

Columbia University
English and Comparative Literature
Fall 2001

SEMINAR: THE WORLD OF THELONIOUS MONK

INSTRUCOR: Robin D. G. Kelley

This course explores 20th century cultural history through the music, ideas, and image of pianist/composer Thelonious Monk. We are particularly interested in how Monk has been “constructed” by critics, fans, writers, visual artists, the music industry, the media, etc., and how Monk himself helped shape his public image. After all, Monk became a major icon for Beat generation poets, surrealist artists, and emerging avant garde jazz musicians, despite the fact that he neither identified nor engaged these creative artists directly. He was constantly reinvented by critics and fans, and many read deeply into his actions--from his “dancing” to the hats he wore. It is not enough to demythologize the man; we must also understand why the myths have been and remain so prevalent and what impact they have had on the postwar art scene.

We are equally interested in studying and understanding his musical ideas. His musical vision was both ahead of its time and deeply rooted in tradition, spanning the entire history of the music from sacred music of the black church to the “stride” masters of James P. Johnson and Willie “the Lion” Smith to the tonal freedom and kinetics of the “avant garde.” And he shares with Edward “Duke” Ellington the distinction of being considered one of the century’s greatest American composers. He helped usher in the bebop revolution, for example, and yet he also charted a new course for modern music few were willing to follow. In an era when fast, dense, virtuosic solos were the order of the day, Monk was famous for his use of space and silence. In addition to his unique phrasing and economy of notes, Monk would “lay out” pretty regularly, enabling his sidemen to experiment free of the piano’s fixed pitches. As a composer, Monk was less interested in writing new melodic lines over popular chord progressions than in creating a whole new architecture for his music, one in which harmony and rhythm melded seamlessly with the melody. “Everything I play is different,” Monk once explained, “different melody, different harmony, different structure. Each piece is different from the other. . . . [W]hen the song tells a story, when it gets a certain sound, then it’s through . . . completed.” Thus we will pay attention to his approach to composition, harmony, time and space (rhythm), ensemble work, and examine the whole question of piano “technique.” Although background in music is not required, some of you might want to read John F. Szwed, *Jazz 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Jazz* (New York: Hyperion, 2000) and perhaps basic music theory texts.

Sifting through a broad range of cultural materials, we examine how Monk has been “read” through his music, his body, his sartorial style, representations of black masculinity, and the prism of modernism. These “readings” of Monk mirror some of the social, cultural, and political upheavals of the postwar period. We will also examine the critical responses to Monk’s work and how it changes over time, asking whether or not the shifts in criticism to his

music had more to do with a changing political climate than with changes in his work. By paying attention to the music, we hope to reveal something of how Monk's presence affected the formation of jazz as a genre/tradition, just as his persona contributed greatly to the phenomenology of jazz experience as a whole.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to:

- Complete all the core readings.
- Lead at least one class discussion (this assignment will be determined by how many students enroll in the class).
- Maintain a weekly journal of your thoughts, reactions to the readings and the music we are listening to in and outside of class.
- A 10-15 page analysis/history of either: 1) a particular Monk composition you find deserving of analysis; 2) a literary, visual, or musical work by another artist about/for Monk, or that reflects a creative effort to incorporate Monk's ideas into a work of art. The purpose of this assignment is to engage Monk's work and/or influence in greater depth. Obviously, there is a lot of leeway here and if you come up with a project that doesn't easily fall within these two broad categories, we can talk about it. However, whatever you choose to do you must 1) get approval from me; 2) focus on Thelonious Monk.

I assume you will attend every class meeting. If it is absolutely impossible to attend class one day, I expect a 3-5 page discussion paper of the week's core readings handed in to me the week following your absence.

Your contribution to class discussion as well as your papers should be constructive, substantive, and engaging. I am less impressed with scathing, vicious attacks than I am with thoughtful essays that pay more attention to the historical subjects than the author, and attempt to place a particular work in context.

REQUIRED READING/HEARING/VIEWING

Books

Rob van der Bliek, ed., *The Thelonious Monk Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Mark Tucker, ed., "Special Issue on Thelonious Monk," *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1999)

Laurent de Wilde,.. *Monk* (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1997)

Thomas Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk: His Life and Music* (Berkeley Hills, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 1997)

Robert O'Meally, ed. *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)

Course Packet

1. "Thelonious Assault" from Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones*
2. Lawrence O. Koch, "Thelonious Monk: compositional techniques." *Annual Review of Jazz Studies*, 2 (1983): 67-80.
3. Steven Somers, "The Rhythm of Thelonious Monk," *Caliban* 4 (1988): 44-49.
4. Mark S. Haywood, " Rhythmic readings in Thelonious Monk" *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 7, (1994-1995): 25-45.
5. Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of American Musicological Society* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1995), 396-422.
6. Jack Kerouac, "The Beginning of Bop," *Escapade* [coursepack]
7. Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, [excerpt]
8. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography*, 124-177
9. Frank London Brown, "More Man than Myth, Monk Has Emerged from the Shadows," *Down Beat* 25 (October 30, 1958): 13-16.
10. Valerie Wilmer, "Monk on Monk," from Wilmer, *Jazz people*
11. Collection of Poetry for/about Monk
12. Harry Smallenburg, "Monk, Bop, and a New Poetics," *Caliban* 4 (1988): 36-41.
13. Wanda Coleman, "On Theloniousism," *Caliban* 4 (1988), 67-79.
14. Stephen Richter, "The Beauty of Building, Dwelling, and Monk: Aesthetics, Religion, and the Architectural Qualities of Jazz," *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 259-268.

15. George Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal*, 16, no. 1 (1996): 91-122.
16. O'Meally, "Jazz Albums as Art: Some Reflections," *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997), 39-47.
17. Chan Parker, MyLife in E Flat, [excerpt], 20-57
18. Valerie Wilmer, "It Takes Two People to Confirm the Truth," in *As Serious as Your Life* [excerpt], 191-204.
19. Linda Dahl, "Kool, 1944-1947," from *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 177-193.
20. Frank Kofsky, "If You're Black, Get Back," from *Black Music, White Business* [excerpt], 55-79.

Recordings

Thelonious Monk: Genius of Modern Music: Volume 1 (Blue Note CDP 7 81510 2)

Thelonious Monk plays Duke Ellington (Riverside OJCCD 2531-24-4)

Brilliant Corners (Riverside OJCCD -026-2)

Monk's Music (Riverside OJCCD-084-2)

Underground (Columbia/CBS CK 40785)

Video/Films

Charlotte Zwerin and Bruce Ricker, *Straight, No Chaser: The Film* (1989)

Toby Byron, *Thelonious Monk: American Composer* (1991)

Jazz Video Collection, *Thelonious Monk* [misc. concert performances, 1957-1970]

Shirley Clarke, *The Connection* (1961)

Bert Stern, *Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1959)

Peter Bull, *Lift the Bandstand: Steve Lacy* (1986)

WEEKLY TOPICS

Week 1: Introducing Monk. . . .

“Thelonious Assault” from Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones* [course pack]

de Wilde, *Monk*, 1-13

Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, Preface, Foreword and Beginnings.

Van derBlik, *Thelonious Monk Reader*, 1-11, 71-83, 182-193.

VIDEO: Performance from Jazz Video Collection, *Thelonious Monk* [1957 trio]

Week 2: Inventing Monk/Inventing Bop

de Wilde, *Monk*, 14-30.

Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 30-47.

van der Blik, *Thelonious Monk Reader*, 11-62

O’Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, chapter 25, 26 and 28.

MUSIC: Minton’s recordings and various Blue Note recordings [study *Genius of Modern Music: vol. 1*]

Week 3: Hearing Monk I: Time and Space

Somers, Steven. “The Rhythm of Thelonious Monk,” *Caliban* 4 (1988): 44-49.

Haywood, Mark S. "Rhythmic readings in Thelonious Monk" *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 7, (1994-1995): 25-45.

Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 168-188.

de Wilde, *Monk*, 31-45, 117-70.

van derBlik, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 241-45, 194-202.

O’Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, chapters 2, 3, 5, 6 and 17.

VIDEO: Performances from Jazz Video Collection, *Thelonious Monk*; excerpts from *Straight, No Chaser* and *Thelonious Monk: American Composer*

MUSIC: *Monk's Music* and misc. examples

Week 4: Hearing Monk II: Composition and Sound/Ellington and the Blues

Lawrence O. Koch, "Thelonious Monk: compositional techniques." *Annual Review of Jazz Studies*, 2 (1983): 67-80.

de Wilde, *Monk*, 85-100

Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 122-167.

van derBlik, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 203-223, 246-278.

Mark Tucker, "Mainstreaming Monk: The Ellington Album," *Black Music Research Journal*, 227-244.

O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, chapters 4, 9, 11, Intro to part VI, chapters 30 and 31.

MUSIC: *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington and Brilliant Corners*.

Week 5: Digging Monk: On Beats, Bohemia and the Five Spot [FIRST HOUR]

Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, [coursepack]

LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography*, 124-177 [course pack]

Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness," [coursepack]

Jack Kerouac, "The Beginning of Bop," *Escapade* [coursepack]

Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 48-78.

van derBlik, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 111-112

MUSIC: Will bring examples of Monk/Coltrane at the Five Spot

Writing Monk I: Poets and Novelists at the Altar [SECOND HOUR]

Misc. Poems [course packet]

Harry Smallenburg, "Monk, Bop, and a New Poetics," *Caliban* 4 (1988): 36-41.

Wanda Coleman, "On Theloniousism," *Caliban* 4 (1988), 67-79.

O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, Introduction to Part II and chapters 29, 24 and 35.

Stephen Richter, "The Beauty of Building, Dwelling, and Monk: Aesthetics, Religion, and the Architectural Qualities of Jazz," [coursepack]

MUSIC: Amiri Baraka and Jayne Cortez recorded performances [to be determined]

Week 6: E-Raceing Monk: Thelonious Plays the Politics of the 1960s

Brown, Frank London. "More Man than Myth, Monk Has Emerged from the Shadows," *Down Beat* 25 (October 30, 1958): 13-16.

Ingrid Monson, "Monk Meets SNCC," *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1999), 187-200.

Robin D. G. Kelley, "New Monastery" from *Black Music Research Journal*.

Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 79-88, 188-213.

Valerie Wilmer, "Monk on Monk," from Wilmer, *Jazz people* [excerpt]

van derBlik, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 235-40.

VIDEO: *Lift the Bandstand: Steve Lacy*

MUSIC: *Underground* and will bring examples of Lacy/Rudd/Archie Shepp/Dolphy and others interpreting Monk's music

Week 7: Writing Monk II: The Politics of Jazz Criticism

van der Blik, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 63-70, 84-109, 113-181

O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, chapter 8.

George Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950"

SPECIAL GUEST: Nat Hentoff

Week 8: NO CLASS [Will have screening of Monk films this week, TBA]

Week 9: Seeing Monk/Seeing Jazz

Gabbard, Krin. "Evidence: Monk as Documentary Subject," *Black Music Research Journal*, 207-225.

O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, Intro to Part III and chapters 12-16.

O'Meally, "Jazz Albums as Art: Some Reflections," *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997), 39-47.

VIDEO: *Straight, No Chaser; Thelonious Monk: American Composer; Jazz on Summer's Day* [excerpt] All of these will be shown on a separate day TBA.

Week 10: Monk in Motion: Exploring Dance in Jazz

O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, Intro to Part IV and chapters 18, 19, and 20.

VIDEO: Segments from Thomas DeFrantz, *Monk's Mood: A Performance/Meditation on the Life and Music of Thelonious Monk; Thelonious Monk: American Composer and Straight, No Chaser*.

SPECIAL GUEST: TBA

Week 11: Reproducing Monk: Musical Labor, Patronage and Women's Unwaged Work

de Wilde, *Monk*, 46-62

Chan Parker, *MyLife in E Flat*, [excerpt], 20-57

Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 70-82.

O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, chapter 27.

Valerie Wilmer, "It Takes Two People to Confirm the Truth," in *As Serious as Your Life* [excerpt], 191-204.

Linda Dahl, "Kool, 1944-1947," from *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 177-193.

VIDEO: Segments from *Straight, No Chaser*

Week 12: Selling Monk: Race and the Political Economy of Jazz

de Wilde, *Monk*, 63-84, 101-116, 171-95.

Frank Kofsky, “If You’re Black, Get Back,” from *Black Music, White Business* [excerpt], 55-79.

O’Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, chapter 23

Weel 13: Coda: Monk after Death

de Wilde, *Monk*, 196-214

Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 89-95, 213-223.

MUSIC: Monk and the Giants of Jazz tour; Various examples of tribute albums. . . .

SPECIAL GUEST: T. S. Monk, Jr.