

# Thelonious Monk's Pianism

BENJAMIN GIVAN

Scores of jazz artists have crafted their own distinctive instrumental techniques, whether by choice or because they lacked access to standardized instruction, but few have played as unconventionally as the pianist Thelonious Monk (1917–82). Flagrantly flouting both classical and jazz norms, Monk was often accused of ineptitude, particularly during his early career.<sup>1</sup> Yet today he has become one of jazz's iconic figures, revered as a master composer and often regarded, in the popular imagination, as the archetypal nonconformist intellectual and modernist artist. This is no paradox. On the contrary, Monk's *sui generis* pianism helped to cement all these facets of his public persona.

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If some of the musicians, listeners, and writers who heard Monk over the years dismissed him as incompetent, others countered that he was fully capable of playing conventionally but chose not to, and still others judged his pianism favorably by either its own self-defined standards or the larger jazz community's. The most widely held view among the pianist's devotees, especially during the peak period of his career in the late 1950s and 60s but still persisting in some quarters, is grounded in modernist aesthetics. It casts his instrumental technique as subordinate, even irrelevant, to his music's abstract structure, and it gives comparatively little serious consideration to the sound he elicited from

<sup>1</sup> Two other leading jazz artists who were accused of technical inadequacy are trumpeter Miles Davis (1926–91) and tenor saxophonist John Coltrane (1926–67). Robert Walser addresses the critical reception of Davis's trumpet technique in "Out of Notes": Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis," in *Jazz among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 165–88. In a well known article, Zita Carno defends Coltrane's technique: "The Style of John Coltrane, Part 1," *The Jazz Review* 2, no. 9 (1959): 18–19; repr. in *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary*, ed. Carl Woideck (New York: Schirmer, 1998), 9–10.

his instrument.<sup>2</sup> This is a regrettable oversight, for if Monk's individual piano sound and keyboard fingerings, as documented in concert films, are examined in note-by-note detail, his playing turns out to be in some fundamental respects more conventional than is often thought.<sup>3</sup>

At first, no one knew quite what to make of Monk. "I'd rather hear him play a 'boston'[-style accompaniment] than any other pianist. His sense of fitness is uncanny," wrote the pianist Herbie Nichols in 1944. "However," Nichols continued, "he seems to be partial to certain limited harmonies. . . . He seems to be in a vise . . . and never shows any sign of being able to extricate himself."<sup>4</sup> Monk's bandleader at the time was the tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, who later recalled being asked "every night—'Why don't you get a piano player?' and 'What's that stuff he's playing?'"<sup>5</sup> A widespread initial impression was that Monk was trying unsuccessfully to play in a conventional professional manner—that his technique was, in effect, "pre-competent."

<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge the only previous overview of the discourse on Monk's instrumental technique appears in David Kahn Feurzeig's "Making the Right Mistakes: James P. Johnson, Thelonious Monk, and the Trickster Aesthetic" (DMA diss., Cornell University, 1997), 45–61. This dissertation, which was kindly brought to my attention by one of this article's anonymous reviewers, explains pitch-based aspects of Monk's playing as manifestations of "tricksterism." While my reading of early discourse on Monk (i.e., from the 1940s and 50s) largely agrees with Feurzeig's, I do not concur with Feurzeig's explicit privileging of pitch over other musical dimensions within his own interpretation of Monk's technique. See Feurzeig, "Making the Right Mistakes," 63.

<sup>3</sup> Precedents for this article's close consideration of the human mechanics of piano technique include Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 33–34, 364–65, 381; Ellie M. Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 99–121; and James M. Baker, "The Keyboard as Basis for Imagery of Pitch Relations," in *Musical Imagery*, ed. Rolf Inge Godøy and Harald Jørgensen (Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2001), 251–69.

<sup>4</sup> Herbie Nichols, "Jazz Milieu," *The Music Dial* 2/2 (1944): 24, quoted in Laurent de Wilde, *Monk*, trans. Jonathan Dickinson (New York: Marlowe, 1997), 95, and in *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, ed. Rob van der Bliek (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2 (hereafter abbreviated *TMR*).

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Feather, "Coleman Hawkins," in *The Jazz Makers*, ed. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 172, quoted in Joe Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 28, in Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 323, and in Thomas Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk: His Life and Music*, trans. Robert Dobbin (Berkeley: Berkeley Hills Books, 1997), 36–37. (This quotation is reworded in Fitterling's book, evidently owing to its having been translated into German and then back into English.) See also George Hoefer, "Hot Box: Thelonious Monk in the '40s," *Down Beat*, October 25, 1962, 43–44, repr. in *TMR*, 17. Pianist Randy Weston remembered hearing Monk with Hawkins and not being able to "understand what Hawkins was doing with this guy who didn't play much." Quoted in Leslie Gourse, *Straight No Chaser: The Life and Genius of Thelonious Monk* (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 37. Weston soon reconsidered, but confirmed that "most pianists in the 1940s didn't like Monk" (*ibid.*, 79). Monk's four recordings with Hawkins, from 1944, can be heard on Coleman Hawkins, *Bean and the Boys* (Prestige PRCD-24124-2).

When Monk's first recordings under his own name were released on Blue Note Records in 1947, they sold poorly. The label's owner, Alfred Lion, reported that white listeners thought the pianist "lacked technique,"<sup>6</sup> and Lion's wife, Lorraine, was greeted with a similar reaction when she tried promoting the discs to Harlem record-store owners.<sup>7</sup> Many journalists agreed. An anonymous *Down Beat* magazine reviewer derided Monk's now-classic Blue Note release "Misterioso" as "veritably faking,"<sup>8</sup> and the respected critic Leonard Feather, while praising Monk's abilities as a composer, disparaged "his lack of technique and continuity."<sup>9</sup>

What was it about Monk's playing that drew such a negative response? Bizarre though his innovative harmonic idiom and melodic conception initially sounded to listeners accustomed to swing-era jazz, it was above all his unusual way of negotiating the keyboard that struck many of them as inept. Standard piano technique, from the classical sphere to the work of early jazz pianists like Earl Hines, Fats Waller, and Art Tatum, has often sought to counter the instrument's inherently percussive, mechanical nature by emphasizing sustained tones, legato phrasing, consistent dynamic attacks, and digital velocity. Monk's approach was in many ways antithetical to these conventions. In the words of bebop scholar Thomas Owens, "Monk's usual piano touch was harsh and percussive, even in ballads. He often attacked the keyboard anew for each note, rather than striving for any semblance of legato. . . . He hit the keys with fingers held flat rather than in a natural curve, and held his free fingers high above the keys. Because his right elbow fanned outward away from his body, he often hit the keys at an angle rather than in parallel. Sometimes he hit a single key with more than one finger, and divided single-line melodies

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Nat Hentoff, "Three Ways of Making It," in *The Jazz Life* (New York: Da Capo, 1975), 196.

<sup>7</sup> Lorraine Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 66. Contrary to Lorraine Gordon's recollection, Hentoff claims that Monk's first records for Blue Note were better received "in Harlem and in the Negro sections of a few other large cities" than they were among white listeners ("Three Ways of Making It," 196).

<sup>8</sup> *Down Beat*, June 17, 1949, 14, repr. in *TMR*, 32. On the debate between advocates of swing and of bebop, see Bernard Gendron, "'Moldy Figs' and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942-1946)," in *Jazz among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 31-56, repr. in idem, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 121-42 (see also 143-57).

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Feather, *Inside Jazz*, orig. publ. as *Inside Be-Bop* (New York: Da Capo, 1977), 10. In a preface to the 1977 reprint edition, Feather moderated his views, reflecting that "the truth about Monk lies halfway between the unjust early derogation and the subsequent cult-like hero worship" (ibid., v [unnumbered]). Well after Monk had established a secure worldwide reputation, there were still occasional naysayers, notably the pianist Lennie Tristano, who, according to saxophonist Lee Konitz, deemed Monk "a lousy piano player." See Ira Gitler, *Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 303.

between the two hands.”<sup>10</sup> How audiences reacted to these unorthodoxies depended not merely on whether they believed Monk’s technique was right or wrong—or, good or bad—but also on what they thought his intentions were.<sup>11</sup> Was he a conventionally skilled musician whose apparent quirkiness was entirely calculated, or an autodidact whose peculiarities were nonetheless rational and internally consistent? Or was he simply aspiring to a traditional instrumental mastery and coming up short? For clues, some looked to his formative years.

Monk never discussed at length how he developed his piano technique. During his youth in San Juan Hill, the predominantly West-Indian neighborhood on Manhattan’s west side where his family moved from North Carolina after World War I, his first formal music lessons were on the trumpet.<sup>12</sup> After a bronchial illness impeded his progress on that instrument, he gravitated toward the piano, which his older sister, Marion, was already studying.<sup>13</sup> “I started playing music . . . when I was 5,” Monk remembered years later, in 1971. “I always wanted to play the piano. A lady gave us a piano. The player-piano kind. I saw how the rolls made the keys move. Very interesting. . . . I learned the chords and fingering on the piano. I figured it out. I jumped from that to reading. But I had to go further than that. I had a little teaching: you have to have some kind of teaching.”<sup>14</sup> Monk learned to read music notation by looking over his sister’s shoulder;<sup>15</sup> when Marion eventually stopped taking lessons, her teacher, a man named Wolfe (who may have been affiliated with the Juilliard School of Music as either a student or an instructor) agreed to teach Thelonious instead.<sup>16</sup>

Monk received his first piano lessons at between eight and twelve years old (sources differ as to his exact age).<sup>17</sup> He remembered being “around

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Owens, *Bebop: The Music and Its Players* (New York: Oxford University press, 1995), 141.

<sup>11</sup> For a thorough discussion of the role of authorial intention in the reception of jazz improvisation, see Janna K. Saslaw, “Far Out: Intentionality and Image Scheme in the Reception of Early Works by Ornette Coleman,” *Current Musicology* 69 (2000): 97–117.

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Wilmer, “Monk on Monk,” *Down Beat*, June 3, 1965, 20, rev. and repr. as “Round about Monk,” in *Jazz People* (New York: Da Capo, 1977), 44.

<sup>13</sup> Marion Monk White discusses her brother’s early musical education in the documentary film *Thelonious Monk: American Composer* (BMG DVD 72333 800065-9).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Pearl Gonzalez, “Monk Talk,” *Down Beat*, October 28, 1971, 12–13, repr. in *TMR*, 188.

<sup>15</sup> Grover Sales, “I Wanted to Make it Better: Monk at the Black Hawk [sic],” *Jazz: A Quarterly of American Music* 5 (1960): 31–41, repr. in *TMR*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 6–7; Peter Keepnews, “Young Monk,” *The Village Voice*, August 8, 1989, 18, 20–21, repr. in *TMR*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis H. Lapham states that Monk began piano lessons at the age of eight. See “Monk: High Priest of Jazz,” *Saturday Evening Post* 237 (April 11, 1964): 73. Most other sources give ages closer to twelve. See P. Keepnews, “Young Monk,” 7, and Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 6.

10 or 11, but what I've learned since I've mostly taught myself."<sup>18</sup> Independence and individual creativity are dominant themes in his own memories of his musical education; he acknowledged having "learned from numerous pianists,"<sup>19</sup> but said he "never had what you might call a major influence."<sup>20</sup> And even though he recalled having gone "through a whole gang of scales like other piano players did,"<sup>21</sup> he tended, on the whole, to characterize his piano playing against convention without ever expressly claiming to have mastered standard keyboard techniques.

At any rate, Monk evidently made rapid progress on the instrument. Within three or four years he was playing professionally around New York City, and by his late teens he had taken a job accompanying a touring evangelist.<sup>22</sup> At a tour stop in Kansas City the pianist Mary Lou Williams happened to be in the audience, and she later gave an oft-quoted account of how he sounded at that early stage. "While Monk was in Kaycee he jammed every night; really used to blow on piano, employing a lot more technique than he does today," she recalled. "Monk plays the way he does now because he got fed up. Whatever people may tell you, I *know* how Monk can play."<sup>23</sup> Williams's underlying implication is that Monk was technically proficient in a conventional sense, such that his idiosyncrasies were purely a matter of individual choice. If so, his mature pianism, rather than pre-competent, might be regarded as a calculated, "post-competent" revision of standard practice.<sup>24</sup>

Actually, Monk's earliest surviving recordings do not necessarily corroborate Williams's account. In 1941, while employed as the house pianist at Minton's, the Harlem nightclub where early beboppers congregated, Monk was recorded informally several times by Jerry Newman, a

<sup>18</sup> Nat Hentoff, "Just Call Him Thelonious," *Down Beat*, July 25, 1956, 15–16, repr. in *TMR*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Sales, "I Wanted to Make It Better," 104. Monk's younger brother, Thomas, remembered that, in general, "if somebody would try to make him do something, he would automatically rebel against it. He had his own ideas about things, and once his mind was made up about something nobody could change it" (quoted in P. Keepnews, "Young Monk," 8).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Hentoff, "Just Call Him Thelonious," in *TMR*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Keepnews, "Young Monk," 9; Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Max Jones, "Then Came Zombie Music," *Melody Maker*, May 8, 1954, 11, reprinted in *TMR*, 12. Other sources re-quoting this anecdote include *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, ed. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff (New York: Dover, 1966), 311; Gunther Schuller, "Thelonious Monk," in *Jazz Panorama: From the Pages of The Jazz Review*, ed. Martin T. Williams (New York: Da Capo, 1979), 223; Dan Morgenstern, "An Evening With Monk," in *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now*, ed. Robert Gottlieb (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 608; Bob Doerschuk, "The Monk Story," *Keyboard* 8, no. 7 (1982): 12; and Keepnews, "Young Monk," 10.

<sup>24</sup> The singer Billy Eckstine likewise remembered that during the 1940s, "Monk . . . played ten times as much as he does now. I think he has got a little weird in his music today. But I tell you, Monk could play" (quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 352).

Columbia University student who brought a portable disc recorder to the venue. Unfortunately Newman did not always meticulously document the personnel on his recordings, so when the discs were later released commercially they gave rise to almost as much confusion about Monk's playing as clarification.<sup>25</sup> On some tracks Monk is unmistakably present, playing much as he did in later years.<sup>26</sup> On others, particularly those from a jam session featuring the guitarist Charlie Christian, a comparatively conventional, fluid piano technique can be heard, which certain writers have cited as proof of Monk's orthodox proficiency.<sup>27</sup> There is, however, a significant likelihood that in some cases the pianist is actually Kenny Kersey, another regular at Minton's around the same time.<sup>28</sup>

The most strikingly counterintuitive eyewitness accounts of Monk's early playing liken it to that of the quintessential jazz keyboard virtuoso, Art Tatum (1909–56). According to pianist Billy Taylor, in 1940 Monk “was playing much more like Art than what he later became. . . . I was accustomed to hearing him play tenths and other things—three-fingered runs like Tatum. I mean he didn't phrase it like Tatum, but you could tell that was the influence. And the touch was so different.”<sup>29</sup> The musical devices Taylor mentions are by no means signature elements of Tatum's style, however; they are pervasive among jazz pianists of the era. And though it is certainly likely that Monk, too, used them early in his career, this does not in itself mean that his playing subsequently changed, for he continued to use three-fingered runs in later years and, when performing solo, also favored the “oompah” bass figures favored by Tatum and the classic Harlem stride pianists.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> CD releases of the Minton's recordings include, *Thelonious Monk: After Hours at Minton's* (Definitive DRCD 11197), *Hot Lips Page: After Hours in Harlem* (Highnote, HCD 7031), and *Charlie Christian: Live Sessions at Minton's Playhouse* (Jazz Anthology 550012).

<sup>26</sup> Monk's playing at Minton's is discussed in DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 224–26, and idem, “Nice Work if You Can Get It: Thelonious Monk and Popular Song,” in *TMR*, 265–70.

<sup>27</sup> In the late 1950s Gunther Schuller wrote that “for those who still tend to doubt Monk's ability to play technically fluent piano, listening to his Teddy Wilson-like work on the 1941 Minton's Playhouse LP . . . can be a revelation” (“Thelonious Monk,” in *Jazz Panorama*, 223); and Joe Goldberg, several years later, concurred that “the recording made of a jam session with Charlie Christian at Minton's in 1941 proves [that] Monk sounded a good deal like Teddy Wilson. He can be heard, on that recording, blithely making runs that many writers have for years assumed were beyond his technical grasp.” See *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 26, quoted in Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Discussed in Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 98–99.

<sup>29</sup> Gitler, *Swing to Bop*, 103. See also Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 15–16. The trumpeter John Carisi, who also heard Monk perform at Minton's, concurs with Taylor that the pianist replicated Tatum's characteristic figures with a different pianistic approach, but he appraises Monk's playing more negatively and denies that it differed substantially from his later work (Gitler, *Swing to Bop*, 85).

<sup>30</sup> Feurzeig discusses stride-based facets of Monk's playing, comparing it to that of the leading stride pianist James P. Johnson, in “Making the Right Mistakes,” 55–61.

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EXAMPLE 1. "Just a Gigolo." Words and Music by Irving Caesar, Julius Brammer and Leonello Casucci. © 1930 (Renewed) Irving Caesar Corp. and Chappell & Co., Inc. All Rights for Irving Caesar Music Corp. Administered by WB Music Corp. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.

♩ = ca. 69

34:18

Right Hand

Left Hand

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a right-hand and left-hand staff. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked as approximately 69 beats per minute. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 below the notes. The first system starts with a treble clef and a bass clef. The second system begins with a measure number '3'. The third system begins with a measure number '6'. The fourth system begins with a measure number '8'. The right-hand part features a complex melodic line with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes, while the left-hand part provides a steady harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes.



## EXAMPLE 1. (continued)

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system (measures 10-11) features a treble staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a long melodic line, and a bass staff with a constant eighth-note accompaniment. The second system (measures 12-15) shows more complex rhythmic patterns in both hands. The third system (measures 16-17) includes a triplet of eighth notes in the treble and a bass line with a long note. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 below the notes.

Example 1, a transcription from a film of Monk playing “Just a Gigolo,” unaccompanied, illustrates both these effects.<sup>31</sup> (As with most music examples transcribed here, the upper staff contains all the notes that Monk plays using his right hand; the lower staff shows all notes played with his left. This differs from standard piano notation, where the two staves do not necessarily correlate with the right-hand/left-hand distinction.) Wherever Monk’s fingerings are discernible from the film, they are indicated beneath the staff, directly under each notehead.<sup>32</sup> Each finger

<sup>31</sup> This performance can be seen in the documentary film *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser* (Warner Brothers DVD 11896).

<sup>32</sup> Where no finger numbers are shown, Monk’s fingering could not be determined from viewing the film (usually because his hands are off-camera).



is assigned an integer from 1 (thumb) through 5 (pinkie). Where Monk plays chords, the finger numbers are listed vertically, descending from the highest pitch to the lowest. For example, on the downbeat of the first bar in Example 1 he strikes octave A<sub>5</sub>s with his right thumb (1) and pinkie (5), meanwhile playing A<sub>4</sub>, F, and B<sub>4</sub> with his left thumb (1), index finger (2), and pinkie (5) respectively.

Tatum-like devices in “Just a Gigolo” include a stride-bass accompaniment in measures 5–9 and, in the second half of measure 7, a rapid cascading three-fingered pattern consisting of an arpeggiated augmented triad sequenced by descending whole steps. For the arpeggiated pattern, Monk plays the first three consecutive augmented chords with his ring finger, index finger, and thumb; he substitutes his pinkie for the ring finger in the final two iterations. The underlying harmony is a tritone substitution for the supertonic (i.e., F<sub>7</sub> instead of B<sub>7</sub>). Three bars later, having arrived on a tonic harmony (A<sub>7</sub> major-seventh) in measure 10, Monk plays another three-fingered run, this time arpeggiating an added-sixth sonority (A<sub>7</sub>–C–E<sub>6</sub>–F) with a chromatic lower neighbor (B<sub>4</sub>) prefixing the third of the chord. The entire gesture comprises two alternating right-hand trichords, C–A<sub>7</sub>–F and F–E<sub>6</sub>–B<sub>4</sub>, each fingered with the pinkie (5), middle finger (3), and thumb (1).

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Even though Monk’s characteristic mature piano style did not at all resemble Tatum’s, apart from these general features, it was remotely conceivable that the younger musician was equally skilled but deliberately exercised technical restraint in public.<sup>33</sup> In a droll anecdote referencing the overtly adept bebop pianist Bud Powell, pianist Walter Davis, Jr. supposedly remembered an occasion when “Thelonious . . . pushed back the cover on the piano and started to play, sounding just like Bud Powell. . . . All of a sudden, [he] stopped, put the cover down . . . and said, ‘Don’t tell nobody.’”<sup>34</sup> This and other such tales may strain the limits of credulity if understood literally, but their basic underlying thread—that Monk intentionally concealed his true level of technical facility—also appears in less far-fetched accounts.<sup>35</sup> In an intriguing review of one of the pianist’s final public appearances, at the 1975 Newport Jazz Festival in New York, *New Yorker* critic Whitney Balliett wrote that “Monk . . . has worn away, and so has his playing. All the eccentricities have vanished, leaving a straight, modern-sounding chord-based pianist. . . . It was

<sup>33</sup> On Monk and humor, see Gabriel Solis, *Monk’s Music: Thelonious Monk and Jazz History in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 49–56.

<sup>34</sup> Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 29. Gourse does not cite this anecdote’s source, so it may not originate with Davis himself.

<sup>35</sup> Along the same lines, the saxophonist Johnny Griffin, Monk’s occasional sideman during the 1950s and ’60s, claimed to have once heard his bandleader copy Tatum’s playing in private and then declare dismissively, “I’m not interested in playing like that. It’s just an imitation.” See De Wilde, *Monk*, 41.

almost as if Monk was telling us that he had been putting us on all these years and that he had finally tired of the joke.”<sup>36</sup>

Naturally, another possibility was that Monk’s pianism was neither pre-competent nor intentionally post-competent but simply an original approach properly judged either on its own terms or by broader jazz idiomatic norms. Pianist Cecil Taylor takes the latter view, arguing that “when you start talking to the people about . . . just what is it that makes [classical pianist Vladimir] Horowitz’ touch superior, then I don’t know on the basis of what presumption they’re going to talk about Monk’s limited technique. It always comes out to, ‘Well, we’ve got this tradition’ or some shit like that. I have a tradition [too], and my tradition informs me the way that theirs informs them. . . . I don’t have the academies to forward my tradition.”<sup>37</sup>

Taylor, speaking during the 1960s, offers a pointed rejoinder to those who would evaluate Monk’s playing by Eurocentric standards, and his strident tone signals that Monk’s technique was still very much subject to debate at the time. The poet and cultural critic Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), showing uncharacteristic indecision, defends Monk’s playing on various different grounds in articles published around the same time as Taylor’s comments. In one instance he takes an adamant post-competent stance, insisting that “critics who talk about this pianist’s ‘limited technical abilities’ (or are there any left?) should really be read out of the club. Monk can get around to any place on the piano he thinks he needs to be, and for sheer piano-lesson brilliance, he can rattle off arpeggios and brilliant sizzling runs that ought to make even those ‘hundred finger’ pianists take a very long serious look.”<sup>38</sup> In another context, though, Baraka offers a different, subtler argument, stipulating that “by *technical*, I mean more specifically being able to use what important ideas are contained in the residue of history or in the now-swell of living.”<sup>39</sup> Having thus redefined instrumental technique in terms of lived experience and cultural knowledge, he proposes that

<sup>36</sup> Whitney Balliett, *Collected Works: A Journal of Jazz 1954–2000* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 450. Much as Balliett suggests, the pianist Horace Silver recalls that upon first hearing Monk, his “initial reaction was that he was fooling everybody, and that he couldn’t be serious.” Quoted in Alyn Shipton, *Handful of Keys: Conversations with Thirty Jazz Pianists* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 136. Silver soon reconsidered, however. See Ben Sidran, *Talking Jazz: An Oral History*, expanded edition (New York: Da Capo, 1995), 141–42; and Horace Silver, “Thelonious Monk: Tributes from Colleagues,” *Keyboard* 8, no. 7 (1982): 23.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in A. B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1966), 41.

<sup>38</sup> Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], “The Acceptance of Monk,” *Down Beat*, February 27, 1964, 20–22, repr. in *idem*, *Black Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 32, and in *TMR*, 168.

<sup>39</sup> Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Black Music*, 71.

“consciousness . . . of facts, ideas, etc. [is] *the* most important part of technique.”<sup>40</sup>

For Baraka, then, good jazz technique manifests a particular set of socially-embedded ideas—“ideas that can make it easier for this modern jazz player to get at his roots.”<sup>41</sup> His general premise—that music ought to be judged by its intellectual content as opposed to its physical execution—represents the nearest thing to a consensus among Monk’s devotees. Rather than defend the pianist’s instrumental technique by deeming him conventionally proficient, or by appealing to other technical criteria, his advocates have tended to concede his technical shortcomings but to dismiss them as inconsequential.<sup>42</sup> Baraka accordingly contends that:

[T]he ideas that one utilizes *instinctively* . . . determine the degree of profundity any artist reaches. . . . (And it is exactly because someone like Oscar Peterson has instinctive profundity that technique *is* glibness. That he can play the piano rather handily just makes him easier to identify. There is no serious instinct working at all.)

To my mind, *technique* is inseparable from what is finally played as content. A *bad* solo, no matter how “well” it is played is still *bad*.<sup>43</sup>

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Baraka somewhat obfuscates matters by referencing “instinct” without defining it, and his slight of the famously virtuosic Oscar Peterson is rather elliptical—in an apparent contradiction he disparages Peterson for having both “instinctive profundity” and “no serious instinct.” Yet his basic point is plain enough: Peterson’s pianism, contrary to Monk’s, is instrumentally virtuosic but intellectually deficient.

Responding to Baraka’s criticism, Peterson rejects the writer’s redefinition of “technique” without directly answering the more substantive charge leveled at his own music’s intellectual substance. He otherwise basically agrees that ideas are paramount and that a player’s technique, in the ordinary sense of the term, should be judged by how well it serves his or her ideas:

My first impression is that [Baraka] doesn’t play. What he’d realize is that technique *is* separated from playing. Thelonious Monk *is* limited

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>42</sup> Here I take a somewhat different view from Feurzeig, who perceives a “continued defensiveness” about Monk’s technique among the pianist’s advocates even in the 1980s and 90s (“Making the Right Mistakes,” 49–53). While this defensive attitude has certainly never vanished, as Feurzeig demonstrates, I do not regard it as the dominant strain of opinion.

<sup>43</sup> Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Black Music*, 71.

technically. But let's not put Thelonious down. You can say that about me, too. I can think of a whole lot of things that I'm not technically capable of playing. Otherwise, what does the phrase "playing over his head" mean? . . .

Technique is something you use to make your ideas listenable. You learn to play the instrument so you have a musical vocabulary, and you practice to get your technique to the point you need to express yourself, depending on how heavy your ideas are.<sup>44</sup>

Sidestepping the question of how to evaluate musical ideas, Peterson concurs, with slight reservations, that Monk's technique is competent insofar as it suits its musical content: "Monk is a very harmonic player, and that requires a special type of technique. As a linear player, well, I don't think Monk is a linear player."<sup>45</sup> Fundamentally, both Baraka (in the second given opinion) and Peterson appear to believe Monk has technical limitations, but only Peterson states it outright.<sup>46</sup> Baraka evades the point semantically.

That Baraka and Peterson scarcely mention the sound of Monk's playing—so jarring to unaccustomed ears—reveals how firmly they distinguish between music's intellectual and acoustic dimensions. Their view of sounding music as the concrete realization of human ideas, a notion strongly associated with European modernism, is widespread, even among African-American musicians and writers whose only allegiance to European aesthetics, if any, is thoroughly embedded within traditional black vernacular expressive practices (a fusion that has lately been termed "Afro-modernist").<sup>47</sup> Monk himself may have had similar modernist tendencies; he hinted as much while practicing his

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Len Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists* (New York: Da Capo, 1983), 137. The transcript of Lyons's interview with Peterson is terminologically problematic—after quoting Baraka's claim that "Technique is inseparable from what is finally played as content," Lyons immediately continues by asking Peterson, "What's your impression of [Baraka's] idea that technique and content are separate?" On the face of it, Lyons's question appears to misrepresent Baraka's point, probably because he uses the word "technique" in its everyday sense rather than according to Baraka's redefinition.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 138. Peterson's complimentary assessment of Monk's playing was not reciprocated: upon hearing one of Peterson's records during a "Blindfold Test," for *Down Beat* magazine, Monk's initial comment was: "Which is the way to the toilet?" (Leonard Feather, "Blindfold Test: Thelonious Monk," *Down Beat*, April 21, 1966, 39, repr. in *TMR*, 186).

<sup>46</sup> For another jazz pianist's view of the same issue, see Bill Evans's comments in Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists*, 224–25.

<sup>47</sup> On Afro-modernism in jazz, see Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 27–30, 96–130, and Jeffrey Magee, "Kinds of Blue: Miles Davis, Afro-Modernism, and the Blues," *Jazz Perspectives* 1 (2007): 6–9. On Afro-modernism and Monk, see Solis, *Monk's Music*, 31, 49. Though "Afro-modernism" has proved a fruitful explanatory trope in contemporary jazz studies, it should be self-evident that the present article seeks to broaden the current hermeneutic landscape by taking an alternate interpretative perspective.

composition “Round Midnight” during a 1957 recording session, as documented on a rehearsal tape that was eventually released commercially.<sup>48</sup> Dan Morgenstern describes and interprets the relevant sequence as follows: “There is a marvelous moment, early on in the progress of ‘Round Midnight,’ where Monk stops and says: ‘I can’t hear that right . . .’ Not hit; not get. *Hear*. He has to hear himself right, satisfy his mind’s inner ear, bring forth what must be. There are no shortcuts.”<sup>49</sup> In drawing attention to Monk’s inner consciousness, Morgenstern displays a reverence for the realm of musical ideas that was pervasive among mid-century jazz critics. Monk’s case vividly exemplifies this aesthetic ideology. Rather than being impelled by the pianist’s idiosyncrasies to reconsider their preconceptions, modernist critics have redoubled their convictions. Faced with a musician whose physical technique, and its audible effects, are extraordinarily prominent aspects of his artistic identity, these critics have responded reflexively by turning their attention elsewhere—toward his creative intellect and accomplishments as a composer, or, secondarily, his biography and social milieu.<sup>50</sup>

Baraka, Peterson, and Morgenstern may well have had rational political reasons for highlighting the intellectual dimension of Monk’s playing.<sup>51</sup> Consciously or not, their remarks undercut longstanding primitivist stereotypes of black culture as body-oriented.<sup>52</sup> Whether

<sup>48</sup> “Round Midnight (in progress),” *Thelonious Himself* (Riverside, OJCCD-254-2). Many jazz musicians of Monk’s generation saw their art as embodying modernist aesthetic values. See Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 493–94; and Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19, 70.

<sup>49</sup> Dan Morgenstern, *Living With Jazz*, ed. Sheldon Meyer (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 363.

<sup>50</sup> The physical aspects of Monk’s music that have received most attention *qua physical phenomena* are the dances the pianist often performed during his live sets. One of the functions of Monk’s dance routines was to encourage an interactive, creative ensemble environment. For more on Monk’s dancing, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “New Monastery: Monk and the Jazz Avant-Garde,” *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (1999): 155; Baraka, “The Acceptance of Monk,” *TMR*, 169; Martin Williams, “A Night at the Five Spot,” *Down Beat*, February 13, 1964, 22, repr. as “Monk at the Five Spot,” in *Where’s the Melody? A Listener’s Introduction to Jazz* (New York: Pantheon, 1966), 107; Phil Woods, “Thelonious Monk: Tributes from Colleagues,” *Keyboard* 8, no. 7 (1982): 23; and Ben Riley’s and Randy Weston’s comments in the film *Thelonious Monk: American Composer*.

<sup>51</sup> Monk himself reportedly used the word “‘thinking’ . . . a lot in talking about his music,” in a 1948 interview. See Orrin Keepnews, “Thelonious: Monk’s Music May Be First Sign of Bebop’s Legitimacy,” *The Record Changer* 7, no. 4 (1948): 5, 20, repr. in idem, *The View from Within* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 112, and in *TMR*, 53. Musicians’ use of this sort of modernist rhetoric cannot always be taken at face value. See Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 201–2.

<sup>52</sup> Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “Theorizing the Body in African-American Music” *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 75–76.

or not this was a motivating factor, many of those who heard Monk play live tended likewise to interpret his performances in psychological terms. Lorraine Gordon (formerly Lion), for instance, draws attention to the cerebral aspects of Monk's pianism rather than its physical or audible features, recalling that the pianist's "fingers would stay above the keys for a split second, and I would wonder when they were coming down. I could hear the wheels going in his head. 'Where shall I put them, these hands, these fingers?'"<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, the critic Valerie Wilmer describes witnessing Monk as a matter of "hearing" his thoughts as much as hearing his music's sound: "When Monk plays you can almost hear him thinking out loud as he selects a note and carefully considers its effect before adding a couple of others, judiciously chosen."<sup>54</sup>

Psychologically driven depictions of Monk's performances can be taken to bizarre extremes. In a strange, and quite possibly apocryphal, anecdote related by the trumpeter Eddie Henderson, Monk supposedly once played an entire set while depressing the piano keys so softly as to be completely inaudible.<sup>55</sup> Regardless of its doubtful veracity, this story unequivocally portrays the pianist's music as reducible to an entirely mental level.<sup>56</sup> Essentially the same assumption underlies the less radical but more common notion that even when Monk played the piano audibly, he was not actualizing his music's entire metaphysical structure. Biographer Thomas Fitterling describes this approach as "letting the music go by, only picking out certain parts."<sup>57</sup>

If Monk was indeed concealing some of his musical ideas as he improvised, it would have been not merely an isolated personal quirk but rather an instance of the pervasive postwar "hip" rhetorical device of "ironic reduction," as Philip Ford has noted.<sup>58</sup> Ford argues, for example, that Monk's improvisational strategy of distilling themes down to skeletal outlines is comparable to such synecdochic countercultural gestures as substituting "brushing palms for handshaking."<sup>59</sup> These reductive modes of communication are socially exclusionary—they are only fully comprehensible to select insiders with enough knowledge to

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 48. A good example of the visual effect Gordon describes can be seen midway through m. 14 of the performance of "Just a Gigolo" excerpted in ex. 1 (at 35:11 of the DVD release of *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser*).

<sup>54</sup> Wilmer, "Round about Monk," 44.

<sup>55</sup> De Wilde, *Monk*, 98.

<sup>56</sup> An equivalent psychologically oriented description of the trumpeter Miles Davis's playing occurs in a joke told by David Amram, quoted in John Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 194.

<sup>57</sup> Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Ford, "Somewhere/Nowhere: Hipness as an Aesthetic," *Musical Quarterly* 86 (2002): 49–81.

<sup>59</sup> Anatole Broyard, "Portrait of the Hipster," *Partisan Review* 15, no. 6 (1948): 722, quoted in Ford, "Somewhere/Nowhere," 53.

fill in the informational lacunae. The fragmentary character of Monk's music functions, in this regard, much like the complex harmonies and intricate contrafact melodies favored by early beboppers in general.<sup>60</sup>

Partially because of this artistic cliquishness, beboppers were often stereotyped as hip Bohemian intellectuals, and it was Monk above all who came to personify this image both within and beyond the jazz community.<sup>61</sup> Journalists often portrayed him as an eccentric nonconformist, playing up his intellectuality by citing his early education in science and mathematics.<sup>62</sup> His habitual taciturnity was accordingly seen as an introverted retreat into pure thought—a cool, silent facade concealing an active, penetrating mind whose cogitations, like his musical statements, were only intermittently expressed out loud.<sup>63</sup> According to his manager, Harry Colomby, Monk “never engages in any kind of conversation he doesn't like. . . . He disconnects sometimes—then all of a sudden he comes up with a statement that is so profound it scares you.”<sup>64</sup>

A 1959 article by Albert Goldman perfectly illustrates how a hipster sensibility tends to exaggerate the intellectuality of Monk's music and minimize its embodied and acoustic dimensions. “I wouldn't call what he does playing the piano,” Goldman writes, in an affected argot. “No, man, you gotta dig Thelonious as the thinker, the skull, the long medulla. Just watch how he sits there on the stand. . . . Maybe he's got one leg over the other, sitting sidewise with his elbow on the rack while he flaps the keys with one hand. You dig right away the cat is thinking. . . . Sometimes he thinks so hard, he don't even bother to get a sound.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Frank Tirro, “The Silent Theme Tradition,” *Musical Quarterly* 53 (1967): 314–17.

<sup>61</sup> A contemporary *Time* magazine article, for instance, reported that bebop musicians “like to wear berets, goatees and green-tinted horn-rimmed glasses, and talk about their ‘interesting new sounds.’” See “How Deaf Can You Get?” *Time*, May 17, 1948, 74, quoted in Eric Lott, “Double V, Double-Time: Bebop's Politics of Style,” *Calaloo* 36 (1988): 598, repr. in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Gabbard, 245.

<sup>62</sup> By 1960, Dan Morgenstern could write that “Monk has been called an eccentric *ad nauseam*” (“An Evening with Monk,” 607). Nat Hentoff describes some of Monk's eccentricities: “Monk acts according to how he feels, and no one is ever quite sure how he'll feel at any given time, not even what he feels. He may often stay up two or three days, and he does not eat by the clock since his periods of hunger do not always fall into regular rhythms. On a visit, if he feels like napping, he does” (“Three Ways of Making It,” 187). Articles noting Monk's scientific education include Frank London Brown, “Thelonious Monk,” *Down Beat*, October 30, 1958, 15, and Lapham, “Monk: High Priest of Jazz,” 73.

<sup>63</sup> Teddy Hill's view of Monk's taciturnity is typical: “He's the type of fellow who thinks an awful lot but doesn't have much to say” (quoted in Hentoff and Shapiro, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 341).

<sup>64</sup> Brown, “Thelonious Monk,” 14, quoted in Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 39–40. For more accounts of Monk's brief, humorous outbursts of volubility, see Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 35, and Sidran, *Talking Jazz*, 207–8.

<sup>65</sup> Albert Goldman, “Man, You Gotta Dig That Cat, Thelonious, the Thinker, the Skull, the Long Medulla,” *The New Leader*, October 19, 1959, 27, repr. in *TMR*, 112. For more on the “hip,” exclusionary practice of thinking music without literally playing it, see



Monk's highly visible physical mannerisms are, by this account, indications of their own irrelevance; such is ideology's power to make us believe the opposite of what we see.

For all that his words today seem comically dated, Goldman wrote during an era whose dominant elite aesthetic, an ardent formalism, was typically assumed to be ahistorical. And though his brand of hip intellectualism deals, on the face of it, mainly with physical and social phenomena, Goldman nonetheless shares one of formalism's deepest ideological assumptions, namely that there exists a privileged autonomous realm of abstract musical ideas (as opposed to the socially grounded ideas to which Baraka refers).<sup>66</sup> Proceeding from this assumption, formalist critics often treated Monk's creative intellect and his music's structural design as ample counterweights to his putative instrumental deficiencies. The more idiosyncratic Monk's pianism seemed, the more such writers sought to compensate rhetorically by heightening their praise for his musical intellect. For instance, when the influential critic André Hodeir boldly declared in 1959 that "Monk is to be hailed as the first jazzman who has had a feeling for specifically modern aesthetic values,"<sup>67</sup> he concurrently noted that the "scope and gravity" of this "reappraisal of jazz" made it unnecessary for him to address "minor facets" of the pianist's musicianship such as its supposed technical limitations.<sup>68</sup> It is fair to say, all in all, that Monk's putatively flawed pianism has if anything raised his standing as a modernist intellectual artist.

Within the school of formalist jazz analysis that Hodeir pioneered, Monk's keyboard idiosyncrasies have also bolstered his reputation as a composer.<sup>69</sup> The pianist's improvisations have been receptive to formal analysis because they often exhibit the sorts of motivic unity that

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Phil Ford, "Hip Sensibility in an Age of Mass Counterculture," *Jazz Perspectives* 2 (2008): 136–37.

<sup>66</sup> Goldman exemplifies a common tendency among postwar jazz critics, noted by Robert Walser, to see musical improvisations as emanating from their creators' "inner emotional realm[s]." See Robert Walser, "Deep Jazz: Notes on Interiority, Race, and Criticism," in *Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America*, ed. Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 272, 279–80.

<sup>67</sup> André Hodeir, "Monk or the Misunderstanding," in *Toward Jazz*, trans. Noel Burch (New York: Da Capo, 1962), 164, repr. in *TMR*, 125.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 176 (*TMR*, 133).

<sup>69</sup> Formalist studies of Monk include Lawrence O. Koch, "Thelonious Monk: Compositional Techniques," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 2 (1983): 67–80; Mark S. Haywood, "Rhythmic Readings in Thelonious Monk," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 7 (1994–95): 25–45; James Kurzdorfer, "Outrageous Clusters: Dissonant Semitonal Cells in the Music of Thelonious Monk," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 8 (1996): 181–201; Michele Caniato, "From Popular Song to Jazz Composition: Thelonious Monk's 'Ruby, My Dear,'" *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 10 (1999): 89–102; and Clifford Korman, "'Criss Cross': Motivic Construction in Composition and Improvisation," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 10 (1999): 103–26.

analysts typically value.<sup>70</sup> Since formalists also, as a rule, valorize composed works (which are traditionally the ultimate stable, unified musical entities), many of them—most notably the critic Martin Williams—have additionally championed Monk’s compositional legacy.<sup>71</sup> For some, Monk’s non-standard pianism simply affirms their belief that his greatest expertise lies elsewhere; Max Harrison even states outright that “Monk plays ‘composer’s piano.’”<sup>72</sup> Monk himself, it is worth noting, did not self-identify as a composer any more than as a pianist, despite his original themes’ popularity with other musicians and centrality within his own repertoire.<sup>73</sup>

Although the critical reception of Monk’s pianism was for some time somewhat skewed toward analytical perspectives that foreground its pitch and rhythmic structure, there has always been a minority view that takes his music’s physical and instrumental dimensions seriously. But even this lesser school of opinion tends to be concerned mainly with how Monk’s keyboard technique influenced his pitch selections rather than with other sonic considerations. This bias toward abstract structure—the pianist’s harmonic and melodic choices as opposed to such concrete phenomena as the sonority and dynamics with which he actualized his chosen pitches—is especially evident in descriptions of how he negotiated the keyboard physically. Witnesses generally agree on two points: Monk, who was over six feet tall, had relatively small hands for a man of his build, and he played with them held quite flat (parallel to the floor).<sup>74</sup> In the journalist Joe Goldberg’s view, the posture and size of Monk’s hands were directly related in that his “unusually small pair of hands . . . leads [him] to play with his fingers spread

<sup>70</sup> Many jazz musicians, too, have praised Monk’s piano solos for exhibiting a “developmental logic.” Gabriel Solis characterizes the pianist’s integration of such musical procedures with Afrodiasporic cultural practices as an “Afro-modernist” creative synthesis (*Monk’s Music*, 31, 38–39). Williams discusses Monk’s use of thematic development in *The Jazz Tradition*, 160, 163, repr. in *TMR*, 218, 220.

<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, Martin Williams, “What Kind of Composer Was Thelonious Monk?” *Musical Quarterly* 76 (1992): 437. Solis surveys the critical orthodoxy positioning Monk as a composer in *Monk’s Music*, 119–23.

<sup>72</sup> Max Harrison, “Mosaic Survey, Part I,” *Jazz Forum* 96 (1985): 35–38, repr. in *TMR*, 38.

<sup>73</sup> When asked, in a filmed interview, whether he preferred playing the piano or composing, Monk replied simply, “[I] do both” (*Straight No Chaser* [Warner Bros. DVD 11896]).

<sup>74</sup> Robert Kotlowitz, for instance, writes “With their minimal formal training, Monk’s hands at work would be the despair of every good piano teacher in the land. The fingers, almost never curved, lie nearly flat on the keys, like ten miniature spatulas. The hands themselves are small for such an oversized body (Monk stands taller than six feet and, like his work, he has the mass and density to go with it).” “Monk Talk,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 1961, 21–23, repr. in *TMR*, 116. Opinion about Monk’s small hand size is not unanimous; Lorraine Gordon remembers his hands being “enormous” (*Alive at the Village Vanguard*, 63).

flat, rather than in the delicate arch favored by classical musicians.”<sup>75</sup> Monk’s wife, Nellie, went so far as to suggest that her husband’s physical limitations had spurred his musical innovations: “he has smaller hands than most pianists, so he had to develop a different style of playing to fully express himself.”<sup>76</sup>

One author who has speculated in some detail about how Monk’s hand posture affected his music is the composer and historian Gunther Schuller, writing in the late 1950s:

Monk uses his fingers not in the usual arched position pianistic orthodoxy requires but in a flat horizontal way. This determines a number of characteristics in Monk’s music. Aside from the tone quality it produces, it makes, for instance, the playing of octaves very hazardous. In playing an octave of two E’s, let us say, it would be easy to also hit by accident the D (a tone below the upper E) and the F (a tone above the lower E). I imagine that Monk soon discovered that he could exploit his unorthodox finger positions, and begin to make use of these “extra” notes which others would have heard as “wrong” and tried to eliminate.<sup>77</sup>

Cursorily discounting sonic issues such as “the tone quality it produces,” Schuller focuses on pitch; example 2, transcribed from a filmed rendition of the song “Don’t Blame Me,” illustrates Monk apparently playing such a miscued octave midway through the second beat of measure 3—in sounding octave F’s he also strikes the note G with his right thumb.<sup>78</sup> Along the same lines as Schuller, Hall Overton, who served as Monk’s arranger for several ensemble projects during the late 1950s and 60s, claimed that the pianist’s flat hands made him “resist the temptation to play full chords.”<sup>79</sup>

Yet Schuller’s and Overton’s view—that Monk’s unorthodox hand position influenced his harmonic and melodic language—is discredited by visual evidence of the pianist in concert. Films show that Monk’s hands were not really so small, and that even though he held them quite flat he was perfectly capable of playing clean octaves and full chords with one hand when he wanted to. Example 2 not only includes several four-note left-hand chords (e.g., the last beats of m. 1 and m. 8, and the second beat of m. 2) but also one instance (the downbeat

<sup>75</sup> Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 27–28. When Monk was asked whether he was “ever taught to hold his hands in the formal manner,” he simply replied, “That’s how you’re supposed to? . . . I hold them any way I feel like holding them” (quoted in Wilmer, “Monk on Monk,” 20).

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Brown, “Thelonious Monk,” 13.

<sup>77</sup> Schuller, “Thelonious Monk,” 231–32.

<sup>78</sup> From the documentary film, *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser*.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Hentoff, “Three Ways of Making It,” 183.

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EXAMPLE 2. "Don't Blame Me." Music by Jimmy Mchugh, Lyrics by Dorothy Fields. © 1932, 1933 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. Copyright renewed 1960, 1961 by Emi Robbins Catalog Inc. All Rights Controlled by Emi Robbins Catalog, Inc. (Print). All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.

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Right Hand

Left Hand

♩ = ca. 78

54:30

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a Right Hand (RH) and Left Hand (LH) staff. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The tempo is marked as quarter note = ca. 78. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and triplets. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5. The first system is marked with a time signature of 54:30. The second system begins with a measure number of 2. The third system includes a measure number of 4 and a section marked with a bracket and the number 27:20. The fourth system begins with a measure number of 5. The RH part is primarily melodic with some accompaniment, while the LH part provides harmonic support with chords and single notes.

EXAMPLE 2. (*continued*)

8

2 3 1 4 2 1 4 2 1 4 2 1 1 4 1 5 1 4 1 5 1 4 1

9

10

10-12 1 4 5 1 4 4 5 1 4 5 5 4 3 1 5 1 2 3 4 4 5 3 2 1 2 5 3 2 1 5

11

12

4 3 3 3 3 3 2 1 2 1 4 5 1 4 1 3 2 5 1

13

14

15

of m. 7) where Monk clearly spans a tenth with his left hand. Likewise, referring back to example 1, in “Just a Gigolo” he plays numerous clean octaves—measures 1, 5, 8, and 18—as well as some three- and four-note chords whose outer voices encompass more than an octave—a right-hand tenth in the second half of measure 12, and a left-hand ninth on the downbeat of measure 15.

It is no revelation to find mid-century modernist critics relating Monk’s technique to his intellectual creativity, his music’s abstract

pitch structure, and his compositional activities. More notably, even certain recent authors who are attuned to matters of social context and theories of embodiment still privilege the strictly musical, pitch-based aspects of Monk's pianism and give short shrift to other less quantifiable features of his performances. The contemporary jazz pianist and scholar Vijay Iyer, for one, sees "music perception and cognition [as] embodied, situated activities,"<sup>80</sup> and he deems Monk's "compositions and improvisations . . . an exemplary nexus of kinesthetics and formalism." Nevertheless, Iyer's principal stated concern within this framework is pitch; he singles out Monk's "explicitly pianistic peculiarities, including the repeated use of pendular fourths, fifths, sixths, and sevenths (as in [the compositions] 'Misterioso' and 'Let's Call This'), . . . major- and minor-second dyads ('Monk's Point,' 'Light Blue'), and rapid figurations and ornamental filigrees ('Trinkle, Tinkle')." <sup>81</sup> In describing his forerunner's music as pianistic, Iyer hints at an inherent contradiction within its performance aesthetic: although Monk's percussive instrumental technique was unpianistic from a Eurocentric perspective, it nevertheless often served music that was itself highly pianistic in the sense of being well-suited to conventional legato articulation. From the standpoint of orthodox pianism, there is a conceptual tension between the notes Monk played and the way he played them.

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This tension begins to dissipate, however, when we consider how Monk's playing sounds in performance, with its piercing sonority and often biting articulation. The role of sound becomes especially clear when Monk's music is decoupled from his pianism and played on other instruments. Monk often undertook this decoupling himself by asking non-keyboard instrumentalists to play his original compositions—conceivably a sign that he regarded his music as fundamentally abstract and was therefore relatively unconcerned with such performance-related issues as instrumental sonority and articulation. But such an interpretation would fail to take into account the particular physical demands, noted by Iyer, that many of Monk's themes pose for non-pianists.<sup>82</sup> These technical challenges, which, according to the saxophonist Gigi Gryce, Monk sometimes insisted upon even when horn players protested vociferously, inevitably had audible consequences.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Vijay Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 396. See also idem, "Embodied Mind, Situated Cognition, and Expressive Microtiming in African-American Music," *Music Perception* 19 (2002): 387–414.

<sup>81</sup> Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," 398.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Gryce recalled: "I had a part he wrote for me that was impossible. I had to play melody while simultaneously playing harmony with him. In addition, the intervals were

A case in point is Monk's famous 1959 concert at New York's Town Hall featuring his own compositions in Overton's horn arrangements. Reviewing the event, Schuller criticized Overton's setting of the tune "Little Rootie Tootie" because it contained an orchestrated transcription of a piano improvisation from Monk's original 1952 recording of the same piece. As can be heard on the issued concert album, the transcribed piano improvisation followed several instrumental solos and was played, mainly in unison and octaves, by Donald Byrd (trumpet), Phil Woods (alto saxophone), Charlie Rouse (tenor saxophone), and Pepper Adams (baritone saxophone).<sup>84</sup> One might expect an improvised solo initially intended as a one-off piano performance to be even harder than a composition for horn players to negotiate. Indeed, Schuller thought it "quite an error of judgment . . . to write out an instrumental chorus which [was] not . . . originally conceived in Monk's mind for those instruments, and which . . . is filled with typical pianisms that are virtually impossible to orchestrate."<sup>85</sup> However, he did not consider that the arrangement's sound in performance—its timbre, dynamics, and articulation—may have been as intentionally calculated as its pitch and rhythmic content. As it happens, Monk's sensitivity to a broad range of sonic parameters is strongly evident at all stages of the piece's genesis, from its original conception through its transcription and orchestration.

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Monk first recorded "Little Rootie Tootie" for Prestige Records in a trio featuring bassist Gary Mapp and drummer Art Blakey.<sup>86</sup> Named for the pianist's then two-year-old son, Thelonious, Jr. (nicknamed Toot), it has a conventional thirty-two-bar AABA song form. Between the recording's opening and concluding head statements, Monk plays a

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very wide besides; and I just told him I couldn't do it. 'You have an instrument, don't you?' he said. 'Either play it or throw it away.' And he walked away. Finally I *was* able to play it. Another time I was orchestrating a number for him, and I didn't write everything down for the horns exactly as he'd outlined it because I felt the musicians would look at the score and figure it was impossible to play. He was very angry, and he finally got exactly what he wanted. I remember the trumpet player on the date had some runs going up on his horn and Monk said they were only impractical if they didn't give him a chance to breathe. The range was not a factor 'because a man should be flexible on all ranges of his horn'" (quoted in Hentoff, "Three Ways of Making It," 183).

<sup>84</sup> *The Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall* (Riverside RLP 1138). The album's compact disc reissue (OJCCD-135-2) includes an alternate take of "Little Rootie Tootie" that was played as an "encore" at the end of the concert because, according to producer Orrin Keepnews's liner notes, the beginning of the initial rendition had accidentally not been recorded; the opening of the "encore" was spliced onto the first version for the original release.

<sup>85</sup> Gunther Schuller, "Thelonious Monk at Town Hall," *The Jazz Review* 2, no. 5 (1959): 7–8, reprinted in *TMR*, 96–97. Interestingly, the *New Yorker* critic Whitney Balliett took a much more favorable view of the same performance ("A Celebration for Monk," *New Yorker*, March 7, 1959, 155–56, quoted in Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 159).

<sup>86</sup> "Little Rootie Tootie," *Thelonious Monk* (Prestige 7027; CD reissue, OJCCD-010-2).



chorus-and-a-half-long solo in which sound functions not only as a medium for expressing his abstract ideas but also as a factor guiding his creative process. It happened that the piano at New York's Beltone Studios, where the performance was taped, was quite out of tune.<sup>87</sup> In particular, its F $\sharp$  an octave and a half above middle C had a pronounced ring, as occurs whenever a single note's three strings fall slightly out of synchronization. Monk was known to react strongly to out-of-tune pianos—supposedly he once ceased a public performance mid-stream because of a ringing note—and the 1952 “Little Rootie Tootie” recording captures a very direct response.<sup>88</sup> As he begins his second solo chorus (the first four measures are transcribed in ex. 3), Monk strikes the piano's sour F along with the C $\flat$  (B $\sharp$ ) above it, producing a jarringly pungent tritone interval. Either as a spur-of-the-moment reaction or through forethought, the pianist overtly emphasizes this sharply incongruous sound rather than shying away from it. He reiterates the same tritone loudly and percussively some thirty times within the next seven bars.

Such insistent repetition is quite atypical, even for a fairly economical improviser like Monk, so it hardly seems coincidental.<sup>89</sup> Rather, it suggests a holistic musical sensibility that engages the contingencies of in-the-moment performance in addition to abstract structural concerns. Here, sound inspires the pitch structure.<sup>90</sup> The repeated notes are not simply realizations of the abstract pitches F and C $\flat$  that could just as

<sup>87</sup> Schuller himself wrote, “Prestige should be ashamed of itself for allowing a record date on such a bad piano; it sounds like a tinny, out-of-tune barroom upright” (“Thelonious Monk,” 233).

<sup>88</sup> Ira Peck reports an informant's saying “Once, . . . right in the middle of a number he stopped, got up from the piano, and walked away. ‘The B note rings,’ he said. ‘It disturbs me’” (“The Piano Man Who Dug Be-Bop,” 44).

<sup>89</sup> It is worth acknowledging that Monk plays a vaguely similar passage during a solo version of “Little Rootie Tootie” recorded nearly twenty years later, on November 15, 1971 (see *The London Collection Volume 1* [1201 Music 9005-2]); the passage in question occurs at 1:58 and is transcribed in the sheet music publication *The Thelonious Monk Collection: Artist Transcriptions* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, n.d.), 47. So it is certainly possible that this passage was not entirely spontaneous, even though it does not appear in any of Monk's other three recorded solos on the same composition, as heard on the compact discs *Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall* (two separate takes) and *Monk's Blues* (Columbia/Legacy CK 53581). But on the 1971 version the F–C $\flat$  tritone occurs only ten times and is given much less emphasis, dynamically or durationally, than on the 1952 recording with the out-of-tune piano.

<sup>90</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch envisions this sort of scenario in his florid description of musical improvisation's “circular causality”: “The sounding material does not simply tag along after the human mind. . . . Sometimes it refuses to take us where we would like to go; better still, this instrument . . . takes us somewhere else, ushers us into the presence of beauty not foreseen. And just as the ivory of the keys possesses in and of itself qualities that inspire the person improvising at the piano, thus musical language in general suggests in turn a meaning that it was not specifically our intention to communicate.” See *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 28. See also Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 40.

## EXAMPLE 3. "Little Rootie Tootie," mm. 1–4

1:55  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 142$

Monk  
(Piano)

Mapp  
(Bass)

Blakey  
(Drums)

\* Rim shots

likely have been played on a different piano at another time and place; on the contrary, they are dependent on these notes' specific audible qualities on this particular occasion. This is by no means an isolated occurrence: when Monk recorded the song "These Foolish Things" at the same studio two months later, the same piano key was still out of tune—perhaps the instrument had not been tuned in the interim—and his E $\flat$ -major rendition of the theme contains, within its first four bars, several iterations of the same F $\sharp$ . Probably seeking to mask or magnify the mistuned note (depending on the listener), the pianist made the unusual decision to harmonize the melody in minor seconds.<sup>91</sup> As before, his pitch selections were influenced by his instrument's sound.

<sup>91</sup> "These Foolish Things," *Thelonious Monk* (Prestige 7027; CD reissue, OJCCD-010-2). I disagree somewhat with Mark Tucker's explanation of this passage; Tucker, who provides a transcription, contends that Monk "add[s] minor-second dissonances to acidify the tune and lampoon the sentiment" and contrasts this performance with Monk's less unorthodox playing on a 1955 album (*Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington* [Riverside

Monk explicitly instructed Overton to orchestrate the “Little Rootie Tootie” solo, a decision the pianist could scarcely have anticipated when playing it seven years earlier.<sup>92</sup> The improvisation, which was directly shaped by a sonic peculiarity of its original performance, might now seem to be decontextualized and treated as an abstract structure. But since the technical difficulties that Monk’s music poses for brass and reed instruments have audible consequences, the Overton arrangement may actually, given Monk’s personal involvement, reflect the pianist’s desire to highlight the human mechanics of sound production. If so, the distinctive timbral and rhythmic inflections that unavoidably arise when horn players negotiate the transcribed solo’s technical hurdles, or for that matter when they play Monk’s pianistic compositions, are far from incidental. With his evident attentiveness to the materiality of sound, Monk likely favored such challenges for their audible expressive effects.<sup>93</sup>

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More to the point, Monk’s own piano technique was also geared toward his distinctive, intensely percussive sonic palette. Such a seemingly quotidian conclusion would be barely worth stating had it not been directly contradicted by numerous musicians and critics alike. Faced with Monk’s radical idiosyncrasies, they have been reluctant to grant his keyboard technique its most straightforward explanation. That said, none of the prevailing schools of thought seems entirely unfounded. Those who denigrated Monk’s playing as incompetent were probably justified in the sense that there is no primary evidence of his having an instrumental command like that of most formally trained professional pianists. Those who thought his technique was post-competent were right to interpret it as deliberate rather than as an unsuccessful attempt to play conventionally. And clearly his pianism featured venerable Afrodiasporic performance practices such as disarticulated (i.e., extremely

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OJCCD-024-2]) in which the pianist may have “rein[ed] in his adventurous tendencies in an effort to reach a broader audience.” See “Mainstreaming Monk: The Ellington Album,” *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (1999): 235, repr. in *Uptown Conversation*, 155–56. Tucker’s interpretation of the Ellington album seems compelling, but his focus on pitch to the exclusion of other performance elements leads him to overlook a more likely practical explanation for Monk’s quirky version of “These Foolish Things.”

<sup>92</sup> The moment during rehearsals for the Town Hall concert when Monk asked Overton to orchestrate the original “Little Rootie Tootie” solo was recorded on tape by the photographer W. Eugene Smith (see Eric Bishop, “Jazz Loft Project Digs Up Photographer’s Musical Buried Treasures,” *Down Beat*, April 2008, 20). In 1963, Overton revisited the process of orchestrating a transcribed Monk solo for a Philharmonic Hall concert: the big-band arrangement of “Four In One” heard on Monk’s album *Big Band and Quartet in Concert* (Columbia/Legacy C2K 57636) features a transcription of a piano solo on the 1960 album *Thelonious Monk Quartet Plus Two at the Blackhawk* (Riverside RLP-1171; CD reissue, OJCCD-305-2).

<sup>93</sup> Robert Walser makes a similar point in arguing that trumpeter Miles Davis sought to “articulate . . . moment[s] of strain” in the course of performance (““Out of Notes,”” 174–76).

non-legato) percussive sonorities.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the dominant views of Monk, while extolling his music's intellectual content and abstract structure as well as his compositional legacy, generally either tacitly assume his instrumental technique was flawed and dismiss the matter as irrelevant, or else simply refrain from confronting it directly. In either case, Monk's pianism has not been given the attention it warrants. Upon close scrutiny, it turns out that many of his mannerisms served consistent sonic ends and that his habit of asking other musicians to play physically awkward material also applied to his own playing: he was actually creating technical hurdles for himself.

Concert films offer the best all-round information about Monk's piano technique because they reveal his physical posture, motion, and fingerings at the keyboard. Example 4, transcribed from a filmed performance of "Well You Needn't," illustrates two of his characteristic devices: (1) using the same finger to play consecutive, differently pitched notes; and (2) distributing between both hands a melodic line that could just as easily be executed with either hand alone.<sup>95</sup> Again, notes played with his right hand are notated in the upper staff, those played with the left are in the lower one; fingerings are indicated numerically beneath each staff wherever they are unambiguously visible. In this film, and others discussed below, Monk's hands on the keyboard are within view almost continuously while he solos. Only occasionally are additional camera angles intercut, momentarily leaving his fingers offscreen.

Relying mainly on his right hand for the first eight measures of example 4, Monk plays successive, differently-pitched eighth notes with a single finger at several points. On the second beat of measure 2 he strikes E $\flat$  and then D $\flat$  with his index finger; he uses his middle finger twice in a row in measure 3 (C and A $\flat$ ) and three times in succession in measure 6 (E $\flat$ , D $\flat$ , and B $\flat$ ); and in measure 7 he plays the initial G $\sharp$  and A with his ring finger. He could easily have played all these melodic fragments with different fingers of his right hand, which would have required less hand and arm motion and been more conducive to legato articulation. But his chosen fingering is a fail-safe way to insure that the pitches will sound detached, with no legato whatsoever, because a split second must inevitably elapse between releasing a key and depressing the next. Despite being comparatively awkward overall, this manner of execution also better enables Monk to strike and release these notes

<sup>94</sup> Olly Wilson lists "the tendency to approach singing or the playing of any instrument in a percussive manner" as one of African-American music's five cardinal traits. See "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music," in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, ed. Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 328.

<sup>95</sup> From the documentary film *Thelonious Monk: American Composer*.

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EXAMPLE 4. "Well You Needn't." Words by Mike Ferro. Music by Thelonious Monk. Copyright © 1994 (Renewed) by Regent Music Corporation (BMI). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

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52:03

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 190$

Right Hand

Left Hand

5

10

15

20

24

## EXAMPLE 5. “We See”

The musical score for Example 5, "We See", is presented in two staves: Right Hand and Left Hand. The right hand part begins with a tempo marking of "ca. 202" and a key signature of one flat. The melody is divided into two parts: the first part consists of three notes (F, E♭, E♭) played with the middle finger of the right hand, and the second part consists of two notes (G, B♭) played with the middle finger of the right hand. The left hand part consists of a chromatically descending line (E♭, D, D♭, C, B) played with the middle finger of the left hand. The score is marked with a time signature of 43:32. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 3 and 4 for the right hand, and 3 and 2 for the left hand.

with equal force and timing than if he played each with a different finger. He reuses this technique in measures 15, 17, 20, and 24.

In measures 21–24 of the same excerpt Monk divides between both hands a melody whose range is under an octave—well within a single hand’s span—thus anatomically partitioning the melody into its two registral strata: the right hand plays semitonally undulating broken thirds while the left traverses its own chromatically descending line, E♭–(E♭)–D–D♭–C–B. He further individuates this lower line from the other, higher pitches by using only his left middle finger throughout, which again helps him articulate its notes uniformly.

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Example 5, transcribed from a performance of “We See” that was filmed in London during the 1960s, offers another illustration of Monk’s dividing a melodic line between his hands.<sup>96</sup> The given excerpt is from the theme’s bridge, where the pianist first plays a three-note motive by alternating between his middle fingers, F (right hand)–B♭ (left hand)–E♭ (right hand), and then uses both hands to play two parallel sixths that he could easily have struck with just one hand. His two-handed realization of the first three notes facilitates non-legato articulation and also, as in “Well You Needn’t,” physically bifurcates the melody in accordance with its pitch strata (the B♭ being disjunct from the step-related F and E♭).<sup>97</sup> He continues to employ both hands when activating both strata concurrently in the second measure, again sounding the two voices with a close parity of articulation and dynamics that would be somewhat harder to achieve with a more conventional fingering (especially for the notes G and B♭, each played on the downbeat with a middle finger).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> On the piano a legato articulation is most readily achieved by playing a melodic line with one hand not only because it is easier to coordinate the release of one key with the depression of the next, but because it is easier to control the sort of diminuendi most conducive to legato phrasing. (Since the instrument’s notes always decay in volume after being struck, an overall diminuendo allows each new note to enter at a volume approximating that to which the preceding note has decayed.)

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EXAMPLE 6. "I Mean You." By Thelonious Monk and Coleman Hawkins. Copyright © 1947 (Renewed) Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP) and Embassy Music Corporation (BMI). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

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Right Hand

Left Hand

$\text{ca. } 195$

3 2 5 4 3 3 4 4 4 4

3 3 2 3 3

7

$D^7$   $D^7$   $G \text{ min}^7$   $C^7$

4 5 5 5 5 5 5 3 5 3 4 1 1 2 1 4 3 1

2 2 2 2 3 1 3 3 3 3 3 3

11

$F$   $E^7$

4 5 3 1 3 4 5 3 3 2 3 2 3 2

2 3 3 3 3 3 3

15

$F$   $D^7$   $C^7$

3 3 2 4 3 3 2 2 3 3 3 3

3 3 3



## EXAMPLE 6. (continued)

20

F

D<sup>b</sup>7

3 2 3

3 3 3

24

D<sup>7</sup> G min<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup> F

3 4 4 3 2 1 3 2 1 3 3 5 3 5 3 5 3 2 1 2 4

3 3

Monk creates similar effects with his two middle fingers during a filmed solo on “I Mean You,” transcribed in example 6.<sup>98</sup> In measures 1–2 and 23–24, he uses these digits to give both members of several major- and minor-third vertical dyads comparable volume and articulation (by contrast, he plays other thirds with only his right hand at mm. 5–6 and m. 26 of the same excerpt). In addition, at two points during the intervening passage (mm. 12–15 and mm. 17–20), he shares descending melodic lines between both hands. The first of these (mm. 12–15) is fingered in a way that embodies its pitch structure: Monk sounds the chromatic D<sup>b</sup>s with his left hand and the diatonic notes—mainly descending perfect-fourth dyads, C–G and D–A—with his right (the piece is in F major). In the second instance (mm. 17–20), he may simply be using two hands to facilitate a non-legato effect as elsewhere.

Jazz performance, as Travis Jackson has detailed, encompasses many frames of social activity beyond the sonic and instrumental—a live show’s time, place, broader cultural backdrop, and other considerations likewise beyond our scope here, can all be considered “musical” in a general, expansive sense.<sup>99</sup> Monk put especially careful thought into his music’s visual presentation, not only in selecting his signature eye-catching hats and suits but in cultivating an array of theatrical mannerisms, at least one of which—playing with one hand crossed over the

<sup>98</sup> From the documentary film, *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser*.

<sup>99</sup> Travis A. Jackson, “Jazz Performance as Ritual: The Blues Aesthetic and the African Diaspora,” in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, ed. Ingrid Monson (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 56–71.

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EXAMPLE 7. "Round Midnight," mm. 6–8

Right Hand

Left Hand

30:08

6  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 70$  Cm7(b5) Abmin7 D $\flat$ 7 Cm7(b5) F7

5 5 5 5 1 1 2 3 5 4

5 1 3

8 Bmin7 E7 B $\flat$ min7 E $\flat$ 7

4 2 1 5 1 5 3 1 5 1

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other—served audible as well as visual purposes. Example 7, from a rendition of “Round Midnight” filmed in Oslo by Norwegian state television (NPK) on April 15, 1966, shows that Monk briefly reaches his left hand over his right (see the end of the first measure quoted) in order to play a single note, D $\flat$ , midway through a passage involving no other such maneuver.<sup>100</sup> The D $\flat$  is an ornamental tone superimposed above the pitch A $\flat$  from the original melody, which he is meanwhile playing with his right hand; the use of the left hand underscores the D $\flat$ ’s decorative function. A more routine approach would have been to play the D $\flat$  with his right hand, the C $\flat$  a ninth below with his left, and the A $\flat$  between them with either hand. Monk could even have played the D $\flat$ , A $\flat$ , and C $\flat$  all with his right hand alone, although this would have involved stretching a ninth with that hand. Neither of these alternatives would have enabled him to maintain the melody line’s physical (and, by extension, sonic) continuity by playing the A $\flat$  with his pinkie, the same finger that strikes all four preceding melodic notes in measure 1 of example 7.

Toward the end of a solo on “Criss-Cross,” filmed live at London’s Marquee Club on March 14, 1965, Monk again reaches his left hand over the right to allow the latter to sustain its ongoing musical role (ex. 8).<sup>101</sup> For a ten measure stretch he mainly plays dyads of either

<sup>100</sup> This performance appears on a DVD accompanying the compact disk *Monk in Paris: Live at the Olympia* (Thelonious Records TMF 9316, 2003). The same film has been issued on the DVD *Thelonious Monk: Live in '66* (Jazz Icons DVWW-JITM).

<sup>101</sup> From the DVD accompanying the compact disk *Monk 'Round the World* (Thelonious Records TMF 9323, 2004).

## EXAMPLE 8a and b. “Criss-Cross”

(a)

22:00

(b)

22:11

B $\flat$  and A $\flat$  or B and G with his right thumb and pinkie. In conjunction with these dyads, his left hand plays mostly beneath the right (as in the first chord in ex. 8a) but sometimes reaches as much as two or three octaves above it to strike B $\flat$ s in the piano's upper register (as in the last chord in ex. 8b). In one plausible interpretation, the high B $\flat$ s can be considered superimpositions above the conceptual upper voice, as occurs in “Round Midnight”; alternatively, the right-hand dyads may be understood as multifunctional—capable of either a melodic role (with respect to each dyad's upper note) or an accompanimental one supporting another, higher line. Indeed, Monk habitually treated melody and accompaniment more interchangeably than did most other jazz musicians, as the next excerpt (ex. 9) also shows.

Example 9 comprises two fragments from a thirty-two-bar chorus transcribed from Monk's solo on the song “Lulu's Back in Town,” from the 1966 Oslo film.<sup>102</sup> The pianist had stated essentially this same material while accompanying tenor saxophonist Charlie Rouse at an earlier point during this performance, beginning at 0:52, so the given passage is evidently not totally spontaneous. Further, its three eight-bar A-sections are all quite similar. Here, Monk apparently uses the crossed-hands technique for audible expressive reasons when it is neither physically advantageous in itself nor directly related to the music's pitch structure as in “Round Midnight” and “Criss-Cross.” Aside from the

<sup>102</sup> From the DVD accompanying the compact disk *Monk in Paris: Live at the Olympia*.

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EXAMPLE 9. "Lulu's Back in Town." Words by Al Dubin, Music by Harry Warren. © 1935 (Renewed) WB Music Corp. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.

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The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a right-hand and left-hand part. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The tempo is marked as ca. 114. Chord symbols are placed above the right-hand staff, and fingering numbers (1-5) are placed below the notes. The score includes triplet markings and various rhythmic values.

**System 1 (Measures 1-3):** Chords: D<sup>b</sup>7, C<sup>b</sup>7, F<sup>b</sup>7, E<sup>b</sup>7, D<sup>b</sup>7, C<sup>b</sup>7. Right hand: 5 2, 5 2, 3 1, 3 1, 3 1, 3 1, 3 1, 2 1. Left hand: 3 3, 2 3, 2 2, 3 2.

**System 2 (Measures 4-6):** Chords: F<sup>b</sup>7, E<sup>b</sup>7, A<sup>b</sup>, G min<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup>, F<sup>7</sup>, B<sup>b</sup>7. Right hand: 1 3 3, 5 5 5, 3 3 3, 3 3 3, 3 1 3, 3 2. Left hand: 2 3 2, 3 3 3, 3 2 2, 2 2, 2 3.

**System 3 (Measures 7-9):** Chords: E<sup>b</sup>, D<sup>b</sup>7, C<sup>b</sup>7, F<sup>b</sup>7, E<sup>b</sup>7, D<sup>b</sup>7, C<sup>b</sup>7. Right hand: 5 2 1, 2 1, 3 1, 3 1, 3 1, 2 1. Left hand: 3 3, 2 2, 3 3, 3.

**System 4 (Measures 10-12):** Chords: F<sup>b</sup>7, E<sup>b</sup>7, A<sup>b</sup>, E<sup>b</sup>, C<sup>7</sup>, F<sup>7</sup>, B<sup>b</sup>7. Right hand: 3 1 3, 5 1, 3 1, 3 1, 3 1, 2 3, 2 3. Left hand: 2 3, 3 3, 3 2 2 3, 2 3, 2 3.

EXAMPLE 9. (continued)

E<sup>b</sup> C min<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C min<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

16

21

C min<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b</sup> C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b7</sup>

25

D<sup>b7</sup> C<sup>b7</sup> F<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> C<sup>b7</sup> F<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup>

29

A<sup>b</sup> E<sup>b</sup> C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> C<sup>b7</sup>

bridge, he plays the entire chorus with his left hand in the keyboard's mid-to-upper register, sometimes—as in measures 7, 15, and 31—reaching more than two octaves (over twelve inches) above his right. Pianists ordinarily cross their hands for only brief periods, usually so that one hand can play an ongoing figure while the other fleetingly alternates registers above and below it (as seen in exs. 7 and 8). Why, then, does Monk in this instance keep his hands crossed for extended stretches when he could have executed the same notes far more easily with them uncrossed? One reason is surely pure showmanship for his viewers' benefit, as he would obviously have known he was being filmed. But he also seems to be deliberately creating technical difficulties for sonic reasons, just as he did when asking other instrumentalists to play physically awkward material. Conveying a sense of expressive tension, Monk's hand crossing slightly reduces his manual control and thus insures that he strikes the piano keys with irregular force and articulation; his melodic lines are resolutely non-legato and the notes within each chord are unequally weighted.<sup>103</sup>

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Monk's solo on "Blue Monk" from the same Oslo film is a pianistic tour de force featuring nearly all the above described instrumental techniques in close succession.<sup>104</sup> Its opening chorus consists of several descending melodic gestures played detachedly with only a right index finger—an explicit display of anti-virtuosity. Monk continues in this disarticulated manner through the following two choruses, now dividing the single-note melody between both hands. Next come three choruses featuring highly pianistic devices such as parallel sixths played in one hand and double-time oscillating effects. Then, in the seventh chorus, Monk crosses his left hand over his right, using it to play in the upper register for an uninterrupted two-chorus stretch. In so doing, he superimposes an upper voice over basically the same right-hand chords that he had used in the previous chorus, just as he did in "Criss-Cross." The most salient outcome is a voluntary condition of physical strain that is inevitably manifested in the sounding music. All told, "Blue Monk" is an emphatic demonstration of self-defined virtuosity, a statement of vast expressive range crafted entirely on the pianist's own terms.

To be sure, keyboard fingerings are only one aspect of Monk's pianism—the one most readily quantifiable for interpretive purposes—and he employed many other novel instrumental effects besides those addressed here (such as lifting some notes of a chord while sustaining

<sup>103</sup> Rosen makes a similar observation with regard to Chopin's piano études: "the moment of greatest emotional tension is generally the one that stretches the hand most painfully, so that the muscular sensation becomes—even without the sound—a mimesis of passion" (*The Romantic Generation*, 383).

<sup>104</sup> See the DVD accompanying the CD release *Monk in Paris: Live at the Olympia*.

others, and various innovative approaches to pedaling). Further, the selected techniques discussed here are atypical; Monk did not use them most of the time. Nevertheless, they exemplify a performance aesthetic that I believe suffused his playing much more broadly. Even when Monk's fingerings were notionally orthodox, the precise force and timing of each piano key's depression and release were always geared toward a desired sonic outcome—one that was typically vibrant and incisive if not always demonstratively strained. This is not to say that his approach was intentional in the sense that he might easily have chosen to play otherwise. While improvising in real time, Monk, like most jazz players, would probably not have experienced any sense of playing certain notes in certain ways for certain reasons, because he would not have perceived these creative steps independently from one another. Pitch, rhythm, subtleties of articulation, physical modes of realization, and expressive intent all coexisted in a unified field of integrated knowledge, both intellectual and embodied.

Monk's pianism has been interpreted in so many ways that it is hard to generalize about how players, listeners, or critics viewed it; and as noted with Baraka, for example, some have stated more than one opinion on the matter. Consequently, however much one might wish to respect the opinions of musicians themselves, it is necessary to contradict at least some of them, some of the time, when drawing conclusions.<sup>105</sup> My own emphasis on the physical, instrumental, and sonic aspects of Monk's music, for instance, places me at odds with esteemed jazz pianists such as Dick Katz and Barry Harris, who both see the essence of Monk's art as purely musical.<sup>106</sup>

But the particulars of Monk's case have no bearing on the larger methodological point that the acoustic and corporeal dimensions of jazz merit more attention than has hitherto been the case, if only because they can shed new light on old questions. Formal structure and cultural context remain by and large the dual pillars of contemporary jazz scholarship, even if they are today often treated as interdependent rather than as separate domains.<sup>107</sup> Monk's pianism illustrates that the realms of sound and embodied action can be just as vital as formal

<sup>105</sup> Ingrid Monson, for example, contends that “the only ethical point of departure for work in jazz studies and ethnomusicology remains the documentation and interpretation of vernacular perspectives, contemporary or historical” (*Saying Something*, 6).

<sup>106</sup> Dick Katz claims that “Monk is all music, not part piano, part music” (quoted in Hentoff, “Three Ways of Making It,” 202); and Barry Harris states, “at home, the other musicians practiced their instruments; but Monk practiced music” (quoted in De Wilde, *Monk*, 92).

<sup>107</sup> Monson writes that “form never exists without its social component,” and “structure [has] as one of its central functions the *construction* of social context” (*Saying Something*, 129, 186).

and social concerns, and may sometimes even influence them.<sup>108</sup> In the course of performance, Monk's body, instrumental technique, and the sound he created all affected everything from his melodic and harmonic choices to the way his image was constructed in public discourse. Naturally, the pianist was in this respect far from unusual among jazz players, or for that matter performers in any musical idiom. For example, recent studies by David Ake on pianists Keith Jarrett and Bill Evans, and by Robert Walser on trumpeter Louis Armstrong, have yielded valuable new insights by dealing with jazz as a physical, embodied activity.<sup>109</sup> This interpretative perspective, which is well established within some branches of musicology, has only recently begun to permeate jazz research.<sup>110</sup>

Although my straightforward functional explanation of Monk's keyboard technique may not be a majority view, it resonates with a small but persistent counternarrative on the pianist.<sup>111</sup> This counternarrative casts him more as a prosaic, rational individual than as an idiosyncratic

<sup>108</sup> An earlier study of the sonic, acoustic aspects of jazz performance is Jairo Moreno's "Body 'n' Soul?: Voice and Movement in Keith Jarrett's Pianism" *Musical Quarterly* 83 (1999): 75–92. Moreno's account of Jarrett's critical reception, it is interesting to note, identifies a very different set of aesthetic concerns among Jarrett's critics from those discussed here in Monk's case. Whereas Monk's listeners often sought to accentuate his music's intellectual underpinnings, Jarrett's critics, Moreno argues, tend to regard the sound of Jarrett's piano playing as an unmediated expression of his inner, pre-reflective subjectivity. Critics are therefore perturbed by Jarrett's concurrent vocalizations because they seem to manifest his conscious thought processes.

<sup>109</sup> David Ake, "Body and Soul: Performing Deep Jazz," in *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 83–111; Robert Walser, "Valuing Jazz," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 314–18.

<sup>110</sup> Among the numerous publications dealing with art-music performance as an embodied activity are Richard Leppert's *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and, more recently, Elisabeth Le Guin's *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Kyra D. Gaunt deals extensively with issues of embodiment in her work on African-American girls' games. See *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>111</sup> Two influential commentators who have previously characterized Monk's technique as a means to an end are Martin Williams, who writes, "to make his playing as personally expressive as he wished, Monk . . . even altered his way of striking the keys, [and] his finger positions." See *The Jazz Tradition*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 157, repr. in *TMR*, 216; and Stanley Crouch, who comments that "[Monk's] techniques—the way he fingered the piano—a lot of it was based on the fact that he really understood that the piano was a percussive instrument that could be approached with the same variety of percussive attacks that, say, a drummer gets who uses different pressures with his sticks—who uses brushes, who uses mallets, who uses even, say, his hands on the drumheads themselves. And so, as a piano player, Monk was often capable of getting very unusual and wide-ranging tonal colors from his instrument." See "Thelonious Monk: 'Thelonious Himself,'" *Jazz Profiles* (NPR radio broadcast), available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15130418> (accessed December 23, 2007).



nonconformist: the Thelonious Monk, that is, who the saxophonist Sonny Rollins, one of his mid-1950s collaborators, recently insisted was “not in the least” the “weird” personality so often portrayed;<sup>112</sup> the Monk who, when asked by a university lecturer to “play some of your weird chords for the class,” is said to have pointedly replied, “What do you mean weird? They’re perfectly logical chords”;<sup>113</sup> and the Monk who can be seen, in various filmed interviews, giving obstinately quotidian answers to condescending and inane questions from journalists apparently seeking to elicit koan-like aphorisms.<sup>114</sup> It is high time to reconsider the exaggeratedly eccentric public caricature of Monk, a distortion perpetuated by lingering romantic notions of artistic temperament that dovetail all too often with racial stereotypes.<sup>115</sup> Monk’s unique pianism was neither inept, a joke, nor irrelevant to abstract musical concerns, but simply a reasonable means to an inspired end.

Skidmore College

#### ABSTRACT

The jazz pianist Thelonious Monk’s highly idiosyncratic instrumental technique has long been a topic of controversy. Examination of competing views sheds light on the circumstances under which Monk’s

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<sup>112</sup> In a conversation with the actor and director Clint Eastwood, Rollins remarks: “The thing I can say about Monk is, he’s not as weird as people try to portray him as being. He was a very honest person. Very honest, and he just loved music. And he just loved playing music, and he wasn’t weird at all. I mean, you know, people thought of him, ‘Oh what a weird—.’ Not in the least” (<http://www.video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-78376603291510336&hl=en> [accessed January 26, 2008]).

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*, 188. In a similar anecdote, Monk apparently once telephoned the New York radio station WKCR after hearing an announcer praise his use of “wrong notes,” and declared over the airways, “The piano ain’t got no wrong notes” (David Remnick, “Bird-Watcher,” *New Yorker*, May 19, 2008, 64). Likewise, saxophonist Steve Lacy argues that Monk’s compositions, known for their structural idiosyncrasies, are actually “extremely logical,” and “very old-fashioned, really, in a lot of ways” (quoted in Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 29).

<sup>114</sup> At one point in the film *Straight No Chaser*, a German-speaking journalist asks Monk, “Do you think that the piano has enough keys—eighty-eight—or do you want more or less?” to which the pianist replies, “I mean, it’s hard for you to play those eighty-eight.” And in the documentary *Thelonious Monk: American Composer*, when a French-speaking interviewer asks Monk which of his compositions he considers his best, Monk answers simply, “I don’t know. I haven’t really rated them, I mean, within my mind.” The interviewer presses him: “You mean, they’re all good?” Monk: “Well, I expect for them to be a certain standard before I let anybody hear them.” Interviewer: “You mean everything you write is stamped with genius?” Monk: “I don’t know about that!”

<sup>115</sup> As Ingrid Monson notes, “the historically close associations between madness, pathology, and racial difference [make] the image of the jazz avant-garde artist especially prone to appropriation by primitivist racial ideologies.” See “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 (1995): 412.

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detractors have accused him of incompetence, whereas his devotees have generally argued either that he was proficient in a conventional sense or that his pianistic imperfections were irrelevant to his music's intellectual content.

New perspectives on Monk's pianism may be sought through the analysis of concert films that document his playing in close detail. The films indicate that sometimes Monk intentionally created technical hurdles for himself in order to imbue his playing with a degree of expressive tension.

Keywords: improvisation, instrumental technique, jazz, Thelonious Monk, piano