

GABRIEL SOLIS

MONK'S MUSIC

**THELONIOUS MONK
AND JAZZ HISTORY
IN THE MAKING**

**© 2008 UC Regents
Buy this book**

A Biographical Sketch

THELONIOUS SPHERE MONK. It is a name like no other, ripe with allusions, as if ready-made for a man who would be mythologized in his lifetime and beatified after his death.

Much is known of Monk's life. His comings and goings, his business dealings and friendships, and his work and to some extent his play were chronicled in the pages of trade journals, in film, and in biographical writings, like those of any public figure of the twentieth century. Still, there is something about Monk's life and art that resists complete knowledge. As much as we know about the events of his life, there remains at the heart of the story a basic inscrutability. On one level he is "Mysterious Thelonious," as the title of a children's book by Chris Raschka puts it. Even to musicians who knew him well, Monk was always a little enigmatic. Like his music, he was not always predictable, and this made him engaging and occasionally difficult, but always worth spending time with. In addition to being basically inscrutable, Monk doggedly refused to compromise, either personally or artistically. His story also mirrors that of many jazz musicians of his generation: he moved from a small town in the south to the urban north, aspired to social and economic mobility, and was deeply involved with music from many spheres.

Thelonious Sphere Monk was born on October 10, 1917, in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. His birth certificate actually reads "Monk, Thelious, Jr."

(Gourse 1997, 2). His parents, Thelonious (or perhaps Thelious) Monk Sr. and Barbara Batts, were in some ways typical of their generation of African Americans. Thelonious senior was a laborer; Barbara stayed at home but took in such work as she could. When Monk was three, Thelonious senior and Barbara moved the family, including Monk's sister, Marion, and brother, Thomas, to the San Juan Hill neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The Monks were like many African American immigrants from the south to the north, looking for a better life, for opportunities that were not available to them in a small, rural community. Not long after moving to New York, Thelonious senior returned to North Carolina, seeing the kids again only sporadically thereafter on occasional visits to New York (Farrell 1964, 85).

Throughout his childhood Monk was surrounded by music. Until he moved back to North Carolina, Thelonious senior played music in the home regularly (Gourse 1997, 7). What kind of music he played—what repertoire, in what style, and how well—is not altogether clear. Monk remembered his father playing swing-style music on the piano and dabbling on the ukulele. What he played on the uke is hard to say, but it would most likely have included an assortment of pop songs, novelty items, and perhaps blues or fiddle tunes that were the common stock of rural southern music in the early twentieth century. In addition to whatever repertoire Monk became familiar with at home, Monk would have heard a wide variety of music in his neighborhood. San Juan Hill was so named because it was home to many immigrants from the Spanish Caribbean, particularly Cuba and Puerto Rico. In such an environment Monk probably would have heard traditional and popular music from that area as well as opera and light classical music, both of which were quite popular throughout the Caribbean (in this he was more like New Orleanian musicians than many of his compatriots). Finally, Monk lived relatively near a number of great pianists of the stride tradition, and he described having listened to their music often. As he noted later, James P. Johnson was a particular favorite (Gourse 1997, 13).

In addition to all of this relatively informal exposure to music from across a wide spectrum, Monk also had some contact with formal music education. The Monk family did not initially provide for his musical training but did give his sister, Marion, piano lessons as part of the basic education of any young girl with aspirations for upward mobility. She was apparently no great talent, but young Monk stood by the piano and watched her lessons carefully. By age twelve Monk had developed some skill on the instrument,

and the piano teacher suggested to his parents that his talent should be cultivated (Hentoff 1960, 134–35, and 1956, 15; Gourse 1997, 6–7). These lessons would of course have focused on developing technique (fingering, articulation, fluent music reading, and so on), but they would have done so within the framework of the Western classical tradition, thus introducing Monk to the canon of that music.

Monk also distinguished himself in his youth as a scholar and an athlete. His academic accomplishments were enough to earn him a spot at the prestigious Stuyvesant High School. However, Monk was disappointed by the apparently racist policies of the school, which allowed him to attend but ironically did not allow him to participate in the school's music program. At some point Monk's preference for music over other activities pushed him to dedicate himself to playing piano, and in his sophomore year Monk dropped out in order to pursue music full-time.

After leaving school Monk came of age musically in the parallel worlds of sacred and secular black vernacular music making. He had played publicly on occasion by his early teens, for rent parties and as an organist at Union Baptist Church, but he truly became acquainted with the rigors of life as a professional musician working as an accompanist for a barnstorming evangelist from 1935 to 1937 (Gourse 1997, 10–11; Hentoff 1956, 15; Lapham 1964, 73). There is no record of what Monk played for the preacher, but some things can be reasonably surmised. Playing for a preacher on a circuit that would have included diverse African American audiences around the country would have required flexibility in musical interaction, much as would the modern jazz performances Monk engaged in soon after. It would have required sensitivity to the vibe of an audience, and the ability to extend or contract pieces in response to that vibe. It also would have involved mastering the codes of "soulful" playing and required the ability to participate in call-and-response forms seamlessly.

At this time Monk was listening to, and appears to have been profoundly affected by, music from Tin Pan Alley. Later in life Monk recorded many standards, in quartet, trio, and solo piano versions. What is striking is that none of the pop songs he played regularly come from after 1945, and by far the majority of them were first published between 1925 and 1935—that is, during Monk's teens. As Scott DeVaux has argued, Monk's predilection for this repertoire and the remarkably straightforward way he played it, always keeping the melody present or at least very near by, should be seen as an acknowledgment of his fondness for the music of his youth and of the debt he owed it in developing his own particular style (DeVaux 1999a, 170, 183).

The next stage in Monk's career is one of the most enigmatic: it did not follow the trajectory it might have been expected to, and there is very little evidence as to why. Returning to New York after playing in the medicine show, Monk did not become a member of a touring band, and he did not work in any particularly high-profile contexts. He took jobs playing as opportunities presented themselves, playing where and when he could in the New York area. In 1941 he was hired by drummer Kenny Clarke to be the house pianist for Minton's, a club in Harlem famous for its after-hours jam sessions and that would become one of the sites for the development of bebop. Perhaps because of this regular showcase, Monk composed prolifically at this time, penning all of his best-known pieces, including "Round Midnight," "Straight, No Chaser," and "Epistrophy," all of which would quickly become modern jazz standards.

Oddly, unlike his compatriots at Minton's—including, most famously, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker—Monk did not translate his position at the forefront of the new music into recording contracts, tours, and the other trappings of musical fame. Although by the mid-1940s bop was the hip music par excellence, Monk was really not on the radar outside the small world of his fellow musicians. It is hard to be certain how to account for this, but some plausible reasons are related to the way that Monk has been seen since then as an uncompromising individualist and a quintessential outsider. The most compelling reason that Monk might not have found the same fame as others is that he wasn't playing bop. By this time Monk had clearly developed the distinctive, idiosyncratic approach to harmony that he would use for the rest of his life, and this approach had in fact been central to the development of bebop. He did not, however, adopt a melodic approach that was at all similar to that of Parker or Gillespie, opting instead to focus on careful and unusual interpretations and elaborations in his spacious, angular melodic voice. Perhaps most importantly, he did not engage in the kind of virtuoso display that was so key to the music of nearly all of his contemporaries. While many were playing faster and more densely than ever before, playing a game of musical one-upmanship, Monk played fewer and fewer notes, letting the silence speak. Opting out of musical gamesmanship may well have been a sound artistic goal, but it requires audiences to pay close attention and dig deep to hear what makes the music good.

It was during this time that Monk met and married Nellie Smith. She was important to Monk in a number of ways; she often earned the family living when Monk was unable, but perhaps most significantly she supported him emotionally and physically during periods when he was under

psychological strain. The home life that Thelonious and Nellie Monk cultivated was remarkable in that it contradicted cherished stereotypes about jazz musicians. The two were devoted to one another and their two children. Both Thelonious and Nellie were essentially homebodies, more interested in cultivating family life than being “on the scene.” In the end, this disinterest in touring and public life could well have contributed to the difficulty Monk had developing his career.

It was not until 1947 that Monk got a chance to record as a leader, with the Blue Note label. Those recordings, released as singles and on an album under the title *Genius of Modern Music*, were far from ideal, but they still sound bracing today. The fidelity is not great, and Monk’s sidemen are a mixed bag: Art Blakey is not at his most sensitive, and the horn players do not always seem to know quite what to do with Monk’s tunes. Still, there is an excitement and a clarity in Monk’s playing that prefigure his best recordings that would be released later. The recording of “Thelonious,” the fourth track on the original LP release, is exemplary. This version begins with Monk playing the A section—with its repeated one-note melody—solo, as was to become his standard opening. If this were not stark enough, he is then joined by Blakey on the hi-hat. By the time the horns come in (Idrees Sulieman, tp; Danny Quebec West, as; and Billy Smith, ts), we are already deep in a world of sound that is totally Monk. The horns weave a dense counterpoint around the tolling single-note melody, broadcasting a roughness and energy that is enhanced by edgy timbres and a “wide” approach to intonation. The solos are unremarkable until Monk comes in with a little gem. He keeps the single-note melody in sight throughout the A sections, building a brilliant stride accompaniment around it noteworthy for its insistence. Here Monk is most in his own world and absolutely uninvolved with musical fashions of the time.

As brilliant as these recordings sound now, it is hard to imagine audiences embracing them at the time. Most of the singles were released with little or no notice from the jazz press, and those that were reviewed came in for little praise and much criticism. A *Down Beat* review of “Misterioso” and “Humph” from 1949 seems prejudiced from the outset: “Two more sides by the pianist who did *NOT* invent bop, and generally plays bad, but interesting piano.” The reviewer is put off by what he hears as Monk’s technical and creative shortcomings. “Monk fingers around trying to get over the technical inadequacies of his own playing, plus getting lost in one arpeggio cliché variation . . . that takes him fifteen seconds to get out of. . . . This is veritably faking a rather large order and only [Milt] Jackson and John

Simmons' bassing redeem it" (Levin 1949). In 1951, George Hoefer finds equally little to like in a single that has Monk playing the standards "Nice Work If You Can Get It" and "April in Paris." As Chris Sheridan notes, Monk is "damned if he does and damned if he doesn't" (Sheridan 2001, 20). People found Monk's own music hard to understand, but Hoefer is certainly not interested in hearing Monk as an interpreter: "Monk's forte is originality and he doesn't get much of it in these two versions of standard melodies" (Hoefer 1951). *Metronome* published an equally tepid review in 1951. A few years later, in 1953, *Down Beat* finally included a review of Monk that was quite complimentary, though mystifyingly brief. Of a single including Monk's songs "Let's Cool One" and "Skippy," the reviewer says, "Tasty dishes of cucumber and peanut butter, served by a svelte sextet." Aside from noting Monk's bandmates and giving the songs four and three out of five stars, respectively, that is the whole review.

Monk's relationship with Blue Note continued for a few years, into 1952, and his career moved steadily forward, despite major personal and professional troubles. In 1951 Monk was arrested and convicted on narcotics charges. The legal trouble and its aftermath could have been devastating, but Monk persevered, and the event became one of the most important in defining his image for succeeding generations. The arrest was not groundless—Monk was in possession of narcotics, for whatever reason—but the matter was probably treated more severely than it might have been had Monk not been black, defiant, and a jazz musician. Because Monk was uncooperative he spent time in jail for the charges, an experience that was apparently psychologically damaging. Monk, after all, was by no means a hardened underworld figure. Worse than the experience of imprisonment, however, was the loss of his cabaret card, a license to perform in New York City taverns and nightclubs. Whether or not Monk was framed on the narcotics charges, as has been suggested, the punitive withdrawal of his livelihood was clearly unjust, and a glaring example of the ways in which the New York police arbitrarily used the card system to punish and control musicians.

In spite of his inability to perform in Manhattan (the cabaret card regulations did not apply to clubs in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens) and his disinclination to travel, the period from 1952 to 1957 saw the gradual emergence of Monk as a public figure. In 1952 Monk signed with Prestige Records, which was building its reputation for modern jazz. Monk was unhappy at Prestige, despite the opportunity to work with a number of notable colleagues, including Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins. Three years

later, in 1955, Monk's contract with Prestige was bought out by Orrin Keepnews at Riverside Records, at which point began arguably the most fruitful period of Monk's whole career.

Keepnews was an interesting figure, a jazz fan who stepped in at just the right moment and produced a staggering body of recordings. His work with Monk was particularly inspired, leading to many of the most interesting albums in his oeuvre. The first two albums Keepnews produced with Monk were, respectively, an album of standards and an album of Duke Ellington tunes. All of the work was reimagined in Monk's inimitable style, showing Monk as an interpreter of the highest caliber. The idea behind these albums was to give listeners something familiar to hang on to while absorbing Monk's unique approach. Monk was quick to point out in an interview with Ira Gitler some years later that he himself had wanted to do the recordings because they were all songs he liked (Gitler 1957, 20). In any case, the recordings do involve familiar material, but at least as noteworthy is the way they highlight just how distinctive Monk's approach is; there is no mistaking this for Art Tatum or Nat "King" Cole or Teddy Williams or Bud Powell, even though this is a repertoire that any of them might have played. Keepnews continued to present Monk in the best possible light, producing the recording *Monk's Music*, which includes Monk playing with Coleman Hawkins and John Coltrane, respectively, on two versions of "Ruby, My Dear"; recording Monk live with Johnny Griffin and later John Coltrane on tenor; and teaming Monk with composer Hall Overton in order to present Monk's music in a large group format without simply adopting a standard big band orchestration.

In 1957 Monk's fortunes took a turn for the better when, with the help of his friend and sometime patron, the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, he secured the return of his cabaret card (Farrell 1964, 86). His first major public appearance following this was an extended engagement at the Five Spot, a Greenwich Village tavern that was to become a central spot in the hipster culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1959 Monk was arrested on drug charges a second time, again under questionable circumstances, and again he lost his cabaret card. After a time, however, he secured its return with the help of the Baroness de Koenigswarter (Farrell 1964, 87). In 1962 Monk signed with Columbia Records, a major label with the ability to promote him quite broadly. Throughout the 1960s Monk appeared regularly in the United States and abroad, at nightclubs, concert halls, and jazz festivals, with a fairly stable quartet, and in 1964 he became only the third jazz musician to have his portrait on the cover of *Time* magazine, after Duke Ellington and Dave Brubeck.

The 1960s were a period of mixed fortunes for Monk. He played throughout the decade with Charlie Rouse, who had come into the quartet in the late 1950s. His performances were more lucrative, and Monk had the opportunity to play in Europe and Asia for wildly appreciative audiences that seemed finally to have caught up with his musical ideas. Monk's recordings for Columbia benefited from top-of-the-line studios, the sensitive producer Teo Macero, and extensive promotion and distribution networks, but they were not as consistently interesting as his work from the 1940s and 1950s. Monk was no longer composing prolifically, and the few tunes he composed in this period, such as "Stuffy Turkey," are not among his best. This was also a time of deteriorating health for Monk, and he suffered alarming periods of dissociation that became more serious and more frequent over the years (Gourse 1997, 200, 204–6, 225). Tragically, Monk's downturn in mental health was exacerbated by inept care (Gourse 1997, 277–78). That said, throughout the decade Monk and Rouse were able to find compelling material in the tunes they had been playing for years. The 1964 recording made live at the It Club in Los Angeles is among the best of Monk's recordings, and the 1968 recording *Underground*, Monk's last for Columbia, is outstanding.

It is difficult to know anything about the last decade and a half of Monk's life except in vague terms. Monk's contract with Columbia ended in 1968, signaling the beginning of the end of his career. He continued to perform regularly, albeit sporadically, until 1974, and recorded some of his finest trio and solo performances for the Black Lion label in 1971. By the end of 1972, however, he had begun a process of general withdrawal. He moved to the Baroness de Koenigswarter's residence in Weehawken, New Jersey, and by 1975 he had become almost totally reclusive. Monk described himself as simply being tired, and his illness was never satisfactorily diagnosed or treated (Gourse 1997, 289–96; Lacy, personal communication). On February 5, 1982, Monk died from an aneurysm in Weehawken.

Monk died just as his legacy, which the rest of this book examines in detail, was becoming clear. In the early 1980s jazz musicians were becoming more interested in acoustic, post-bop-influenced sounds, after a decade in which the highest-profile music was electric and engaged with rock, soul, and funk. When more bop-influenced music rose to the fore again, it did so with a self-awareness and an explicitly "traditional" sense that it had not had before. Jazz was newly minted as "America's classical music" and dubbed a national treasure by the U.S. Congress. In tandem with a rise in the profile and status of acoustic, post-bop jazz, this period also saw an

upturn in the money to be made playing, recording, and teaching jazz. Given the expanded cultural and economic capital circulating in jazz at the time, this was also a time for increased (or at least increasingly visible) contestation over what sounds were and were not jazz.

Since his death Monk's recordings have continued to sell in significant numbers, and a number of important recordings of his have come to light and been released. At this point virtually everything he recorded in the studio is commercially available, including outtakes and alternate takes from many sessions. In addition, a number of live sessions have been released, most notably the Carnegie Hall tapes of Monk with John Coltrane, which were unearthed from the Library of Congress's collections and released in 2005. These will undoubtedly remain the primary route for both musicians and listeners to become familiar with Monk and his legacy, along with the biographies and films that document his life and work. The purpose of the rest of this book is to look into the ways those documents, as well as the memories and stories of other musicians, have been kept alive as part of the ongoing story of jazz in the years since Monk's death.