of the avant-garde musicians lived in dire poverty and could hardly get a gig. Cecil Taylor worked on and off as a dishwasher; just months after Monk's feature in *Time* appeared, he was actually living on welfare. Drummer Sunny Murray was so poor that he could not afford a drum set for a time. The Steve Lacy–Roswell Rudd group devoted solely to playing Monk's music could only secure gigs in coffee shops and restaurants for almost no money (Lacy 1995; Russell 1964, 6; Spellman 1966, 12–25). Nevertheless, collectives were not merely unions under a different name; the idea was to develop collaborative artistic relationships without leaders, to mirror the experiments in group improvisation that had become a central characteristic of the new music, and to challenge the star system perpetuated by the music industry. Archie Shepp said it best when he remarked on the various critics' pools that jazz musicians had to endure: "I mean, did you ever see [Artur] Rubinstein awarded stars for performance? Bach wasn't no threat to Beethoven and they're both great—right? Nobody says who gets five stars. It's a way of treating Black culture which is discriminato-

ry and divisive because it always creates competitiveness on the very jivest, lowest level" (quoted in Wilmer 1980, 222).

But in 1964, the year of the great "October Revolution," Monk was a star: *Down Beat* voted his quartet the best small group in jazz. To the critics, many of whom ignored or disparaged him a decade earlier, Monk now epitomized what they believed that jazz should be about: a music that transcends color and politics. A year after his Five Spot debut, Monk told black novelist/critic and activist Frank London Brown: "My music is not a social comment on discrimination or poverty or the like. I would have written the same way even if I had not been a Negro" (quoted in Brown 1958, 45). Seven years later, in an interview with English jazz critic Valerie Wilmer, he was even more emphatic about his disinterest in politics:

I hardly know anything about [race issues]. . . . I never was interested in those Muslims. If you want to know, you should ask Art Blakey. I didn't have to change my name—it's always been weird enough! I haven't done one of these "freedom" suites, and I don't intend to. I mean, I don't see the point. I'm not thinking that race thing now; it's not on my mind. Everybody's trying to get me to think it, though, but it doesn't bother me. It only bugs the people who are trying to get me to think it. (Quoted in Wilmer 1977, 50)

The right-wing *National Review* jazz critic Ralph de Toledano (1965, 940–941) took notice of Monk's attitude and praised him for not confusing music with politics: "Like most of the best jazzmen . . . he doesn't believe that he must make his art a sledge hammer to pound away at political themes."

While conservative and liberal critics tried to promote Monk as a foil against an increasingly radical, antiracist musicians' movement, neither the jazz avant-garde nor the black activist community in general ever viewed Monk as a "sell out." On the contrary, he was elevated to the status of cultural icon in some radical nationalist circles. In an article published in the Harlem-based *Liberator*, actor/critic Clebert Ford (1964, 15) included Monk on his list of black revolutionary artists who drew on the "Negro experience" for their art. The list included a broad range of artists, from Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Rollins, Coltrane, and Parker to "the avant-garde nationalism of an Ornette Coleman and [a] Cecil Taylor." A few months later, the *Liberator* carried another article, this one critiquing *Time* for its portrait of Monk. Written by Theodore Pontiflet (1964), the article is really about the exploitation of Monk—by his record label, by managers and clubs, and especially by his white patron, the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter. "She serves as a bitter insinua-

tion," writes Pontiflet, "to both black and white Americans alike that a rich white woman is the black jazzman's salvation." Pontiflet goes on to suggest that *Time's* focus on Monk's relationship with the baroness not only implied wrongly that "black women are in the background reduced to domestic chores" but "warns white America that in these days of talking integration and on the fatal eve of passing a watered-down civil rights bill, they should remember that it could mean more of their daughters will be bringing home an occasional black genius." The author implies, however, that Monk was unaware of the exploitation that he had to endure as a black artist in the United States, thus unintentionally reinforcing the dominant image of him as naïve and childlike. Throughout the struggles of his career, Pontiflet writes, "Thelonious Monk and his wife Nellie remain as pure as honey. The patron baroness? She was part of the deal—the bitter part of the sweet."

All of these portraits of Monk, from the *Liberator* to the *National Review*, treat him as though he were oblivious to politics. Of course, the reality is much more complicated. As Ingrid Monson (1999) points out, Monk not only played a benefit for Paul Robeson in 1954 and performed at various fund-raisers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), but at times he made relatively militant statements denouncing discrimination in the music industry and condemning police brutality. He told Valerie Wilmer: "In the United States the police bother you more than they do anywhere else. The police heckle you more. You don't have that much trouble anywhere else in the world except the United States. The police just mess with you for nothing. They just bully people and all that kind of shit. They carry guns, too, and they shoot people for nothing" (quoted in Wilmer 1977, 50). It is also interesting to note that, when he was interviewed by Stanley Dance in 1963 and asked to name one of the "greatest Americans of the century," he chose George Washington Carver. The person whom he admired most in *sports* was Paul Robeson (quoted in Gourse 1997, 197–198). But this side of Monk—the "race" man, patron of the black freedom movement, critic of police brutality—was not the dominant image projected by the mainstream media. Instead, Monk came across as the kindly eccentric with the funny hats who, unlike the "angry" young lions, knew how to swing.

Played Twice: Musical Encounters

All of these factors help us understand the great chasm between Monk and the avant-garde as well as the timing and meaning of Monk's sudden success. Nevertheless, I think that the most important and, in some ways, most elusive explanation for the unique, interdependent, often strained

relationship between Monk and the avant-garde lay in the music itself. Interestingly, LeRoi Jones (1964) took a mildly critical stance toward the development of Monk's music in the early 1960s, but not because of politics. Like many others, Jones praised Monk for his contribution to bebop and to the New Music and still saw him as a revolutionary of sorts but wondered why, suddenly in 1963, the artist was being feted after two decades of hard times. In raising this question, Jones hinted that something in the music, in his playing, might be faltering that could be related to his canonization, his migration to the Columbia label, and his overnight fame. He then issued a warning of sorts: "[O]nce [an artist] had made it safely to the 'top,' [he] either stopped putting out or began to imitate himself so dreadfully that early records began to have more value than new records or in-person appearances. . . . So Monk, someone might think taking a quick glance, has really been set up for something bad to happen to his playing" (21). To some degree, Jones thought that this was already happening and placed much of the blame on Monk's sidemen. "[S]ometimes," Jones conceded, "one wishes Monk's group wasn't so polished and impeccable, and that he had some musicians with him who would be willing to extend themselves a little further, dig a little deeper into the music and get out there somewhere near where Monk is, and where his compositions always point to" (22).

The question, of course, is, to where did Monk's compositions point? Did his music point forward, as in Jones' view, to the experiments of the free jazz movement? Did it point back to the old stride pianists with whom Monk so strongly identified? This question is critical if we are going to understand how Monk's music could be so attractive to the avant-garde as an opening for their own experimentation. In the final section of this article, I show how Monk's compositions and piano style actually promoted greater freedom while simultaneously placing certain restrictions on instrumentalists and how specific avant-garde artists built on elements of Monk's music to extend his conception of rhythm, timbre, group improvisation, and the eventual emancipation from functional harmony.

Although few of our leading canonizers place Monk within the realm of "free jazz," many writers and musicians recognize his contributions to the New Music. Musicologist James Kurzdorfer (1996, 181) has suggested that Monk "in some ways foreshadows the often atonal 'free' jazz of some of the musicians of the next generation." Likewise, pianist Ran Blake (1982, 29) identified Monk as one of the major figures "responsible for loosening the grip of tonality and thus paving the way for the later free jazz experiments of Ornette Coleman and others." Randy Weston, an extraordinary pianist/composer, insisted that what Monk had been

doing all along was not so different from what free jazz was attempting to do, both musically and politically. Disturbed by all the hype surrounding the avant-garde, Weston told Arthur Taylor: "I don't see how this music is more free than another. I've heard Monk take one note and create unbelievable freedom. One note can be a whole composition. . . . There have been musicians throughout the years who have protested musically and also protested in other ways than in their music. In other words, this freedom thing is not new" (quoted in Taylor 1993, 27).

Unlike his fellow boppers, Monk was less inclined to take chord changes from other tunes.⁵ Instead, he created a new architecture for his music—not just new progressions and new chord structures but also a different relationship between his harmonic and rhythmic foundation and the melody. Monk asked his sidemen to do more with the melody when improvising, and what he played underneath was often a restatement of the melody or even a countermelody (Williams 1992, 437). One might also point to his use of ostinato in "Thelonious," "Think of One," and "Shuffle Boil," pieces built on one or two notes played repeatedly over a harmonic movement that dominates—even defines—the theme (Blake 1982, 26; Floyd 1995, 182). He also placed greater emphasis on dissonant harmonies than his contemporaries in bebop. Although it was not uncommon for pianists of this era to play clusters (clumps of notes—usually chromatic—played at the same time) in order to achieve tone colors, Monk's closed-position voicings sometimes sounded as if he were playing clusters when he was not. He might voice a major-seventh chord by playing the seventh in the bass, the root next, and then the third—the bottom interval would be a minor second. Sometimes he would voice a chord with the root in the bass and the major third and fourth played together, which would generate harmonic ambiguity because the suspension (created by the fourth) and resolution (the third) occur in the same harmony. It was also common for Monk to play the minor seventh and major seventh, or the minor ninth and the major ninth, at the same time—either in the same chord or a melody note relative to the chord. By thus pushing functional harmony to the edge but never abandoning it, he invented unique ways to voice his chords, exploiting major- and minor-second intervals and emphasizing the highly dissonant and unstable tritone (interval of three whole steps), which gave his music a whole-tone feel and created harmonic ambiguity (Blake 1982, 28; DeVaux 1997,

5. This is not to say that he did not borrow progressions from pop tunes: "In Walked Bud" is based on "Blue Skies," "Let's Call This" on "Sweet Sue," "Hackensack" on "Lady Be Good," "Rhythm-n-ing" on "I Got Rhythm," "Evidence" on "Just You, Just Me," and "Bright Mississippi" on "Sweet Georgia Brown." Nevertheless, even the borrowed changes were altered so significantly through unique voicings and substitutions that they often bore only a passing resemblance to the original.

223–225; Koch 1983, 67–68; Kurzdorfer 1996, 181–201). One hears these elements in virtually all of his music, although they are particularly pronounced in tunes such as “Epistrophy,” “Misterioso,” “Introspection,” “Off Minor,” “Crepuscule with Nellie,” “Ask Me Now,” “Hornin’ In,” and “Raise Four.”

Whereas most pianists of the bebop era adopted Bud Powell’s style—simplifying their instrument by playing sparse chords in the left hand and placing more emphasis on right hand melodic lines built on eighth notes—Monk combined an active right hand with an equally active left hand, combining stride, distinctive arpeggios, bass counterpoint, and whole-tone runs that spanned the entire keyboard. He influenced an entire generation of avant-garde pianists to reassert the left hand and use the lower registers.⁶ As mentioned previously, Monk was also a master of rhythmic displacement—the extension or contraction of a musical phrase that falls outside the established bar lines. Of course, this is not new—one can find numerous examples of rhythmic displacement in standard bebop licks. But for Monk, rhythmic displacement was more than an improvisational strategy; in some respects, it was an essential element of his compositional technique. He wrote and played phrases that might extend four-and-a-half or five bars, or he would frequently play the same phrase at a different place in the rhythm. One can hear these elements in most of his compositions; obvious examples include “Straight, No Chaser,” bars 9–11 of “Ba-lue Bolivar Ba-lues-are,” and bars 5–6 of “Hackensack” (Haywood 1994–95, 25–45; Koch 1983; Kteily-O’Sullivan 1990; Somers 1988, 44–47).

Often celebrated for his use of space, Monk would “lay out” fairly regularly, enabling his horn players as well as bassists and drummers to explore the possibilities of new tonalities. Freed from the piano as harmonic cage, it is no accident that so much of the avant-garde discarded the piano altogether or used it in new ways. In fact, this is partly what Coltrane meant when he said, “Monk gave me complete freedom. He’d leave the stand for a drink or to do his dance, and I could just improvise by myself for fifteen or twenty minutes before he returned” (quoted in Thomas 1976, 88). Coltrane was not alone. Monk’s absence from the piano allowed for musical experimentation within the ensemble itself, opening the door for various kinds of collective improvisation (Williams 1992, 439). Especially memorable were Coltrane’s interactions with bassist Wilbur Ware during the Five Spot engagement. Ware’s inventive playing, use of substitute chords, and strategic avoidance of the tonic

6. Critic Michel-Claude Jalard (1960) linked Monk, Cecil Taylor, and Duke Ellington together precisely because of their strong use of the left hand, although he argues that they do not use it to the same effect.

challenged Coltrane in other ways, particularly without Monk's piano leading the way. "[Ware] plays things that are foreign," Coltrane remarked. "[I]f you didn't know the song, you wouldn't be able to find it. Because he's superimposing things. He's playing around, and under, and over—building tensions, so when he comes back to it you feel everything sets in. But usually I know the tunes—I know the changes anyway. So we manage to come out at the end together anyway" (quoted in Porter 1998, 112).

Yet, although Monk freed the music and musicians in some ways, the structure of his compositions and his unique playing style also had a constricting effect. Ironically, because everything fit together so well and was so tightly structured, Monk's sidemen could not go anywhere they wished with the music. His melodies were not only difficult to learn but improvising on them was always a challenge. Many great musicians lost their bearings playing with Monk, which sometimes led to new discoveries or, more often than not, utter confusion. As Coltrane succinctly put it, "I lost my place and it was like falling into an open elevator shaft" (quoted in Blake 1982, 27). Fellow tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin, who later replaced Coltrane during Monk's extended stay at the Five Spot, found playing with Monk "difficult" and felt that the pianist left his sidemen little "elbow space": "I enjoyed playing with him, . . . but when I'm playing my solos, for instance, the way his comping is so strong, playing his own music, that it's almost like you're in a padded cell. I mean, trying to express yourself, because his music, with him comping, is so overwhelming, like it's almost like you're trying to break out of a room made of marshmallows. . . . Any deviation, one note off, and you sound like you're playing another tune, and you're not paying attention to what's going on" (quoted in Sidran 1995, 201–202).

Monk also placed certain limitations on his sidemen—at least by the early 1960s when he was fronting his own permanent quartet. For example, although he always gave his bassists plenty of space and let them solo frequently, he also insisted that they not use the bow and wanted them to "swing" all the time. This frustrated Butch Warren, who eventually left Monk's band (Gourse 1997, 206). By the time that drummer Ben Riley joined the group, Monk seemed to want even less clutter and more space; he wanted a drummer who would simply swing. When Riley first joined Monk, he was trying to play like Max Roach and Roy Haynes, constantly filling the space, exploring the polyrhythms, and experimenting. Monk was not too keen on this approach and thought Riley was too busy. "Now you don't have to do that, you know," Monk told him. "Just learn how to swing and make everybody move to certain places and then the rest of it will take care of itself" (quoted in Riley and Troupe 1998, 105).

As Frankie Dunlop, the drummer whom Riley replaced, discovered, Monk wanted a drummer who stayed in the background and kept a steady, swinging beat. "Monk demanded rather this solid, dead on-the-beat backing of Dunlop," wrote critic Jef Langford (1971a, 7). "Truly, he was a melodic drummer at his best, but I gather that he played what was requested."

We cannot underestimate the political meanings of "swing" in the era of free jazz. The lack of swing in the new music upset many critics because "swing," in their view, was constitutive of jazz itself. Ironically, critics not only regarded swing as the element that made the music authentic, and thus linked to black folk traditions, but they considered it representative of the good old prepolitical days when the music was color-blind, melodic, and pleasurable. In an otherwise sympathetic 1964 review of the "October Revolution," Dan Morgenstern lamented the loss of "swing," which to him was a defining characteristic of jazz. The New Thing, he noted, "is a form of 20th century 'art music' rather than that unique blend of popular and 'true' art that has been (and is, and will be) jazz as we know it" (Morgenstern and Williams 1964, 33). For some critics, swing not only rendered the music more authentic but also more emotional. Those who were most opposed to raising issues of race and racism in jazz accepted a racialized construction of the music as more physical and emotional than cerebral—the latter a label usually associated with European classical music. Thus it is fitting that Ralph de Toledano (1965, 942) chided Monk for being *too cerebral* and not swinging enough. While praising Monk, he accused him of too much intellectualism, for not reaching down to his "soul" in order to make great music, and for removing any sense of "dance" from his music! In other words, while Monk was not too black politically, and thus a safe symbol in the age of ghetto uprisings, Black Power, and the rantings of the avant-garde, musically, de Toledano considered him not black enough.

Interestingly, the leading pianist/composer of the first-wave avant-garde, and the most direct descendant of Monk, was also accused of not "swinging." A product of a middle-class family on Long Island, Cecil Taylor began playing piano at age five and later explored percussion. In 1951, at age eighteen, he studied piano, theory, and composition at the New England Conservatory, where he became familiar with the works of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg and was deeply influenced by Bartók and Stravinsky (Coss 1961, 19–21; Goldberg 1965, 213–227; Spellman 1966, 3–76; Wilmer 1980, 45–59). His training in European classical music impressed Gunther Schuller, who, in a review of Taylor's early albums (*Jazz Advance* and *At Newport*), emphasized that his trajectory paralleled European music's move toward atonality. Schuller then suggested that

Taylor, unlike other “jazz” musicians, played from his mind rather than his soul and hence did not really play the “blues.” The comment, although made in the context of a glowing review, deeply upset Taylor, who saw himself in the blues tradition: “I play an extension of period music—Ellington and Monk” (quoted in Spellman 1966, 29). On the question of his atonality, Taylor responded to Schuller in the liner notes to his album *Looking Ahead*, again invoking Monk as a precursor of his experiments, not European music:

Some people say I'm atonal. It depends, for one thing, on your definition of the term. . . . Basically it's not important whether a certain chord happens to fit some student's definition of atonality. A man like [Thelonious] Monk is concerned with growing and enriching his musical conception, and what he does comes as a living idea out of his life's experience, not from a theory. It may or may not turn out to be atonal. (Quoted in Spellman 1966, 27-28)

Taylor's classical training—which was variously treated by critics either as a benefit, a liability, or both—not only shaped his reception but also Monk's reception vis-à-vis the avant-garde. Schuller, for example, used Taylor as a foil to define Monk's relationship to the new music almost as much as Taylor invoked Monk to stake out his own position. In an essay in *The Jazz Review*, Schuller (1964, 232) suggested that it would never occur to “a man of Monk's temperament” to practice and perhaps change his technique in order to improve his music. The implication was that Monk, the allegedly self-taught pianist, came out of an improvisational tradition in which study and transformation were not essential. Moreover, Monk's playing was so integral to his compositional style that it had never occurred to him to change it. Schuller was not alone in his assessment. Despite Monk's often-cited 1948 quote that he and his fellow boppers “liked Ravel, Stravinsky, Debussy, Prokofiev, Schoenberg and maybe we were a little influenced by them” (quoted in Panish 1997, 10), jazz critics consistently characterized Monk as an untrained primitive whose musical knowledge was largely intuitive. French critic André Hodeir (1986, 162), whose praise for Monk could hardly be contained, nonetheless insisted that this “true jazzman” had no interest in “serious music.” He assured his readers that “no twelve-tone sirens have lured Monk away from jazz. He probably doesn't even know such music exists. I can safely say that the gradual development of his language has been the result of intuition and intuition alone.” Pianist and teacher John Mehegan (1963, 2-3) said much the same thing:

The idea of Monk enrolling in music school to seek some course of systematic instruction as many of his peers have done . . . is alien to every breath of his life in jazz. This is a central facet of Monk's image—the unsullied sub-

cultural artist who has steadfastly retained the sum total of his oppression, unspoiled by the slick artifices of the glossy white world. . . . The entire body of resources of Western man relating to the playing of the piano, which dates back to the 16th century, remains unknown to Thelonious Sphere Monk for the simple reason that Monk is not Western man. He is a Black man.

Indeed, at the height of Monk's popularity, even the "genius" label was qualified by adjectives such as "naïve," "primitive," or "intuitive." Lewis Lapham's (1964, 72) sympathetic portrait of Monk for the *Saturday Evening Post* described him thus: an "emotional and intuitive man, possessing a child's vision of the world, Monk talks, sleeps, eats, laughs, walks and dances as the spirit moves him."

Cecil Taylor once again responded to Schuller, using the occasion of a forum sponsored by the United Nations Jazz Society (organized by Bill Dixon and attended by Martin Williams, John Lewis, Jimmy Giuffre, and George Russell, among others) to defend Monk as well as the artistic integrity of African-American culture and the limitations of viewing black music in relation to European developments: "I asked them, 'Would it ever occur to Horowitz to practice to change *his* technique?' I said, 'Monk can do things that Horowitz can't, and that's where the validity of Monk's music is, in his technique.' I told them that the Schullers wanted to change jazz to fit their own needs; that, essentially, they couldn't recognize the tradition that came from a black subculture as being valid in the face of European culture" (quoted in Spellman 1966, 31–32).⁷

On the surface, Taylor's identification with Monk appears more philosophical than musical because their approaches to improvisation and composition seemed so dramatically different. Taylor played with a kinetic energy that could not be contained within a steady beat, producing waves of sound that continue to build. His early recordings can sound rather strained, with drummers and bassists playing in tempo and horn players falling back on standard licks. And unlike Monk, Taylor abandoned functional harmony altogether and embraced a more dissonant and chromatic tonal vocabulary. However, close listening to Taylor's early recordings reveals similarities in how both he and Monk used the piano in an ensemble setting. Like Monk, Taylor never accompanies a soloist by simply feeding chords; rather he sounds like he's soloing himself, filling every space with two-handed tremolos and jagged runs up

7. To be fair, Schuller's essay enthusiastically praised Monk and defended his technique at every point. Indeed, the statement to which Taylor refers was made in a footnote. Nevertheless, although Taylor's reading of Schuller's piece may not do justice to Schuller's arguments and intentions, he does hit upon the very real and pervasive problem of racism in jazz criticism.

and down the piano over several octaves. Taylor himself described the role of the pianist in this fashion in his essay/poem "Sound Structure of Substance Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture" (1966) published as liner notes to *Unit Structures*: "internal dialogue mirror turns: player to nerve ends, motivation 'how to' resultant Unit flow. The piano as catalyst feeding material to soloists in all registers. . . . At the controlled body center, motors become knowledge at once felt, memory which has identified sensory images resulting social response." Taylor's "comping," if one can call it that, must be understood as essential to his conception of piano playing, which in many ways is "orchestral" (see Bartlett 1995, 279; Jost 1994, 75; Levin 1991).

Taylor also drew on Monk in developing a kinetic philosophy of performance. Playing was a physical activity that required the whole body; it was dance. Dance was inseparable from music, Taylor (1966) insisted, and he understood dance as "a visible physical conversation between all body's limbs: Rhythm is the space of time danced thru." He maintained a long-standing interest in dance and even studied dance and wrote for ballet (see Bartlett 1995; Jackson 1965; Miller 1988). He regarded Monk's dance as part of a long tradition of musicians dancing around their instruments going back before Delta blues musician Charley Patton to the present, with avant-garde drummer Milford Graves doing the same thing (Wilmer 1980, 50). Bassist Buell Neidlinger recognized the critical importance of dance in black musics and the impact that Monk's dancing had on his generation of artists. Echoing his former collaborator and mentor, Neidlinger remarked, "Dance is the core of all great musics, whether it's Monk, Ellington, or Stravinsky" (quoted in Silsbee 1987, 9).

Finally, during his formative years as a composer/player, Taylor turned to Monk's music as a tool for the development of his own system of composition and improvisation—what he called "constructivist principles." The basic idea was to compose, learn, and perform music by ear, to produce structured music that was not written down. A musical score, Taylor argued, "is subjugated to the feeling of jazz—they swung, 'swing' meaning the traditional coloring of the energy that moves the music. It is the physicality of the musician, and the physicality of the musician is determined by a particular tradition that he comes out of—by the blues." Here again, Taylor stakes out his connection to Monk, who wrote out lead sheets but insisted that his players learn by ear. At the time that Taylor developed his constructivist principles, he noted, "We used a lot of Monk's tunes. We used to take the Monk tunes out of themselves into the area in which I was going" (quoted in Spellman 1966, 71). In the process, he introduced Monk to his sidemen through the terms of experimental music and helped usher in a new generation of "students" who regarded Monk's music as a road to greater freedom.

Of Taylor's sidemen, the most committed student of Monk's music was the phenomenal soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy. Born Steven Lackritz in New York City, Lacy studied with Cecil Scott and played with several Dixieland revival bands before meeting Taylor. Together, Taylor's and Monk's music had a revolutionary impact on Lacy. He went on to record with Taylor on *Jazz Advance* (1956), *At Newport* (1957), and *New York City R&B* (1961) and then made several albums on his own. He was so taken with Monk's music that his second album as a leader, *Reflections* (1958), consisted entirely of Monk compositions. Indeed, it was the first all-Monk album ever recorded by an artist other than Monk. Joined by Mal Waldron on piano, Buell Neidlinger on bass, and Elvin Jones on drums, Lacy chose to record more difficult, less well-known compositions such as "Four in One," "Skippy," and "Hornin' In," as well as the lovely ballads "Ask Me Now" and "Reflections." With the exception of "Bye-Ya," none of the pieces Lacy selected had been recorded before by anyone except Monk. To prepare for the album, Lacy learned approximately thirty Monk tunes and "listened to Monk's records hundreds of times" (Gitler 1958). Monk's music became something of an obsession, although one that would prove to be a hallmark in Lacy's musical education and his path to greater freedom.

If Monk heard Lacy's album, he certainly did not give any indication of it. Nevertheless, Lacy sought Monk out in order to extend his musical education, and Monk befriended the young soprano saxophonist. He even hired Lacy for a sixteen-week gig at the Jazz Gallery (another club owned by the Termini brothers).⁸ But when Monk hired Lacy for his big band recordings at Lincoln Center in 1963, he would not allow the saxophonist to solo (see Gervais and Bouliane 1977; Gitler 1961; Gourse 1997, 168–173; Lacy 1964). "I think Monk was trying to teach me a lesson," he recalled. "I was too anxious" (Lacy 1995). Anxious or not, Lacy had already proven himself to be a brilliant and conscientious interpreter of Monk's music. That Monk reined Lacy in and, in fact, never hired him again (with the exception of the big band concert) suggests that something else was going on besides a lesson in patience.

Lacy's engagement with Monk's music pushed him in new directions—partly toward the experiments of Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry. Evidence of this comes from Lacy's third album, *The Straight Horn of Steve Lacy*, recorded in November 1960 while he was working with Monk. On this date, he led a piano-less quartet consisting of bassist John Ore, drummer Roy Haynes (both members of Monk's rhythm section at

8. Unfortunately, there are no extant recordings of this group, which included Charlie Rouse on tenor saxophone and the inimitable Roy Haynes on drums.

the time), and Charles Davis, a bop-influenced baritone saxophonist who had recorded earlier with Sun Ra. Lacy included three Monk compositions: "Criss Cross," "Played Twice," and "Introspection." Both in choices of songs and interpretation, these recordings reveal Lacy moving away from a tonal center. "Introspection," for example, is built on whole tones and a kind of wandering chordal movement that only occasionally lands on the tonic. Davis and Lacy constructed solos that stretched the limit of functional harmony and sounded somewhat akin to Coleman, although they remained loyal to Monk's conception by constantly finding ways to restate the theme. Equally surprising is the work of John Ore, who is more adventurous rhythmically (and harmonically) on these recordings than he was with Monk. One can almost hear the influence of Charles Mingus, Wilbur Ware, and possibly Charlie Haden as he breaks up the beat and turns the bass into more of a melody instrument.

One year later, Lacy returned to the studio to lead another piano-less quartet. This time he was joined by Don Cherry on trumpet, Carl Brown on bass, and Billy Higgins on drums—all associates of Ornette Coleman. The timing of this collaboration is important: Higgins had recently recorded and gigged with Monk on the West Coast, and Don Cherry had been playing Monk's music more frequently without Coleman. Indeed, Cherry had been exploring songs such as "Monk's Mood" and "Crepuscle with Nellie" in the New York Contemporary Five, and he had recently recorded a version of "Bemsha Swing" with John Coltrane. On this date, Lacy recorded four Monk compositions: "Evidence," "Let's Cool One," "San Francisco Holiday," and "Who Knows." The result is a brilliant fusion of Monk's ideas with Coleman's "harmolodic theory" (his idea that harmony, melody, and rhythm should be given equal weight in order to break out of the constrictions created by improvising on chord changes). Coleman's intention was to eliminate chord progressions and move to free improvisation generally built on tonal centers, although, as his own ideas evolved, even the need for tonal centers became less important (see Litweiler 1992). Don Cherry believed that Monk's music was especially open to harmolodic explorations "because his melodies are where you can hear the harmonies in the melody, and you can improvise Monk's tunes from the melody or from the chords" (quoted in Sidran 1995, 409). Lacy's collaboration with Cherry, Brown, and Higgins moves even closer to free improvisation built on tonal centers than his previous album, and yet both Lacy and Cherry seem even more committed to building their solos on the melody. As Lacy explained at the time of this recording, playing with Monk had taught him "to try to get more with the melody, to have what I play relate to the melody, and to get inside the song" (quoted in Hentoff 1961). Indeed, the theme is so important that on

"Evidence," Lacy plays the role of Monk's piano by restating the theme under Cherry's solo.

In trombonist Roswell Rudd, who was also a renegade from the Dixieland revival scene and a rising figure in the avant-garde, Lacy met a Monk soul mate—not to mention an astounding improviser and brilliant arranger (Danson 1982; Heckman 1964; McRae 1975). In about 1961, the two formed a band that was to function as a kind of school for them to study Monk's music. Joined by drummer Dennis Charles, with whom Lacy had played in Cecil Taylor's band, and a succession of different bass players, the group spent the next three years playing on and off together and getting gigs where possible—restaurants, coffee houses, and so on. Unfortunately, the group never went into the studio; only one amateur recording exists from a 1963 gig at the Phase Two Coffee House in New York ("Liner Notes" 1994). By the time the recording was made, however, the group was regularly playing all of Monk's recorded compositions—fifty-three in all (see "Liner Notes" 1994; "Steve Lacy" 1963; Lacy 1995). (Monk's own group rarely had more than twenty songs in its book at one time.) As Lacy recalls, getting to this point required hard work and patience: "We played the tunes very strictly, especially at first, when we didn't dare deviate at all. We improvised right on the structure whether there were five bars or seven bars or funny keys or whatever. . . . The thing is, though, it was a nightly experience—we wanted to play on those tunes every night. So, after a while, if you do things every night you start to take liberties, and the liberty was what interested us—a liberty through this discipline" (quoted in "Liner Notes" 1994).

Liberty is precisely what they achieved. They continued in the Monkish tradition of using elements of the theme as the essential building blocks but found new ways to tear apart the melody and rebuild it—exemplified in their interpretation of Monk's ballad "Pannonica." Lacy and Rudd offer two different interpretations of the theme simultaneously, reduced to short staccato phrases and played over a steady march tempo. By the fourth bar, "Pannonica" is hardly recognizable—they strip it to its bare essence just as Monk had distilled "Just You, Just Me" to create "Evidence." They stretch Monk's music beyond anything he had ever done, using more variable rhythms, abandoning functional harmony, and extending Coleman's concept of harmolodics to achieve a level of group improvisation in which no one seems to be in the background.

A wonderful example of this transformation process can be heard in their version of "Brilliant Corners." The first chorus is played as a slow dirge and then in double time on the second chorus. The melodic and harmonic movement is shaped like a circle, except for the bridge, which is more of a descending movement. In the Lacy-Rudd recorded version,

the bass of Henry Grimes becomes the harmonic foundation as he essentially keeps restating the melody, playing around with it, turning it inside out, tearing it apart, and reconstructing it. Lacy and Rudd respond by playing circles around his circular statement of the theme, following the bass notes as a roving tonal center—sometimes hovering over it, sometimes landing directly on it. On the choruses that are doubled in tempo, Charles and Grimes play a *clave* rhythm that gives the song a funkier, Caribbean feel while Rudd's trombone explores a range of harmonic and rhythmic patterns, from Dixieland-style phrases to short staccato lines that seem to puncture the "circle." Moreover, all four musicians continually vary dynamics; they shift easily from forte to pianissimo, shouting and whispering when the mood of the song requires it.

The addition of bassist Henry Grimes to the group contributed enormously to the success of these recordings. A rising giant in the avant-garde, Grimes had played with a range of people, from Arnett Cobb and Anita O'Day to Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, and Albert Ayler. His style fit perfectly with Lacy and Rudd's vision because they could not use a bass player who just swung steadily in $\frac{4}{4}$ time—the kind of bass player Monk wanted by the early 1960s. With no piano and a conception rooted in group improvisation, they required a bass player who could change up rhythms and tempos easily, play melodically, and provide a strong harmonic foundation when needed. At the time, there were few bassists with those capabilities who were sympathetic to the new music; the most notable examples were Mingus, Charlie Haden, Reggie Workman, Buell Neidlinger, David Izenzon, and Ronnie Boykins. Indeed, their biggest problem was finding imaginative bass players who could do all of these things and stick to the project of learning Monk's music. They eventually went through seventeen bass players and several rewritings of the bass book ("Steve Lacy" 1963, 14).

Although the Lacy-Rudd quartet has not been adequately documented, the group succeeded in finding unexplored areas to which Monk's music pointed where few—Monk included—had gone. "What we wanted to do," Lacy explained, "was to eliminate the compromises Monk had had to make recording [his compositions], due to the lack of sufficient preparation of his sidemen. It seemed there wasn't a strong enough relationship between the improvisations and the piece itself. This was true not only in Monk records but in most of the jazz we'd heard" (15). In other words, Lacy believed that Monk's sidemen did not explore all the improvisational possibilities embedded in his music because they tended to be stuck in the bop mode of soloing on the chord changes. Lacy and Rudd recognized the possibilities of freedom in Monk's music. "Now we're at a point," Lacy added, "where our flexibility is at least equal to

that of any of the so-called free players. However, our freedom has been won through a long—and some people would say, arbitrary—discipline. It's also been an extremely enjoyable one" (15).

Not all of the avant-garde artists developed Monk's ideas by working through his repertoire. Eric Dolphy is rarely associated with Monk; they never played together, and Dolphy recorded only four different Monk compositions—and only one of those as a leader.⁹ Yet, in some ways, Dolphy worked more to advance Monk's harmonic ideas than his saxophonist contemporaries who attributed much of their music development to Monk—namely, Rollins and Coltrane. Flutist/composer James Newton was one of the few observers to make the Dolphy-Monk connection. In the liner notes to Dolphy's *Other Aspects* (previously unreleased recordings discovered posthumously), Newton (1987) observed: "One point that is not dealt with too often is the influence of Thelonius [*sic*] Monk on Dolphy. Monk's incredibly advanced timbral knowledge would lead him to use the full range of the piano. As with Ellington, it is not uncommon for a Monk phrase to cover three or four octaves. Each register's color has a strong tie to what is trying to be accomplished rhythmically and emotionally. The same qualities that are often inadequately called 'angular' can be found in Eric's playing." Careful listening to Dolphy's improvisations on bass clarinet and alto saxophone bear this out. Like Monk, Dolphy often employed whole-tone scales, and his tendency to explore the upper structures of chords (ninths, elevenths, thirteenth) created minor- and major-second intervals that became Monk's trademark. Dolphy's composition "Hat and Beard" from his *Out to Lunch* album suggests that he listened to Monk's music and developed a clear conception of what lay at its core. Recorded in February 1964 with Dolphy (bass clarinet), Freddie Hubbard (trumpet), Bobby Hutcherson (vibes), Richard Davis (bass), and Tony Williams (drums), "Hat and Beard" was not the sort of piece that Monk would have embraced, despite the many compositional and harmonic affinities with his music. Although composed in the "free jazz" idiom with obvious shifts in time signature (it begins in $\frac{5}{4}$, moves to $\frac{3}{4}$, and eventually evolves into a more free-form rhythm), the theme of "Hat and Beard" works somewhat like Monk's "Friday the Thirteenth" in that the bass counterpoint is played so forcefully against the melody that it emerges as the principal motive. And

9. Altogether, Dolphy recorded a version of "Round Midnight" with John Lewis's Orchestra (September 1960) and another version with George Russell (May 1961); "Blue Monk" with Abbey Lincoln (February 1961); and "Epistrophe" as a leader with Misha Mengelberg, Jacques Schols, and Han Bennink (June 1964). He was also a featured soloist on Gunther Schuller's "Variants on a Theme of Thelonious Monk (Criss Cross)" (Simosko and Tepperman 1996, 108, 110–111, 112, 126).

while the tonal center fades in and out during improvisations (supported by Davis's strong bass playing), the theme outlines a G7(#5)-E♭7(b5) vamp, giving the song's opening statement a whole-tone feel.

"Hat and Beard" reveals Dolphy's conception of the essential elements in Monk's music, and at the same time, it tells us how he—together with Hubbard, Hutcherson, Davis, and Williams—could use these elements to find openings for freer improvisations. Another example to consider in this light is Dolphy's version of "Epistrophe," recorded in the Netherlands in 1964 with pianist Misha Mengelberg (released on Dolphy's *Last Date*). What makes this recording so fascinating is that the Ukrainian-born Mengelberg, one of Holland's leading avant-garde musicians/composers, plays so much like Monk that one could almost imagine what a Dolphy/Monk collaboration might sound like. Dolphy develops an extremely chromatic solo on bass clarinet, which works well with the piece's chromatic melody. Meanwhile, Mengelberg's comping is somewhat Monkian—sparse clusters, dissonant block chords, tremolos, insistent restatements of the melody. Dolphy moves further outside when he returns to trade eighths with the drummer and then turns the melody "inside out" by coming in on the first beat of the measure rather than the second. (After a couple of choruses, it all works itself out, although it is not clear if Dolphy's early entry was intentional or not.) Mengelberg sounds even more Monkish on his original composition titled "Hypochristmutreefuzz." Although the piece was not intended as a Monk tribute, he and Dolphy play it as if it were. Built on a descending chromatic chord progression similar to Monk's "Thelonious," Mengelberg's solo and comping are full of whole-tone phrases, tritone and minor-ninth intervals, and a storehouse of quotes lifted directly from Monk.

Monk's musical spirit appears in another of Dolphy's collaborations, this one with pianist Andrew Hill. Hill grew up in Chicago and found his way to the avant-garde via various R&B and bebop bands in the 1950s. By the early 1960s, he was drawn to experimental music; moving away from chord progressions, he began composing works based on a single tonal center around which musicians could remain or leave. Hill drew much of his inspiration, especially as a composer, from Monk. He told writer A. B. Spellman (1963), "Monk's like Ravel and Debussy to me, in that he's put a lot of personality into his playing, and no matter what the technical contributions of Monk's music are, it is the personality of the music which makes it, finally." Monk's personality is quite apparent in Hill's "McNeil Island," recorded on *Black Fire*, his first album as a leader. Accompanied by Joe Henderson (tenor saxophone), Richard Davis (bass), and Roy Haynes (drums), Hill constructs a ballad akin to "Monk's

Mood" and "Crepuscle with Nellie." Henderson and Hill play the melody in unison in a slow, halting rubato tempo, over Davis's arco bass. Hill fills in the space with bass counterpoint, arpeggios, and truncated runs, occasionally landing on an isolated seventh or ninth in the bass—"orchestral" strategies characteristic of Monk. And like Monk, all of Hill's "fills" seem to have been carefully composed.

Dolph's collaboration with Hill took place about six months after "McNeil Island" was recorded and one month after Dolphy recorded "Hat and Beard" (and, incidentally, one month after Monk's *Time* profile). Hill led the date but used the rhythm section with which Dolphy had worked the previous month—namely, Richard Davis on bass and Tony Williams on drums. Besides Dolphy, he hired Joe Henderson again on tenor saxophone and Kenny Dorham, who replaced Hubbard on trumpet. Thus, only weeks after making "Hat and Beard," some of the same band members found themselves exploring one of Hill's most Monk-influenced pieces, "New Monastery," which apparently got its name after Frank Wolff of Blue Note remarked that the tune reminded him of "something Thelonious Monk wrote long ago" (quoted in Hentoff 1964b). "New Monastery" does contain hints of Monk's "Locomotive" and "Played Twice." The horns simultaneously play slightly different countermelodies over Hill's simple motive, which shifts back and forth between intervals of a perfect fourth and augmented fourth (tritone). Hill's two-note phrase is constantly displaced, rhythmically and harmonically, for it floats up and down the keyboard along with the tonal center. The work's structure is unusual: twenty-two bars consisting of two A sections of eleven bars each. Like Monk, Hill keeps returning to the theme when he's comping and soloing. And although the song lacks a fixed tonal center, the augmented fourth emphasizes whole-tone harmony (particularly on Dolphy's solos) while the perfect fourth creates a sense of suspension. Although "New Monastery" contains many elements of Monk's sound and compositional techniques, there is no mistaking Hill's tune for the music to which he is playing tribute. Unlike "McNeil Island," Hill does not try to reproduce Monk's sound here. It does swing in places, but the goal of this tune and all of Hill's compositions on *Point of Departure* is freedom. Indeed, because Davis and Williams are not concerned with sustaining the pulse or keeping steady tempos, rhythmically they bring the same energy and freedom they had brought to Dolphy's *Out to Lunch* session that produced "Hat and Beard." Hill recalled, "I was certainly freer rhythmically. And the way I set up the tunes, it was more possible for the musicians to get away from chord patterns and to work around tonal centers. So harmonically too, the set is freer" (quoted in Hentoff 1964a). Thus, like so many artists of the 1960s

avant-garde, Hill and Dolphy were quite willing to jettison traditional notions of swing and functional harmony in the name of freedom.

Coda

During one of his infamous “blindfold tests,” Leonard Feather played for Monk “Flight 19” from Andrew Hill’s *Point of Departure* (Feather 1966). The recording apparently bored Monk; he looked out the window, complimented Feather on his stereo system, and made no comment whatsoever about Hill’s playing or the song. Monk’s reaction to Hill, which took place in 1966, is telling. As much as I would like to imagine Monk recording with Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, Eric Dolphy, Archie Shepp, Henry Grimes, Buell Neidlinger, Steve Lacy, and Roswell Rudd in a small combo, Monk had no such interest in collaborating with the avant-garde. His opposition to the new music was primarily aesthetic. As I have attempted to demonstrate, neither professional jealousy, fame, nor what has wrongly been identified as Monk’s conservatism or apolitical attitudes adequately explains why those collaborations never happened (although the latter certainly shaped the ways in which critics and fans responded to him in the early 1960s). Certainly, Columbia’s interest in making Monk as salable as possible served as a much greater fetter for such collaborations.

To find our answers, we have to understand and acknowledge Monk’s deep investment in his musical conception. In some ways, Monk can be seen as an architect who built a unique structure to house his music. The jazz avant-garde was interested in demolishing all houses, letting the music sprawl out into the expanse. Yet it was through his Old Monastery, if you will—equipped with so many windows and doors in unusual places—that this new generation of artists could *see* the expanse, could imagine the emancipation of the music from functional harmonies, standard song forms and time signatures, and Western notions of musicality. The irony is not that they found avenues to freedom in such highly structured music or that Monk could not see all the possibilities his music had to offer. Rather, it is that the avant-garde helped create Monk’s audience, contributing indirectly to his canonization and rise to fame, yet they could hardly make a living playing his music—let alone their own.

This essay would never have been published had it not been for the insights and suggestions of T. J. Anderson, Dwight Andrews, Anthony Davis, Ann Douglas, Maxine Gordon, Farah Jasmine Griffin, James Hall, George Lipsitz, Eric Porter, Ron Radano, Guthrie Ramsey, Paula Giddings, Robert G. O’Meally, Franklin Rosemont, Mark Tucker, Michael Washington, Randy Weston, Arthur Woods, the entire Columbia Jazz Study Group, and the participants in the University of North Carolina symposium on Monk.

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