

STRAIGHT, NO CHASER

Robin D.G. Kelley. *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times Of An American Original*. Free Press: New York, 2010.

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Some days it can seem that jazz has already entered its antiquarian phase—that it is an art form that has entered the era in which all significant forward development has ceased and the true work is now to record ever more accurately and deeply its origin, development, various sub-movements and heroes. Jazz as a genre has entered a kind of “eternal present.” In this it resembles its near-relation the blues, as well as rock and pop, and most intriguingly for the sake of this argument, classical music. It would seem that there are likely no more innovations to be made. After the dense and atonal harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and electronic contributions of musicians such as Ornette Coleman, the AACM Collective, Cecil Taylor, Andrew Hill, Shannon Jackson, John Zorn, and Bill Frisell among dozens of others, it is difficult to imagine where new directions would emerge from within the realm of what our civilization thinks of and defines as “music.” The most skilled contemporary jazz musicians—Wynton Marsalis being an exemplar—are, in truth, glossing on the innovations of thirty, forty, fifty, even sixty years ago. And since one of the fundamental pillars of jazz is innovation based upon individual creativity, its present state revives an old question: is jazz over?

To even broach such a question is to risk giving offense, or at best to provoke arguments that cannot be resolved, but it helps to clarify some of the challenges faced by a book such as *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. With the exception of the Big Band era, jazz has never enjoyed a mass audience. Since the advent of the bebop phase—spearheaded by Thelonious Monk, among others—jazz has been losing the support of the sort of audiences that were important to its sustainability. Big record companies—now global conglomerates—no longer view jazz as an art worthy of subsidy. They are now more interested in marketing (milking) the catalogs of a few mythic figures—most notably Miles Davis—while keeping, to their credit, other catalogs (such as Monk’s) available on iTunes and other internet sources. The contemporary big names of the jazz world such as Wynton Marsalis, Keith Jarrett, and Brad Mehldau now work from niche labels like Nonesuch or European labels like ECM, and are economically sustained by serious touring.

In this climate, Kelley's book is all the more urgent and timely. Countless biographies have been written about leading jazz musicians and composers like Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie, but Monk, the musician who was arguably the most significant both in his harmonic and melodic innovations and lasting influence, has remained the least chronicled and the least well-known. Jazz is an American art form, invented and refined by Americans, then embraced and celebrated by Europeans, Africans, and the Japanese as a new genre of musical expression and it is crucial that its history be rigorously documented for students and researchers of the future. Given the threatened state of the publishing industry one cannot help but wonder if there will be another big biography of a jazz artist published by a New York house, an important issue, given the resources and marketing power possessed by those companies. If jazz has any hope of remaining at or near the center of American consciousness, these books must be written, and published by the major publishers.



There is not a large archive, compared to that of, say, Duke Ellington and Miles Davis, on Monk. Earlier books in English include *Straight No Chaser: The Life and Genius of Thelonious Monk*, by Leslie Gourse, until now the best biography, and yet an essentially journalistic account that relies upon first-person interviews and secondary research; *Monk*, by Laurent de Wilde, useful to Monk fans and jazz aficionados, but narrowly focused on the music, and perhaps the victim of a breathless translation; *Thelonious Monk: His Life and Music*, by Thomas Fitterling, a serious and well-executed overview that provides a brief biographical essay, a very useful study of what makes Monk's music "Monk," and a thorough discography and video catalog to 1996, the date of publication; *Monk's Music: Thelonious Monk and Jazz History in the Making*, by Gabriel Solis, an insightful take on how reputations are made and lost in jazz, with specific attention to the life and career of Monk; and *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, edited by Rob Van Der Bliek, a valuable survey that collects much of the best writing, journalistic, musicological, and biographical, on Monk to 1996. These books have "held the fort" for Monk scholarship. *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* now advances our understanding of the artist and his context in ways that are essential and unanticipated.

There is perhaps no author better positioned than Robin D.G. Kelley to take on the writing of the definitive Monk biography. Professor of History and American Studies at the University of Southern California, Kelley is a

distinguished and award-winning scholar of the African American working class and black leftist thought and culture, two fields which are particularly useful to the study of Thelonious Monk. (This is not to imply that Monk was a “leftist” or even “progressive” thinker—he most certainly had his own opinions and beliefs, even when they cost him dearly, and for a black person in the middle of the last century to be an independent thinker was necessarily to be classed as subversive). Kelley’s previous books include *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*; *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*; *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During The Great Depression*; and *Yo’ Mama’s DisFunktional!: Fighting The Culture Wars In Urban America*.

Kelley is also a serious amateur pianist with a lifelong obsession with the music of Thelonious Monk: “Three decades ago...my new stepfather, Paul, a professional tenor sax player, had me listen to Monk and Johnny Griffin perform ‘Evidence.’ Soon I memorized everyone’s solo on that record... I became completely obsessed with Monk’s sound, his cling-clang sound of surprise, rich with deafening silences, dissonances, and harmonic ambiguities.” Kelley combines a musician’s understanding with his skill as a cultural historian to produce a landmark among critical biographies. His book supplies the who, what, where, when and how of the subject’s personal and artistic development, the less known facts of his private life, the hard-won triumphs and brutal conflicts of any artist whose chosen form requires participation in a commercial, market-based system. But Kelley does much more: most notably, he contributes to the current project of filling in the details of African-American life and culture in the 20th century. The experiences of the wider Monk family are an exhibit of the successes and tragedies, personal and community-wide, of Great Migration blacks.

Kelley’s study also notes the sometimes surprising connections between various schools and groups of modernist and postmodern musicians, artists and intellectuals in postwar New York, Chicago and the West Coast, exemplified by Monk’s warm, and satisfying partnership with composer and arranger Hall Overton and the hipster “scene” at the Five Spot Café where Monk’s groups, including Coltrane, were the house band for years.

While this is not an authorized biography, the first-time cooperation of the Monk family enables Kelley to take us deep into its subject’s personal and family life. Monk in popular journalism and history is often portrayed as an eccentric loner of genius who emerged fully formed from nowhere. Kelley provides *context*; we see Monk as the member of an extended family, as a child and young man in the neighborhood, we learn about his courtships and private dreams—including his amusing and repeated attempts to

become a pop songwriter in the manner of Harold Arlen or Rodgers and Hammerstein.



Monk's life can be roughly divided into four phases, each of which Kelley relates with exhaustive detail and analysis. He begins with a strategy that seems at first problematic: a detailed discussion of antebellum North Carolina and the remote history of the Monk family, black and white. The reader might ask why any of this matters. But in fact it sets forth the conditions for the production of a singular and durable creativity. Kelley maps the Monks of North Carolina as they emerge from slavery and Reconstruction and their long, grim sequel to create the opportunities that young Thelonious was able to grasp and utilize as an avant-garde musician in New York. (His brother Thomas became one of the city's first black police commanders.)

This first phase of Monk's life can be thought of as coming to a close when he signed with Blue Note Records in 1947 after difficult, sometimes harrowing slog through the brutalities of the music business. An example is the "theft" of credit for Monk's standard "Round Midnight" by bandleader Cootie Williams and lyricist Bernie Hanighen. It was common for leaders to claim songs written by others as a price for playing them, but this case was extreme, both because of the roughness with which Monk was treated and because the song became one of the most famous and successful in the jazz repertory: "Thelonious had nothing to do with these lyrics," Kelley writes, and may not have known they existed. "Hanighen and his estate receive a third of the royalties from every version of 'Round Midnight' produced. And in turn the original composer and his estate receive only a third of the royalties—to this very day." This sort of rapacity, coupled with a grinding schedule of low-paid club gigs and five-and-ten dollar sideman appearances would have deterred almost anyone but Monk.

Monk was more fortunate than many musicians in the bebop world in that he had a family who supported his aspirations and largely allowed him to go his own way. Both his mother, Barbara, who insisted he get an education and bought him his first piano, and his wife, Nellie, who worked long hours to make sure family ends were met while unstintingly supporting Monk's career, made it possible for him to survive the drought of the '40s when he was known as a musician's musician and little else. Monk watched Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, among others, achieve recording contracts and fame with ideas and techniques that he had worked out and shared in the jam sessions and tutorials held at his home while he had

difficulty even recording. The contract with Blue Note would change that, though paradoxically Monk's life would also enter another stretch of difficulty.

The second phase of Monk's life can be thought of as a movement from this initial success to his signing, in 1962, with the largest, most successful record company in the business, Columbia. This is perhaps the most purely enjoyable section of the book. The reader can almost feel the narrative take flight as Monk grows as an artist, builds a family, and sets a course toward enormous artistic distinction. Watching him persevere through the indifference of the music business, the blockheadedness of critics (some of whom would become large boosters when things turned around), and the competitive betrayals of "frenemies" like Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Max Roach (all of whom were much better manipulators of the marketplace) as he composes and records classic after classic, we recognize the archetypal American rags-to-riches story, augmented by fresh streams of biographical information: anecdotes from members of the family, interviews with musical collaborators, neighbors and friends, government records, company archives, and other nonfiction and academic studies of jazz, New York City, African American history, the decades of the '20s, '30s, '40s, and '50s.

Explanations of Monk's idiosyncratic titles are, for the devotee, a small example of Kelly's skill, as are the *histories* of the pieces. Monk was notorious for cryptic and obscure song titles like "Ba-lue Bolivar Ba-lues Are," "Crepuscule With Nellie," "Little Rootie Tootie," and "Rhythm-a-ning." Parsing the title of Monk's first great composition (with drummer Kenny Clarke), "Epistrophy," Kelley shows that these can be more than just whimsy: "The title 'Epistrophy' or 'Epistrophe,' means 'turning about' in Greek, and refers to a literary device in which a word or expression is deliberately repeated at the end of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses. A less common definition appears in the 1929 edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary*: '2. *Music*. A phrase or section repeated at the end of the divisions of a cyclic composition; a refrain.' Combine the literary and the musical and we have a title that beautifully describes the structure of the melody. Constructed out of repeated phrases, the melodic line turns in on itself."

Kelley also gives a thorough account of the dark side of Monk's life at this time, including his struggles with the NYPD and loss of his cabaret card, without which musicians could not perform in any establishment that served alcohol. The true extent of Monk's drug use has never been determined, but he was once arrested and did time for marijuana possession and, in another instance, took the rap for a friend's drug possession. These missteps cost him his ability to work in clubs for long stretches of time. Kelley

covers these issues fairly and with balance, placing them in the context of drug policy at the time and of the popular association of any sort of non-conformity with the “Red Menace.”

The third phase of Monk’s life, from the Columbia signing through a frustrating, perhaps ultimately negative, experience with that company and the concurrent, if ironic, securing of his global fame, exhibits another triumph of Kelley’s craft. It is difficult to comprehend, from our perspective, that Monk’s peak as an artist could have proved such a time of difficulty and frustration. Monk never really found a secure place at Columbia; the company demanded three albums a year, and wanted more compositions from Monk than he was inclined to produce; Monk was often more motivated to re-examine and re-interpret existing material from his nearly one hundred tunes. The Columbia work does not finally stand with his best Riverside and Blue Note recordings; on the other hand, the Columbia publicity department was able to make Monk as well known as his music deserved.

Monk appeared on the cover of the February 28, 1964 issue of *Time*, an article that did more than any other to cement his eccentric reputation. The writer portrayed Monk as addicted to prescription drugs, as child-like and dependent on the care of his wife and his friend Pannonica Koenigswarter. Displeased, Monk was quoted as saying, “That’s a drag picture they’re painting of me,” but he did experience a rise in album sales, as well as more performances, here and abroad.

But something else was also happening. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when Monk began to decline as an artist, and more crucially, when his health began to fail with devastating consequences, but we can now see this in hindsight as a clear fourth phase. This final period can be dated from the late 60s, and particularly marked by Monk’s release from his Columbia contract in 1970. By then he had been in and out of the hospital with untreated bipolar disorder, and may have been self-medicating with cocaine and vitamin B12 injections.

Kelley does not sugarcoat or romanticize the suffering but provides a blow by blow account of the last ten years of Monk’s life, including the final stage when he did not touch a piano and rarely left his room. Some have attributed this decline to the effects of long-term drug use, others to the bipolar disorder, yet others to some sort of undiagnosed dementia. It is a grim ending, one that was common among jazz superstars, the outcome of grinding decades of difficulty, and one can’t help but think that such a decline was the ultimate consequence of those qualities that enabled Monk to create such an original and classical body of work: his unflinching independence, his stubborn and surprising self-confidence, his extraordinarily

high standards for both himself and his collaborators. Sustaining such an uncompromising posture while living a life on the edges of “bourgeois” society must have been an enormous strain, and it is miraculous that Monk survived and thrived as long as he did. Independence was the core value of the Monk clan: both Monk and his wife Nellie regularly told their children, “Be yourself... Don’t bother about what other people say, because you are you. The thing is to just be yourself.” It cost them, but they held to it. To Kelley’s enormous credit, he recreates, in depth, the entire story, glorious and tragic, which will now be available for study and interpretation.

The book is, of course, not perfect. At times the reader is left to suspect that Kelley, even in his honest recounting of the problematic aspects of Monk’s life, is *too* sympathetic with his subject. Too often—both as an African American and as a jazz lover—he editorializes in an “insider” stance that can mar the book. Also, he openly speculates at times, in ways that don’t seem necessary or helpful to his narrative. There might also be an argument that Kelley, if anything, knows too much about the subject and related matters, which can lead to digressions, such as his overly detailed account of the teen-aged Monk’s tour with evangelists. Also (and this is not the writer’s fault), the book could have used more rigorous copyediting, a thing hard to come by in these days of publishing cutbacks and collapsed schedules.

Finally, and most simply, the book’s signal achievement is that it succeeds at demythologizing Monk. Jazz has suffered from the projection of the writer’s (and the audience’s) needs onto the artists. Monk has suffered from this projection—the eccentric artist, the mad genius, the idiot savant—as much as any. Robin D.G. Kelley has given us a view of Monk as an authentic individual from a real family that faced specific economic and social challenges during a particular era in American history. He has gathered and organized much of what *can* be known about Monk. *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* stands as a model of the kind of work that remains to be done in the study of jazz. Work in which jazz is understood as a living art still has much to teach us, lessons that go beyond the history of any individual to the history of the larger society, of ethnic groups and commercial systems. But it remains, most of all, a book about one of the giants of a seminal art form, one which may very well resurrect itself, as art forms tend to do, and become central in the future. With that in mind, what Kelley has achieved comes into focus: All you future Departments of Monk Studies, you have your foundation document.