

Daniel Immerwahr, review of *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*, by Robin D. G. Kelley (New York: The Free Press, 2009)

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The history of jazz is full of colorful figures, but none is more enigmatic or intriguing than the pianist and composer Thelonious Monk. Monk was one of the moderns of the 1940s bebop generation, but his music was more angular, dissonant, and offbeat than theirs. Was he even one of them? It was hard to say. Monk had many students but no school—he was more like a magnetic field, pulling everything ineluctably toward the strange and fractured, than he was a leader of men. In his mannerisms, too, he stood apart. Wildly eccentric and yet profoundly reserved, Monk was nearly impossible for his contemporaries to grasp. Journalists gave up trying, and wrote him off as a nut. But was he? Fans and critics mesmerized by Monk have been waiting a long time for Robin D. G. Kelley's biography, fourteen years in the making. Rather than accepting the standard story of Monk as a mad genius, Kelley has elected to pierce the hard rind of myth that encases his subject with exhaustive research into the quotidian aspects of Monk's life: the long hours practicing, the disappointing paychecks, the choices and challenges of life on the bandstand. In doing so, he has also produced what all will recognize to be the definitive biography of jazz's most elusive titan.

The first shock that comes in this unvarnished account of Monk's life is the realization that, for much of his career, Monk was not a major figure in the jazz world. His compositions were performed and appreciated but he spent the 1940s and most of the 1950s—Monk's wife Nellie called these the “un'-years”—scrounging. While his contemporaries Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker found fame, he struggled to find work. If bebop had a house pianist, it was not Monk but Bud Powell, Monk's junior and his one-time protégé. One's sense of jazz chronology is shaken by Kelley's revelation that Charlie Parker had been dead for two years before Monk finally managed to earn a steady paycheck as a bandleader. Part of the problem, to be sure, was the drug bust that deprived Monk of his cabaret card for five years and restricted his ability to work. But the real trouble, it seems, was that Monk simply did not have much of an audience. Critics dismissed his music as a gimmick and fans for the most part left it alone. His fellow musicians looked to him as a guru but, Monk's claims that he invented bebop notwithstanding, their music sounded distinctly different from his and they often passed him over when looking for collaborators.

If Monk toiled in obscurity, though, he was no less fruitful for it. The fact is that nearly all of his compositions were written before he began regularly performing with his own band. “Epistrophy,” “52nd Street Theme,” “Round Midnight,” and “Well You Needn't,” some of Monk's most enduring tunes, were composed during World War II and “Ruby, My Dear” was copyrighted just two months after Hiroshima. By 1956, Monk had nearly completed his corpus, adding such complex and unforgettable works as “Off Minor” (1946), “In Walked Bud” (1947), “Criss Cross” (1951), and “Blue Monk” (1954). All of this was before Monk's *annus mirabilis*, 1957, when, his cabaret card regained, Monk took up a six-month gig at the Five Spot Café in the East Village with John Coltrane as his tenor. That was also the year when *Brilliant Corners*, arguably Monk's best album, was released and won him his first taste of unanimous critical acclaim.

Monk's residency at the Five Spot lives in legend. Monk was playing wonderfully and Coltrane was reaching maturity, with *Giant Steps* just two years in the

future. But, Kelley argues, more was in the air than Monk's music. The Five Spot was a haven for New York artists; its regulars included Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg, Ted Joans, and Frank O'Hara. They were drawn in by, and demanded, experimental music. Before Monk set foot in the door, the Five Spot had already booked Charles Mingus, Randy Weston, and, most tellingly, the quintessential free jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, who had a month-long engagement in the winter of 1956. Monk, in other words, did not climb to fame by reaping the long-due appreciation of bebop fans sown in decades past. He got famous because he inherited an audience from the avant-garde.

As Monk took over Cecil Taylor's bench, Kelley tells us, aspects of his playing that had previously baffled fans and critics started to make sense to them. His percussive attack, love of dissonance, unusual rhythms, and sing-song melodies made him seem to his new audience like a sort of primitive or alien, unschooled and unbowed. Nothing, it turns out, could have been further from the truth; Kelley documents at length Monk's deep familiarity with stride piano, gospel hymns, and even the classical repertoire. But Monk's quirks, variants though they were on longstanding traditions, were nevertheless enough to secure his canonization at the hands of the Beats and their fellow-travelers. Wittingly or not, Monk played the part of countercultural hero perfectly, augmenting his stage routine in 1957 with spirited dances and, starting in 1959, performing in a variety of much-admired hats ("Hat and Beard" was the title of Eric Dolphy's 1964 tribute to Monk). Monk's utterances could take on the obscure profundity of Zen koans, as could his unpredictable musical silences—laying out for long stretches during his shows, sometimes abruptly walking off stage and leaving even his bandmates uncertain if he would return. Even as he dabbled in the role of the rebel, though, Monk was somewhat mystified by his new following. "I was playing the same stuff twenty years ago, man," Monk complained after *Time* put a painting of him on its cover in 1964, "and nobody was painting any portrait." Monk the musician may have been a man of the 1940s, but Monk the icon was a creature of the long 1960s.

The irony of Monk's success is that, by the time it came, it was too late. He offered few new serious compositions after 1957 and gave his tenor chair, previously occupied by John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins, to the game but not particularly inventive Charlie Rouse. Critics complained, with justification, that Monk was repeating all of his old tunes. Worse, as Monk's untreated bipolar disorder became increasingly difficult to contain, the "mad Monk" stories started to ring true. Although Kelley is eager to paint his subject as a man "very much of the world," that seems a hard case to make for late-period Monk. He disliked rock ("That's not lasting. That is not music."), disparaged the free jazz musicians who admired him, called Miles Davis's fusion experiments "bullshit," and seemed to prefer—I am fairly certain this is not a joke—Peter, Paul, and Mary, for whom he opened in 1964 ("They're musicians, and, what they're doing, that'll last"). Here are Monk's views on politics in 1965, the year of the Voting Rights Act, the Watts Riots, and Operation Rolling Thunder: "I'm not in power. I'm not worrying about politics. . . . Let the statesmen do that. That's their job. They get paid for it." For Kelley, a historian who made his career perceiving forms of African-American resistance in times and places where blacks have been supposed to be politically inert, Monk's inability to see the civil rights movement when it was exploding in his face must have been baffling, to say the least.

At moments like this, one feels Monk slipping away from Kelley, who labors so hard to bring his subject to earth. It is disturbingly common in jazz criti-

cism for writers to regard black artists as naïfs, possessing natural gifts rather than the mastery that comes from intellect and hard work. Correcting subtle racism of this sort has been a major project of Kelley and his coterie, with Farah Jasmine Griffin's biography of Billie Holliday being the classic example. But, in *Monk*, Kelley may have met his match. One can see the Monk he wants to write about: the witty, hard-working, erudite Monk of the lean years, the Monk who would make a gag of playing Chopin at breakneck speed (Kelley introduces the book with this anecdote). Kelley is at his best when puncturing the myth of Monk as a childlike intuitive genius, and exposing the condescension behind it. But Kelley is also honest enough to allow us to glimpse the other Monk: the glassy-eyed, Thorazine-addled innocent whose humor is not always intentional and whose stature as an existentialist prophet may be inadvertent as well. The book ends hauntingly with Monk, no longer playing, living out his days in the house of Pannonica de Koenigswarter, the baroness in whose apartment Charlie Parker died. Every day, Monk dresses himself up, only to watch game shows or lie on his bed. "Damn, Monk, you looking pretty sharp lying there. Where you going?" asks Leroy Williams. "Man," Monk replies, "I'm not going anywhere." The question remains whether Monk, standing still, nevertheless got where he needed to go.