

ECCENTRIC, GIFTED, AND BLACK: THELONIOUS MONK REVEALED

ROBIN D. G. KELLEY, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. New York: Free Press, 2009, 606 pages, ISBN 978-0-684-83190-9, \$19.80.

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Do not miss Robin D. G. Kelley's *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*, for it will stand as the definitive biography of the great American composer and pianist for many years to come. What distinguishes Kelley's treatment of Monk's complicated and enigmatic life is the sheer depth and breadth of primary research, including, for the first time, the active cooperation and involvement of Thelonious Monk's family. In his acknowledgments, Kelley describes a long process of convincing Thelonious Monk, III to grant permission culminating in a six-hour meeting in which his knowledge, credentials, and commitment were thoroughly tested and challenged. Once he had secured "Toot's" blessings, as well as that of his wife Gale and brother-in-law Peter Grain, Kelley was introduced to Nellie Monk, Thelonious Monk's wife, and a wide range of family and friends who shared their memories and personal archives of photos, recordings, and papers. This is not an authorized biography, however, since Thelonious Monk, Jr. never demanded the right to see drafts or dictate the content. Rather Kelley was admonished to "dig deep and tell the truth."

I cannot think of any recent musical biography that has dug as deeply as this one by Robin Kelley. Indeed, the level of documentation in the book is more akin to some of the great biographies of African American leaders, including David Levering Lewis's two-volume work on W. E. B. Du Bois¹ and Martin Duberman's life of Paul Robeson. Kelley has mined recording contracts, royalty statements, census figures, archives, union contracts, private audio recordings, census data, property records, and private papers, as well as the existing corpus of writings on Monk and jazz history. Kelley conducted dozens of new interviews with surviving musicians, producers, managers, collectors, business associates, friends, family, and journalists. His depth as an historian is everywhere apparent.

Thelonious Monk has always been one of the most mysterious members of the jazz pantheon. Unlike other defining figures—Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie,

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Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane—Monk rarely commented publicly on his views or musical philosophy and did not prepare an autobiography. Indeed, Monk earned the reputation of remaining silent during interviews with prominent journalists, or offering one- or two-word responses to probing questions. His sartorial style and stage mannerisms—including a wide array of hats and a penchant for dancing in circles on stage, and for leaving the piano for long periods during performances—led to the construction of him as a particularly eccentric figure. Myths, legends, and anecdotes have circulated constantly regarding mental illness, drug addiction, unreliability, and genius. These often retold legends create a trans-historical impression of a fixed personality that just was, rather than came to be.

The central achievement of Kelley's portrait of Thelonious Monk is revealing a three-dimensional, fully historical human being whose musical creativity was central to the development of bebop and jazz composition. Kelley begins by tracing Monk's family history back to the antebellum period when his great-grandfather John Jack Monk was one of nineteen African Americans enslaved by Archibald Monk in eastern North Carolina. Kelley's account of the family history is based on both the family history of Julius W. Monk, a white pianist who was also a member of local 802 of the American Federation of Music, and on the family history kept by the black Monks descended from John Jack. This opening is jarring to readers accustomed to the typical jazz biography that generally goes back no further than one or two generations prior to life of the artist and challenges jazz biographers to also place their subjects in a longer arc of American history. Kelley's point is to trace the Monk family history from slavery through sharecropping and migration northward and to illuminate the elaborate family network from which Thelonious Monk, Jr. emerged. Kelley is determined that Monk's relatives not be nameless ancestors, but rather figures who endured circumscribed life possibilities due to the structural limits placed on African American aspirations by the racial status quo. The enormous archival effort has produced an early history of Monk with much new information.

Barbara Monk, Thelonious's mother, left Rocky Mount, North Carolina in 1922 after her mother's death and a decision to part ways with Thelonious Monk, Sr., whose ill health exacerbated the economic hardship facing the family in the south. Barbara and her three children went to live with her cousin Louise Bryant on 63rd street in the San Juan Hill section of New York City, an impoverished, sometimes violent neighborhood in which recent arrivals from the south lived with recent immigrants from the Caribbean. After the family acquired an upright piano, Thelonious Monk, Jr.'s astonishing ability to learn music by ear became apparent. He taught himself to read music by observing his sister Marion's piano lessons and then began instruction himself at age eleven with teacher Simon Wolf. He studied the classics and developed a special affinity for Chopin and Rachmaninoff. Monk's early piano education is especially important because throughout his career critics painted Monk as a "primitive," often presuming that he could not read music. Monk's insistence that his musicians learn his compositions by ear contributed to this impression, but more fundamentally, Monk's quietness left a blank screen onto which critics tended to project the stereotype of Black musical genius as untutored and instinctual, rather than formed and sustained in the rich cultural life of Black America.

Monk's neighbors in San Juan Hill included saxophonists Benny Carter and Russell Procope, as well as Ellington's famous trumpet player Bubber Miley. From his mother he learned gospel hymns and spirituals and in his teens he traveled the country with a Pentacostal Evangelist, who some called Reverend Graham, leading a

group comprised of piano, trumpet, saxophone, and drums. By 1941 he had become the house pianist at Minton's, co-leading a group with drummer Kenny Clarke with whom he pioneered the more irregular offbeat time feel that would be called bebop and developed chord progressions and substitutions that altered the harmonic landscape of modern jazz. From the beginning Monk was not content with composing only by creating new melodies over the harmonic framework of older tunes (as was common for many bebop tunes by others). Instead he distinguished himself early on by the originality of his compositions and a "less is more" approach to melody that contrasted greatly with the dense, lightning fast melodic lines of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Bud Powell. Kelley sheds new light on Monk's feelings of competitiveness with Dizzy Gillespie, who became the media darling of bebop around 1944, and Charlie Parker, whose virtuosic alto saxophone pyrotechnics generated awe and attracted acolytes and sycophants. Monk's voice is filled with envy when he accuses Bird and Dizzy of copying his harmonies and melodies and using them in their compositions, but using the term bebop to describe both the music of Thelonious Monk and the two horn players has always been a stretch, as Kelley notes. Even though Gillespie adopted Monk's penchant for whole-tone scales and sartorial style, and Parker internalized chromatic harmony and chord substitutions that were similar to Monk's, their preference for breathless tempos and flurries of fast notes accompanied by the asymmetrical drum work of Max Roach (who built on the rhythmic and timbral explorations of Kenny Clarke) sounded very different from the music of Thelonious Monk. Monk preferred medium tempos colored with a palate of distinctive often riff-based melodies, intriguing open-spaced chord voicings, and clever harmonic progressions tied closely to melody. As Thelonious instructed most of the horn players in his groups, to improvise effectively on his compositions required paying close attention to the melody and avoiding what became a standard bebop practice of basing improvisations primarily around the harmonic progression. Although Kelley is not trained as a musicologist, his discussions of Monk's music are cogent and musically insightful, providing the general reader with an excellent path into the composer's aesthetic.

A second major contribution of Kelley's study is documenting Thelonious Monk's financial history—through copyright deposits, recording contracts, royalty statements, family records, and interviews with Monk's long-time manager Harry Colomby. There are many interesting details added to the generally known outlines of Monk's career. The first composition copyrighted with Thelonious Monk's name as lead composer, for example, was "I Need You So." The original lyrics were penned in 1943 by Monk's friend Elizabeth Johnson, but, in the end, Cootie Williams and lyricist Bernie Hanighen re-copyrighted the song with new lyrics in 1944 under the name "Round Midnight." Bud Powell had convinced Cootie Williams to perform the piece in his band. The trumpeter added an eight-bar interlude that was only played by his band. Kelley rightly protests the fact that due to this copyright arrangement, the Thelonious Monk estate receives only one-third of the publishing royalties on one of his most revered compositions. The estates of Williams and Hanighen receive the remaining two-thirds.

Kelley painstakingly provides financial details of Monk's contracts with Blue Note, Prestige, Riverside and Columbia along with a new understanding of Thelonious's relationship to the recording studio and the business. This meticulously researched information contributes not only to understanding Monk, but also to a broader economic picture of jazz in the 1950s and 1960s. Since jazz gradually dropped off the popular music charts, evidence for sales and distribution of jazz recordings has been notoriously scanty. Kelley's access to Monk's financial records

and royalty statements have enabled him to provide an eye-opening picture of the financial ups and downs of one of jazz's most important icons.

Blue Note's Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff were the first to take interest in Monk's music and Lorraine Lion (later Lorraine Gordon) served as the company's marketing department. Although the company's recordings greatly broadened public awareness of Monk and his financial prospects, the decision to make marketing points of Thelonious's odd behavior ultimately led to the consolidation of enduring stereotypes about Monk's eccentric persona. Monk's tendency to stay up all night (sometimes several in a row) then crash and disappear were viewed as personal quirks of an artistic personality rather than signs of the bipolar disorder that Thelonious suffered from throughout his life. Kelley handles the delicate issue of Monk's mental health by neither sensationalizing it nor denying the existence of a clinical condition that was painful for both him and his family. Monk's reputation for refusing to talk, arriving late to performances, and forcing the band to take long solos on its own when he inexplicably left the stage, becomes more understandable when contextualized against a recurrent cycle of intensity followed by depression exacerbated by Monk's use of alcohol and drugs. Kelley makes apparent how irritating Thelonious's erratic moments could be to audiences, record producers, and those who handled his business—most notably his wife Nellie and Harry Colombo—but steadfastly refuses to treat Monk's condition with an exoticizing wink and a nod. Kelley also provides the other balancing side—Monk's warm family life, joy in his children, and love of talking and engaging when he was among close friends and family.

More than Parker or Gillespie, Monk suffered from a lack of employment that left his wife Nellie and their two children Thelonious Sphere Monk III (Toot) and Barbara (Boo Boo) in perilous circumstances. In 1951 Monk was arrested on charges of narcotics possession while in a car with Bud Powell. Since he refused to be a stool pigeon and report Powell, he was convicted and sentenced to sixty days in prison. The greater catastrophe was the revocation of the cabaret card enabling him to work in New York City clubs. Since this was not the first time his card had been revoked for drug possession, Monk's card was revoked indefinitely. It was not until 1957 that Monk was able to regain the card. The New York State Liquor Authority agreed to grant him a card after a lengthy legal proceeding on the condition that a club owner agree to hire Monk. The Termini brothers who owned the Five Spot agreed. In other words, during the years in which some of his most famous compositions were created—Bemsha Swing, Bolivar Blues, Brilliant Corners, Monk's Dream, Panonica, Skippy, Think of One, and Tinkle Tinkle—Monk could not get a gig in a New York club. It's no wonder that Thelonious's family referred to them as the 'un years.' These were followed by many successful years with Riverside and Columbia records, culminating with Monk appearing on the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1964. Nevertheless, Monk's illness made it difficult for him to complete his recording commitments to Columbia, causing his finances to decline precipitously by the end of the 1960s.

Nellie Monk is the unsung heroine of Kelley's biography. The woman who was simultaneously Monk's "wife, road manager, business manager, mother, caregiver, and accountant" (p. 396), kept Thelonious fed, clothed, taken care of, and transported to where he needed to be. The ups and downs of Monk's bipolar disorder and the family's constant financial troubles in the early years took an enormous toll on Nellie's health as she worked as a seamstress to support her two children and her husband's career. She created a warm and loving sanctuary for her husband and their children. The private audio recordings made of Monk's family life that Kelley quotes are full of touching and utterly normal family intimacy.

By the mid-1950s another woman had become a caregiver, benefactor, and companion to Thelonious Monk—the Baroness Panonnica de Koenigswarter (Nica), an heir to the Rothschild banking fortune. Kelley is silent on the nature of their relationship—long the subject of speculation in the jazz world—but from 1954, when they first met, the Baroness was a constant in Monk’s life functioning as another family member, even co-wife, responsible for his care and nurturing. Nellie and Nica seemed to take turns shepherding Monk to his gigs and other professional responsibilities. The Baroness gave him a car, a Steinway piano, and from time to time shared her home with him, something she also did for Charlie Parker before his death in 1955. Although the subtitle to the book is “The Life and Times of an American Original,” Kelley is more thorough in describing Monk’s relationship to racial issues and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements than he is in explaining or questioning the gendered expectations underlying Monk’s heavy dependence and reliance on the principal women in his life. Perhaps there was no way to address these issues directly given Kelley’s sensitivity to the family’s wishes. Nevertheless, the book offers many details of a shared caretaking of Thelonious Monk by Nellie and Nica that are suggestive.

Nellie became deeply interested in natural healing, especially with the aid of juices. She began developing a business as a maker and seller of natural juices, transforming their home into something resembling a natural foods store. As Nellie began to include her clients in her caretaking priorities and, consequently developing a life of greater independence, Kelley speculates that Monk began to feel neglected. Monk’s main complaint was the incessant whir of the juicers often late into the night. Since Nellie wouldn’t stop, Thelonious asked Nica to allow him to live with her in her home in Weehawken, New Jersey. Although Nellie was a constant visitor at first, Monk occupied her second floor with a separate bedroom and bathroom, a Steinway, and panoramic view of the Hudson from 1972 until his death in February 1982. On the one hand, this arrangement gave Nellie a respite from her constant caretaking and the opportunity to build her own life; on the other, it suggests a significant restructuring of their life as a couple. During these years Monk was deeply withdrawn, often refusing to come out of his room or play the piano. Barry Harris, who also lived for a time at the Baroness’s home, would often try to lure him out by practicing piano outside his door. By 1979, Nellie’s visits to Weehawken were few and far between as she focused on the developing careers of her children.

Although Kelley does not comment directly, his dedication of the book to Nellie Monk suggests his deep awareness that without her devotion and sacrifice, Thelonious Monk would not have had the freedom and support to develop his remarkable musical vision. Monk’s body of music, one of the most important in jazz, stands as his monument. Kelley’s remarkable biography provides a very human, compassionate portrait that follows Monk through the larger social circumstances of race and economic disparity in the music industry, while at the same time allowing us to see for the very first time Monk’s very individual and moving personal path.

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NOTE

1. See David Levering Lewis (1993), *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919*, New York: Holt; David Levering Lewis (2000), *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963*, New York: Holt; and Martin Baum Duberman (1988), *Paul Robeson*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

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In the conventional script of modern jazz that in recent years has apotheosized into something like an official history in places like Ken Burns' PBS documentary *Jazz*, Thelonious Monk takes the stage as a more or less fully developed character in 1941. That was the year Monk served as the house pianist at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem, where, in league with Kenny Clarke, Charlie Christian, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie "Bird" Parker and other restless African American innovators, he contributed to the fashioning of a new, modernized approach to swing—bebop it later came to be called—featuring dissonant harmonies and fractured, serpentine rhythms. In the standard mythic tableau, Monk is the eccentric genius in hip sunglasses who writes tunes with inscrutable titles like "Epistrophe," galvanizing the young turks bent on redeeming jazz from its minstrel origins and turning it into a serious (and seriously regarded) art.

Robin D. G. Kelley's magnificent biography, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*, acknowledges the power of this myth but also helps us understand how partial and misleading it is as an account of Monk's complicated role in jazz's most important transformation in the 1940s. Monk, who was born in 1917, had been trying to make a living as a pianist since 1934, when he dropped out of high school in New York City and hit the road for a two-year tour of the southwest and midwest with a female Pentacostal evangelist known as Reverend Graham. Save for an adolescent trip upstate as a Fresh Air kid, this barnstorm through the hinterlands was the first time Monk had left New York since his mother had moved her three children there from North Carolina, leaving behind a husband who suffered from asthma and other health problems. When the faith-healing tour hit Kansas City in 1935, Monk tested his mettle in late night jam sessions with hard-swinging territory band musicians, one night catching the appreciative ear of the fetching young pianist Mary Lou Williams. Back in New York in the late 1930s, while scuffling for small change at dive bars and house parties in Black neighborhoods, Monk gained entrée into the private salons of James P. Johnson, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and Art Tatum, impressing these stride masters with a strong two-handed attack that honored their own approach to the piano as a sovereign instrument, an orchestra unto itself.

Before he got to Minton's, in other words, Monk had steeped himself in Black vernacular music traditions both sacred and secular, and had fashioned his own version of a muscular piano style well known in Harlem. As Kelley makes clear in one example of this book's unfailingly lucid musical discourse, Monk's approach to the piano was actually not fully in sync with bebop, a style which had relieved the instrument of its earlier primary role as rhythmic anchor, freeing up its players to join the chorus of soloists running ever-faster, denser, more breathtaking lines over the chord changes. The key figure in that style of piano was Bud Powell, a protégé of Monk's, and one of several pianists who came to occupy the Minton's chair. By the time people actually began to call the music bebop, Monk's presence at Minton's was largely limited to the after-hours scene in the basement, where he led a rehearsal band and emerged as a teacher and mentor known for his trickster humor and gnomic communication style. Just how revolutionary this underground scene was, Kelley tells us, is unclear. Tellingly, the first magazine profile of Monk, written by

fellow pianist Herbie Nichols for the Black-owned periodical *Rhythm*, portrayed him as (in Kelley's words) a "respectable, intelligent Negro artist committed to creating uplifting and thoughtful music" (p. 116). No sign of the outré vanguardist there.

And no sign of Monk whatsoever in the mainstream jazz press of the mid-1940s. It was Parker and Gillespie who emerged as the public face of bebop—especially the amiable Gillespie, who started appearing in national magazines wearing a beret and horn-rimmed glasses, hip accessories Monk had introduced to the jazz subculture. The powerful critic Leonard Feather, a tireless tout for Gillespie and Parker, thought Monk technically inept and became one of his most insistent detractors. Kelley says that Monk was deeply wounded by Gillespie and Parker's fame, and he proves it by chronicling how for many years Monk used press interviews to argue for his seminal role in jazz's modernist turn. He told a French jazz magazine in the 1960s: "Dizzy and Bird did nothing for me musically, they didn't teach me anything. In fact, they were the ones who came to me with questions, but they got all the credit" (p. 105). Monk's resentment was not just about pride of place in the jazz canon. After Feather published a book about bebop that barely mentioned Monk, Thelonious—according to family lore—accosted Feather on the street, grabbed him, and shouted: "You're taking the bread out of my mouth" (p. 150).

One of the most memorable themes of Kelley's book is how grinding a struggle the jazz life was, even in its golden age, except for a very small number of stars like Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Dave Brubeck. Monk may have carried an aura of purism in jazz circles, but his own strongest desire, Kelley reveals, was to cash in on a hit record. He even signed on as the arranger for a pair of jingles, sung by an obscure Italian crooner, in an unsuccessful bid for selection as the bumper music to Martin Block's "Make Believe Ballroom" radio show. Monk's problem early on was not just in failing to hold on to a steady gig—Gillespie was among those bandleaders who fired Monk for habitual lateness—but also that he didn't have full control over his own intellectual property. We now esteem Monk as one of jazz's great composers, but the copyrights for some of the tunes we associate with him were not his alone. His signature ballad "Round Midnight," for example, was registered to Monk, trumpeter/bandleader Cootie Williams, and lyricist Bernie Hanighen; to this day Monk's estate receives only a third of the royalties generated from the most recorded jazz standard in history. An untold number of tunes were stolen from Monk outright before he established a legal claim to them. The story of White musicians and shady industry operators ripping off Black musicians is an old and important one. Kelley highlights a related story—of Monk's compositions (not just his musical ideas) being pilfered by his Black friends and peers, including Teddy McRae, Sonny Clark, and, most of all, Gil Fuller, the arranger for Gillespie's band.

This was the context in which Monk, as Kelley intriguingly puts it, was "invented," and not in 1941 but in 1948 (p. 132). He's referring to a series of events that put an end to Monk's behind-the-scenes invisibility, if not his vulnerability. The breakthrough started the previous year with a profile in *Down Beat* magazine by the writer and photographer William Gottlieb. Titled "Genius of Bop," the piece, in asserting Monk's preeminence in the new music, sought to shape the history of modern jazz whose first draft was only recently being inscribed in the pages of *Down Beat*, which had been notoriously late to the story. A photograph that ran with the piece pictured Monk, resplendent in goatee, drape suit, beret, and heavy shell glasses, standing in front of the sidewalk awning of Minton's Playhouse alongside trumpeters Roy Eldridge and Howard McGhee and former Minton's manager Teddy Hill. Gottlieb's photograph later achieved its own iconic status as part of jazz's visual memory; in its own original context, it cleverly illustrated—in Monk's hip attire and in his position-

ing closest to the club awning—Gottlieb’s brief for Monk as the “George Washington of bebop.” The publicity turned Monk’s career around. Within days, Alfred and Lorraine Lion and Francis Wolff of Blue Note Records were at his home to talk about cutting his first discs as a leader.

These first recording sessions—a mix of originals like “Thelonious” and “Ruby, My Dear” with standards like “April in Paris” and “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” collected under the title *Genius of Modern Music*—demonstrated a musical vision situated in the harmonic innovations of bebop but still firmly grounded in the swing and stride traditions. Monk eschewed the blistering tempos and flashy technical displays that had become bop hallmarks in favor of medium tempo swing grooves and ballads tethered to the song’s melody. But even as Monk sounded sturdy and old-fashioned in his faithfulness to melody, he also waxed experimental and futuristic in his use of dissonant chord clusters, intervallic leaps, silences, hesitations, and disjointed phrasing. It was a paradoxical musical grammar at once angular and abstract, warm and witty. It seemed both amateurish and profound, a series of mistakes that added up (for those who dug it) to something perversely logical. Paul Bacon, the only critic who seemed to understand Monk in the late 1940s, compared Monk to a carpenter “lustily doing everything wrong, battling his materials, and coming up with the most uniquely beautifully houses in the world” (p. 149). Years later, Martin Williams, who emerged as Monk’s strongest advocate in the world of American jazz criticism, made brilliantly counterintuitive sense of Monk’s seemingly baffling effect, writing that “far from being an inept technician, Monk is a virtuoso—a virtuoso of the specific techniques of jazz, in challengingly original uses of accent, rhythm, meter, time and of musically expressive space, rest, and silence” (p. 336).

Blue Note’s shrewd publicist Lorraine Lion knew that Monk needed to be explained—to be made into a recognizable and resonant character—for the public to catch on. One of the great strengths of Kelley’s book is the way he shows us how the jazz world worked from the inside, the crucial roles played by critics, producers, managers, and publicists not only in collaborating with musicians to create sound, but also in shaping the terms on which that sound was heard and its makers seen. In Monk’s case there was no more consequential example of this mediating influence than a press release Lion wrote and circulated as the linchpin of her marketing campaign for Monk’s first records in 1948. Bootlegging from Gottlieb’s *Down Beat* profile, Lion hardwired into the jazz discourse a set of “foundational adjectives”—“elusive, mysterious, strange, eccentric, weird, genius”—that would come to define Monk for the rest of his career. It was the beginning of Monk’s transformation into what Nat Hentoff later called “a stock cartoon figure for writers of Sunday supplement pieces about the exotica of jazz” (p. 132). Even today, often Monk is remembered as much for the seemingly odd little dances he did while his band members took their solos as for “Well You Needn’t,” “Straight, No Chaser,” and others of the seventy compositions he left behind.

Lorraine Lion (later Gordon) dubbed Monk the “High Priest of Bebop,” a moniker that stuck long after he left Blue Note records for the independent labels Riverside and Prestige in the 1950s and the major label Columbia in the 1960s. Shrouded in an air of mysticism, Monk became an icon to the Beats, intellectuals, and high society slummers who flocked to see him at the Five Spot, the Lower East Side saloon he helped turn into the headquarters of the bohemian avant-garde. In 1964, when Monk appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, he had one of his best chances to define himself for the American mainstream public. In writer Barry Farrell’s profile, Monk is quoted—as he often was—adamantly disavowing his image as a “mad genius.” But that was precisely the image Farrell reinforced in his descrip-

tion of Monk as reclusive, addicted to alcohol and pharmaceuticals, and—in another trope that saturated Monk commentary—childlike in his dependence on the key women in his life, his wife Nellie and his benefactor, the Baroness Pannonica (“Nica”) de Koeningswarter. *Time* thus followed the Sunday supplements, as Hentoff lamented, in retailing lurid stories of Monk’s life—stories of sleeplessness and nocturnal highjinks, of chronic lateness and nodding off at the piano, of drug arrests and lockdowns in mental institutions. Never did they call it what Kelley says it actually was: a manic-depressive bipolar disorder that was not properly diagnosed and treated until after Monk had quit playing and withdrawn from public life.

At the heart of this book lies a cruel irony: the very image of eccentric weirdness that made Monk famous also limited his ability to make a decent living as a jazz musician. The terms of his invention, that is, were both enabling and constraining. Stories of Monk’s strange behavior gave him cachet—and also fueled perceptions among club owners and booking agents that he was unreliable, costing him jobs. (Record sales didn’t help much. Advances from Columbia in the 1960s—and probably gifts from Nica—enabled Monk to send his kids to private school but hardly relieved the household of constant financial stress. Monk recorded thirteen albums for the label, and in the end was indebted to the company for over \$16,000.) Kelley’s narrative cataloguing of Monk’s club dates and recording sessions includes many instances of conduct that understandably enraged his employers, such as the night he showed up two hours late for a gig in Boston and split after playing two short numbers for a devoted audience that had patiently awaited him. This was one of those times when Monk apparently was in the throes of a psychotic episode; after leaving the club, Monk wandered aimlessly around Logan Airport before being picked up by a state trooper and committed to a public psychiatric ward, where he stayed a full week before his family could find him. But Kelley also amasses convincing evidence that Monk was bracingly clear-eyed in his efforts to control the situations in which he worked and unusually perceptive—save for protecting his tunes from the sticky fingers of fellow musicians—about the exploitative nature of the music industry. “A lot of Monk’s problems arise from the fact that he has a sharp business eye,” Monk’s manager Harry Colomby said. “He has an uncanny ability to tell how much a club is making. Booking agencies don’t like this about him, and so a lot of strange rumors about Monk’s undependability began to come out of nowhere and scare off club owners” (pp. 206–7).

Kelley’s discussion of Monk’s mental health will likely fuel further debate on the thorny, age-old issue of the relationship between “madness” and artistic creativity. For that matter, the exact nature of Monk’s mental health may continue to be a subject of inquiry, notwithstanding what would seem to be (at least to this layman) the reasonableness of the diagnosis he finally received in the 1970s. Already, Judith Schlesinger (2009), one of the psychologists whose work Kelley consulted, has challenged the assertion that Monk was bipolar. Schlesinger argues that the behaviors Kelley retrospectively attributes to Monk’s putative condition could also have been triggered by “exhaustion, drinking, severe financial problems, and drugs”—including the “vitamin shots” laced with amphetamines prescribed for him by a “Dr. Feelgood” whose celebrity client list included jazz musicians referred by the Baroness. There is also the question of genes. Monk was unaware that in 1941, when he was jumpstarting the scene at Minton’s, his father, Thelonious Monk, Sr., was committed to the State Hospital for the Colored Insane in North Carolina. Kelley presents this information as a way of suggesting a genetic component to Monk’s bipolar condition. But he also tells us that Black men were often involuntarily committed to Southern Jim Crow mental asylums as “inmates” to be exploited as

laborers—a point Schlesinger seizes on to cast doubt on the notion that mental disease ran in Monk's family (Schlesinger, 2009).

Kelley provides abundant evidence that the life of jazz musicians in the 1940s and 1950s could itself be stressful enough to test their sanity, regardless of brain chemistry. The kind of jazz clubs where Monk usually worked were “veritable health hazards” where alcohol and drugs flowed promiscuously and crazy work schedules played havoc with circadian rhythms. Police patrolled the streets outside the clubs, purportedly to contain the spread of vice outside the entertainment district, in reality to counteract interracial mixing and to put successful Black men in their place. In 1951, Monk took the rap for Bud Powell in a drug bust, did sixty days in Rikers, and lost his New York cabaret license for six years—the “un-years,” he called them, during which it was nearly impossible for Monk to work in clubs that served liquor (the backbone of the jazz economy) in his home city. Monk came back strong with a masterpiece album (*Brilliant Corners*) that won plaudits from the important critics, and with his triumphal initial run at the Five Spot. But just as he met with this flush of success, Monk found himself once again beaten down—this time literally, in 1958, by baton-wielding policemen in the parking lot of a Delaware motel where Monk, traveling to an engagement in Baltimore with his saxophonist Charlie Rouse and Nica in the Baroness's Bentley, made the mistake of stopping to ask for a glass of water.

Such horrific experiences intermingle throughout Kelley's biography with others of an almost gothic sensibility. Fire twice engulfed Monk's apartment, incinerating not just family wardrobes but also Monk's upright piano along with collections of sheet music, band charts, and studio session tapes. Meanwhile, Monk and his wife both battled debilitating physical ailments—Nellie, an abdominal ulcer that led to a lifetime of stomach and intestinal problems; Thelonious, an enlarged prostate that Kelley contends was the main reason he quit performing in 1976. (Monk died in 1982 after a stroke left him in a coma.) The suffering, mortal body is a recurrent figure in Kelley's narrative: to put it plainly, this is a book saturated with death. Monk had great difficulty dealing with death, and he had lots of practice. The body count of Monk's jazz world colleagues who passed prematurely is simply staggering. The list includes Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Bud Powell, Clifford Brown, Sonny Clark, Shadow Wilson, Ike Quebec, Ernie Henry, Denzil Best, Hall Overton, Elmo Hope, Scott La Faro, and John Coltrane. Monk could not bring himself to attend the funeral for his mother Barbara, enraging his sister Marion. At the gravesite of a nephew who died from a drug overdose, Monk made a scene by screaming in anger at the loss, one he felt even more deeply—family members told Kelley—than that of his beloved mother.

It must have been emotionally taxing for Robin Kelley, as he wrestled his prodigious volume of research into a working picture of Monk's day-to-day life, to reckon with this litany of hardship and misfortune. Kelley came to the project as a long-time Monk fan, as an amateur pianist good enough to burrow into Monk's intricate tunes and find their quirky logic, and—not least—as one of the most talented and prolific scholars of his generation. Trained as a labor historian, Kelley made his professional mark writing about Black working-class radicalism, grass-roots community politics, and popular culture, all his work punctuated with powerful insight into the complex dynamics of race and gender. Kelley's historical subjects are not victims: they don't just fight back against racism and economic oppression; in the course of doing so, they build their own social institutions, craft new modes of creative expression, and above all, find pleasure in the struggle. Kelley spent fourteen years arduously laboring on a book about a man whose music

has given him some of his own deepest pleasure. We should not be surprised, then, if Kelley, while paying witness to his favorite jazzman's ordeals and tribulations, should also—in the manner of the blues, Black culture's great tragicomic art form—bid us to see Thelonious Monk as a man who always confronted and often outwitted his demons.

Biography, at its best, is an act of reinvention. Kelley's project, at its most basic level, is an effort to extricate Monk from the myths that have defined his public persona since the 1940s. "The myths surrounding Monk have gotten in the way of the truth," Kelley writes, "and the truth about his life and music is fascinating and complicated—and no less original or creative than the myth" (p. xv). Old myths die hard, and in Kelley's search for "the truth" he dug through an impressive number of public archives and private papers; culled and sifted countless press clippings, court records, census schedules, and tax returns; and interviewed a large number of Monk's fellow musicians, friends, managers, and music industry associates. More valuable to Kelley than any of these sources, however, was his unfettered access to Monk family documents and private tapes, and the relationships he developed with Monk's son, the drummer T. S. Monk ("Toot"), his widow Nellie (before she passed in 2002), and various other of his kith and kin. (Monk's daughter Barbara ("Boo Boo"), born in 1953, died tragically from breast cancer in 1984.) The man Kelley came to know was not the reclusive and uncommunicative Thelonious Monk of myth—a figure who appeared only when mental illness forced him to withdraw, Kelley asserts—but rather a man who was "witty, incredibly generous, intensely family-oriented, curious, critical, and brutally honest" (p. xvi).

Kelley's book is not an "authorized" biography: his access to Monk's family didn't oblige him to share what he was writing or win prior approval for the finished manuscript. The book contains information that doesn't flatter Monk and that can't be easy for his surviving friends and family to process—perhaps most notably, Kelley's revelation that Monk missed Toot's birth in 1949, on the day that happened also to be Nellie's birthday, because he was mired in a period of drug use and possibly was strung out in a shooting gallery on East 14th Street. Throughout the book, Kelley judiciously balances family-generated evidence against his other sources and doesn't reflexively side with the family. In narrating the circumstances of Monk's arrest for marijuana possession outside the Royal Roost in 1948, for example, he remains agnostic about Nellie's claim that club management set her husband up, finding no independent corroborating evidence. Conversely, sometimes the book lacks the kind of memorably specific details one might expect from an "inside" story. Kelley tells us several times that Monk was a man of the world who stayed on top of politics and culture and relished a good argument; we never learn, alas, what books and periodicals the adult Monk read or what news shows he watched.

Kelley, however, does put to rest once and for all the long-standing myth that Monk was a musical primitive untouched by the corrupting influence of civilization. Monk continued to be described as a noble savage long after primitivism had become a discredited ideology in jazz criticism. The influential French critic Andre Hodeir insisted not only that Monk had no interest in "serious music," but that he "probably doesn't even know that such music exists" (p. xiv). Similar nonsense came from jazz pianist and educator John Mehegan, who claimed that Monk had no knowledge of the history of his instrument for the "simple reason that Monk is not [a] Western man. He is a Black man" (p. xiv). In fact, Kelley reveals, Monk was schooled not just in the stride style of the great African American pianists who preceded him, but also in the European classics. As the son of a bootstrapping mother determined to

instill in her children uplifting habits of work and culture, Monk, at age eleven, started formal piano lessons with an Austrian émigré who had studied under the concertmaster for the New York Philharmonic. Monk learned to play Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and Chopin so quickly and so well that this teacher, after just a few lessons, told the parent of another student: “He will go beyond me very soon” (p. 26).

Two years of classical training, augmented by family outings to symphonic concerts in Central Park, gave Monk a solid grounding in European concert music. This had to have played a role in the harmonic innovations Monk later introduced to jazz—just as other aspects of Monk’s pianism and musicality derived from his childhood exposure to his father’s blues harp and two-fisted barrelhouse piano; the foot-patting, hand-clapping gospel music of his mother’s Baptist church; and the calypso and rumba he heard blaring out the windows of his family’s West Indian neighbors in the San Juan Hill neighborhood on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Kelley’s discussion of Monk’s musical education beautifully captures jazz’s boundary-crossing hybridity, undermining simple notions of racial purity. Monk’s jazz aesthetic proved that the distinction between “Western” and “Black” has never been as absolute as either the Negritude or Black nationalist camps would have it.

The challenge for the biographer of a great Black jazz musician is to steer clear of a racialist mythology in which exceptional Blacks are both more and less human than their White worshippers. Monk *was* an unusual man. And if there is such a species as a musical genius, surely he was one of jazz’s versions of it. For the critics and commentators who made Monk famous, however, his originality was not an achievement he had to work for, it was simply an expression of his nature. Albert Goldman enunciated an article of faith among White hipsters when he wrote: “Monk’s brand of thinking comes from the soul and the blood rather than the mind, tapping into a well of racial memory that keeps the music pure, authentic, and black” (pp. 232–3). Primitivist precepts were less overtly racialized but no less obvious in Lewis Lapham’s description of Monk as an “intuitive and emotional man” who “talks, sleeps, eats, laughs, walks, or dances as the spirit moves him” (p. 357).

In such wildly oscillating discourses of difference, Monk is sometimes a super-virile man and at others a free-spirited child. Riverside Records tried to capitalize on the latter in an album cover—for the 1957 LP *Monk’s Music*—that pictured Monk sitting in a child’s red toy wagon. Kelley takes offense at the image, assuring us that “Thelonious was too cool, too masculine, and too angry to convey anything but black manhood” (p. 224). This is one of the rare moments in the book where Kelley strains to defend Monk’s dignity; in general, he allows the quotidian data he’s accumulated on Monk’s life and career speak for itself against the Monk mythology.

Often, Kelley shows, actions that burnished Monk’s reputation for eccentricity had their genesis in African and African American forms and practices unrecognized or misunderstood by the dominant culture. A famously sharp dresser, Monk was especially well known for his hats. Commentators seized on one in particular, a so-called “Chinese” number—or was it a “weird modernistic lampshade” as suggested by one wag?—taken to be evidence of Monk’s Orientalist and/or avant-gardist leanings. In truth, the lid came from Northern Ghana, a gift from jazz/highlife/mambo musician Guy Warren, and Monk delighted in its African provenance (p. 273). Likewise, Kelley explains, when Monk left his piano bench mid-number for his signature syncopated shuffle dance across the stage, he wasn’t trying to merge jazz with downtown performance art: he was (in an African sense) wearing the rhythm of the music; he was (in a Black Baptist church sense) yielding to the

ecstasy of the ritual; and he was (in a jazz sense) laying out so as to give his sidemen more space to improvise and experiment without feeling beholden to the chords he would otherwise have been comping on the piano.

Kelley thus provides the background necessary to understand conscious, practical, culturally-ingrained aspects of Monk's behavior and performance that Goldman, Lapham, and many other writers instead attributed to some sort of racial unconscious or mystical intuitiveness. Just as importantly, Kelley's focus on Monk's family life helps us think about him (and jazz in general) outside of an ideological framework in which the music serves as a dehistoricized symbol of individual freedom and the autonomy of the creative self. Monk once was quoted as saying "jazz and freedom go hand in hand," and the sound bite found its way into Cold War-era propaganda campaigns linking jazz to American ideals of liberty and democracy. This was a time, alas, when the publishers of *Down Beat* refused to put Black jazz musicians on their magazine cover, and civil rights workers were showing up dead in backwoods Mississippi. Monk performed in benefit concerts for CORE and SNCC, but he resisted interviewer's efforts to pigeonhole his music as some sort of commentary on Black oppression, and he felt patronized when left-liberal types implied that he should become a more engaged celebrity-activist. "I think I made a contribution to the movement without having to be there," Monk said (p. 343). He might have been thinking about the daily violence he experienced growing up in a tough neighborhood ("I did all that fighting with ofays when I was a kid. . . There's no reason I should go through that Black Power shit now" (pp. 18–19)); or about the racial hostility in his children's New York City public schools that occasioned their move to New England private schools Thelonious and Nellie could scarcely afford. Whatever "freedom" may have inhered in Monk's music, his feeling for the word could never be divorced from his life as a son, sibling, husband, father, and uncle.

Kelley keeps us abreast of the larger public race story as he narrates Monk's life, enabling us to track what was happening in the jazz world alongside the Montgomery bus boycott, African decolonization, and other modal events in the Black freedom struggle. The real breakthrough in the book, however, is its illumination of the domestic sphere, not just for its own sake but as a crucial space for understanding Monk as a jazz musician. The vast preponderance of Monk's musical life—practicing, composing, mentoring the many musicians who came for instruction—took place in overcrowded apartments where Monk cared for his children (and often those of relatives and friends) while Nellie was out working a series of "regular" jobs. The multi-instrumentalist David Amram was one of the venerable musicians—the list includes Randy Weston, Sonny Rollins, Jackie McLean, and Ran Blake—who made the pilgrimage to the Upper West Side to seek out Monk's counsel. In a four or five hour initial visit, Amram and Monk worked on musical issues while Monk simultaneously looked after Toot and entertained a couple of unexpected visitors from the neighborhood. "Thelonious had a lot of people that loved him that were neighbors and friends of his family," Amram told Kelley. "And I just got this tremendous family sense, right in this small place in New York City of somebody that really had a home" (p. 195).

The typically peripatetic jazz life is famously challenging to home and family commitments; perhaps this is the sense in which Monk truly was an eccentric. Herein lies the second great irony of this book, this one sweet rather than cruel: it took a village to raise and sustain Monk, but he in turn created his own village and watched over it like a beneficent elder. One of the most affecting scenes Kelley paints is of the Five Spot, when Monk would show up for work (usually a couple of hours late) with Nica, Nellie, and the kids, and a gaggle of underage nieces and nephews. The kids

were encouraged to treat the club like a family rec room—just as Monk himself did, sometimes dozing off at the piano, or wandering into the kitchen for a sandwich in the middle of a set. As a bandleader Monk was no Benny Goodman-style martinet, and his approach to parenting mocked the culture of *Father Knows Best*. But there was a heterodox logic (and maybe even a philosophy) behind Monk's style of nurturance. Monk the pedagogue was known for delivering deft aphorisms meant to inspire musicians to find their own voice: "Don't be so perfect" he whispered in the ear of singer Abbey Lincoln (p. 300). Monk the parent, Kelley leads us to believe, was way ahead of his time not just as a stay-at-home dad in the age of the Organization Man, but in encouraging his children to think for themselves.

When we look at Monk in this way, we can see the strain of commentary depicting him as an overgrown child as colored not just by racist undertones but also by gender anxiety: namely, the crisis of American masculinity that produced first the *Playboy* bachelor and then the blaxploitation macho dude. With his focus on Monk as a family man, Kelley helps carve out a new space of jazz masculinity: the Monk of this biography is one of the very rare Black male jazz musicians whose status as an icon of cool does not hinge in significant part on a reputation for sexual adventurism. Monk's relationship with Nica—forever the subject of innuendo—emerges in this book as essentially a family affair: the Baroness and Nellie were not competitors for Monk's love, but rather partners in the difficult enterprise of keeping Monk and his career pointed in the right direction. With the triangular relationship framed in this way, Kelley is able to plausibly explain Monk's move to Nica's mansion in Weehawken, New Jersey—where he spent his last ten years dressing every day in suit and tie, watching TV game shows, and staying away from the piano—not as a separation from Nellie but as an eminently practical solution to a family dilemma. Thelonious needed space and resources to deal with his health problems; Nellie, taxed for years by the administrative demands of Monk's contracts, royalties, and permission requests, was taking her turn using the apartment as a work space for a start-up business in healthful vegetable juices.

As a rule Kelley doesn't romanticize Monk's family life any more than he does the fractious bebop family or the rough-and-tumble jazz world writ large. Thus he tells us that Nellie's visits to see her husband across the Hudson came fewer and farther between with time's passage, and that Nica grew resentful of having to shoulder more and more of the burden of caring for Monk. Consequently, not all readers will be persuaded by the uncharacteristically sentimental vignette Kelley paints at the book's end: Monk, a year or two before his death, finally sits down at the piano with housemate Barry Harris to play—in what Kelley characterizes as a nostalgic valentine to Nellie—hundreds and hundreds of choruses of the love ballad "My Ideal." Some mysteries of heart and mind may elude even the most meticulously detailed, richly textured, and deeply felt biography. That may be especially true of the biography of a jazz musician and composer—and true American original—who titled one of his tunes "Misterioso."

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Most of the major twentieth-century jazz performers have already been biographical subjects several times over. Every few years, journalists, music enthusiasts, memoirists and scholars, working seemingly in concert with the reissue programs of major and independent recording labels, present new or slightly revised examinations of the lives—and occasionally the music—of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. Some of those writers, to be sure, endeavor more than others to connect the experiences those musicians had to broader social and historical currents, so that Duke Ellington has become inextricably linked to the Harlem Renaissance or John Coltrane to the Black Power struggles of the 1960s. Such links have been speculative and impressionistic rather than demonstrated, however, for Harlem Renaissance promoters were much more focused on the work of classical musicians like William Grant Still than they were on jazz performers (Floyd 1990) and John Coltrane resisted, without dissembling, the conflation of the sound of his music with protest (Kofsky 1970).¹

Perhaps unable to establish even tenuous links to established narratives, fewer writers have addressed the life and work of pianist, composer, and bandleader Thelonious Sphere Monk (1917–1982). Beyond monographs by Fitterling (1997), Buin (1988) and Gourse (1997); a smattering of scholarly articles, theses, and other resources (Arndt 2002; DeVaux 1999; Gabbard 1999; Koch 1983; Sheridan 2001; Tucker 2004; Van der Blik 2001; Wilde 1997); and the documentaries *Straight, No Chaser* (1988) and *Thelonious Monk: American Composer* (1993), for example, the echoes of Monk's influence during his lifetime and after have resonated only at the outer edges of public discourse. Where and when the musician appears, his invocation likely has more to do with his purported eccentricity: his penchant for wearing hats during performances, his dancing during the solos of his sidemen, and his seemingly naive, percussive, splayed-finger piano technique. In these cases, the sounding quality of the music, the phenomenon that held listeners captive long enough for those behaviors to register, is ironically muted amidst the din of the more sensational aspects of Monk's public persona. On those rare occasions when the focus is on the particulars of Monk's music—with its distinctive, internally consistent approaches to melodic construction, harmony, and form—it is often the social and the cultural that are drowned out (with Solis 2008 being a notable exception).

Robin D. G. Kelley, a scholar of African American labor and history as well as a cultural critic on the faculty of the University of Southern California, has written a biography of Monk intended to bridge the apparent gap and to present a more complete picture than either the extant sensational or analytic works. Against those, for example, who would describe Monk's playing as primitive or untutored, Kelley argues in the book's prelude that “Monk wasn't born with some kind of natural musical knowledge and ability, nor was he entirely self-taught (though he did have perfect pitch). He received a formidable music education and worked very hard to achieve his distinctive sound” (p. xv). Likewise, to those who might see Monk's public persona as indicative of a brand of mad genius, Kelley offers the following caution: “He got a kick out of fooling people, particularly those whom he thought were too lazy or afraid to think for themselves. One of his favorite pranks was to stare intensely at a spot on the ceiling or in the sky, either in a crowded room or on a street corner. Invariably, several people would look up with him, searching for whatever

elusive object apparently fascinated him. It was an experiment in mass psychology that brought him great amusement” (p. xvii). And those analysts who might divorce Monk the musician from Monk the social agent will learn that “For most of his life he remained engaged and fascinated with his surroundings. Politics, art, commerce, nature, architecture, [and] history were not beyond his ken, and Monk was the kind of man who loved a good debate, despite stories of his inability to communicate” (pp. xv–xvi).

Kelley’s attempt to set the record straight is the result of fourteen years of research: an exhaustive reading of secondary literature on Monk; consultation of public records, private recordings and other primary sources, many of which have gone unexamined or unacknowledged by previous researchers; interviews with members of Monk’s family, including his late widow Nellie (née Smith), as well as his business associates, fellow musicians, producers, critics and friends; and analysis of recorded and live performances as well as documentary sources. The density of the book’s notes, which comprise nearly a fifth of its text (excluding other front and back matter), is a testament to the thoroughness with which Kelley approached his task. Using him as an example, future biographers might derive a realistic understanding of what biographical research requires as well as the kinds of dividends such work might pay.

Some of the most illuminating passages in the book emerge from the meticulousness of Kelley’s investigation and his training as a conventional historian. He traces Thelonious Monk’s genealogy to the early 1800s (pp. 5–14) through birth and census records as well as newspaper accounts, and connects the northern migration of Barbara Monk (mother of Thelonious) and her family to the rural-to-urban, southern-to-northern migrations of African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using interview data and copyright registration forms, he describes the 1943 completion of “I Need You So,” a ballad in C minor that Monk hoped would become a hit pop song. It did become a hit of sorts, once it was retitled “Round Midnight,” but through a tangled series of events described in the text, Monk found himself unable to claim more than a third of the royalties from the tune (pp. 87–88, 101–102). Kelley likewise contextualizes the interest of some jazz musicians in Islam in the late 1940s (pp. 126–127) through his reading scholarship on African American religious life and the contemporary Black press. Even more, drawing from private reel-to-reel tapes made by Nellie Monk of her husband’s practicing, Kelley corroborates interview data that detail the ways that Monk painstakingly worked through, reharmonized, and transformed popular songs—spending, in one case, eighty-four minutes on Ned Washington and George Bassman’s “I’m Getting Sentimental over You” (pp. 217–218). Laudably, given how reluctant most commentators on jazz are to “relate the history of the music to the messy and occasionally sordid economic circumstances of its production” (DeVeaux 1997, p. 12), Kelley uses items from producer Teo Macero’s papers at the New York Public Library to provide readers with a glimpse of the negotiations leading to and the financial terms of Monk’s contract with Columbia Records (pp. 316–318).

Indeed, moving through the biography, a reader will see both Monk and American culture in broader terms. She will learn, for example, of the experiences of a five-year-old Thelonious Monk had in Batavia, New York, in August of 1923 under the auspices of the Fresh Air Fund (pp. 21–22), will be reminded (or informed) that Jim Crow existed outside the South (p. 108) and come to understand why Monk preferred that his sidemen learn his music aurally (pp. 127, 193, 195). Likewise, starting with a piece by Bill Gottlieb in *Down Beat* in September 1947, Kelley reveals where the story of Monk’s eccentricity began and how it propagated without alter-

ation for years (pp. 124–126, 130–132), despite the earnest efforts of some writers (e.g., Brown 1958) to present the musician in a different light. Endearingly, perhaps, one will read of Monk's way of introducing his young relatives to famous musicians during his extended engagement at the Five Spot in 1957. Quoting Jackie Bonneau (née Smith), Kelley writes: "He'd bring Coltrane over and say, 'Coltrane, this is my niece Jackie. You need to know her,' or 'Meet my son, Toot. He's an important cat.' It was as if we were the celebrities" (p. 235). Taken together, those examples suggest that Kelley has produced the most comprehensive and sympathetic portrait of Monk to date, one that at once explores the musician's career and humanizes him.

Nonetheless, the fine-grained research that is the biography's greatest asset is also the source of its many weaknesses. Confronted with so much material from such disparate sources, Kelley had a major challenge in determining how to craft a narrative that both went beyond the chronological chaining of his sources and harmonized the tonal differences between them. Where the former was concerned, part of his solution was an emplotment strategy that relied heavily on foreshadowing. Each chapter, for example, has as its title a quotation that appears somewhere inside it. A reader aware of that device might enjoy reading chapter five, titled "Why Can't You Play Music like the Ink Spots?" just to learn who uttered those words and under what circumstances. Likewise, each chapter ends with a paragraph or a series of sentences that hint at the material in the one to follow. Kelley thus closes chapter fourteen with Monk's looking forward to "his next big gig—the *Tonight Show* with Steve Allen" (p. 186). Too often, though, the use of foreshadowing transforms the story of Monk from an oscillation between triumph and tragedy into melodrama. In the final paragraph of chapter sixteen, for instance, Kelley describes Monk's being uncommunicative with another driver and a police officer after a minor winter automobile accident. The last two sentences of that paragraph might as well be a filmic cut to a black screen on which the words "To Be Continued. . ." forebodingly appear: "A fender bender is not a crime, but the officer felt compelled to take [Monk] into custody, or at least out of the freezing cold. He left a note on Monk's Buick Special: 'Psycho taken to Bellevue'" (p. 213). The story of Monk suddenly becoming unresponsive and perhaps needing to be hospitalized seems dramatic enough without the ending flourish.

Such passages point toward a larger issue in the biography: the tonal inconsistency in Kelley's writing. In the book's best moments, his voice is that of the sober historian and researcher, presenting data and making reasonable inferences from them—such as when he describes Monk's collapse at home in May of 1969 (pp. 396–397) or the questionable nature of most accounts of the "birth of bebop" at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem in the 1940s (pp. 67–68). At other times, though, Kelley writes with the voice of an amateur historian willing to posit connections between events without convincing evidence. In discussing, for example, the January 30, 1956 delivery of a Steinway piano to the apartment of the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, he writes:

Anxious to christen the piano, Thelonious showed up that same night and jammed for hours while Nica and her friends talked and drank the night away. The usually festive atmosphere was subdued by news that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the twenty-seven-year-old minister who had been leading a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama to end mistreatment and segregation on the city's buses, had survived an assassination attempt . . . On the day Nica's piano arrived, white terrorists tossed a dynamite bomb onto Dr. King's front porch. No one was hurt, but it made clear to many observers, Monk included, that the price for

social justice was high and the struggle for basic human rights in the South was little short of war. Although Monk never openly embraced nonviolence, he did admire Dr. King and the Montgomery movement's unwavering determination. (pp. 201–202)

Upon following the note reference that comes a few sentences later, a reader will see listed a series of sources describing the work of Dr. King in the 1950s, but nothing supporting the assertions regarding Monk's opinions on what was happening in the south. Only much later (p. 330), does Kelley offer evidence of Monk's skepticism regarding nonviolence.

Moreover, that passage includes the third of Kelley's voices: that of the entertainment or Sunday supplement journalist (p. xiv) who is apparently close to his subject and can (almost) read his thoughts. Most obviously, that voice registers through the false/forced intimacy of first or nickname address—"Thelonious," "Nica"—when the more formal use of last names would cause no confusion. It registers as well through the informality of phrases like "jammed for hours." When considered alongside others like "tickling the ivories" (p. 24), "a teenaged boy who loved sports, pretty girls and playing piano—not necessarily in that order" (p. 31), "little countermelodies" (p. 71) or "famous around these parts" (p. 110) as well as non-probative information—do we really need to know when Monk and Nellie Smith made love for the first time (p. 99)?—such phrases perhaps show Kelley trying to reach a more populist audience, one that might find sober historians boring. Indeed, as a scholar he paradoxically endorses a particular brand of anti-intellectual response in musing over the "collective yawn" that must have arisen when Hall Overton spoke, following a performance, about Monk's use of sixth and ninth intervals as well as form in a presentation at the New School for Social Research in June of 1963 (p. 340). Here, Kelley perhaps goes beyond assuming intimacy with his subjects to reassure (some of) his readers that he's not as square as the musicologically oriented Mr. Overton.

While some readers may welcome (or not notice) the informality in the text, I found it at best distracting and at worst troubling. After all, it was surely Kelley's reputation as an academic historian that allowed him to examine materials that—and interview people who—might otherwise have been unavailable. The prelude of the book, as I noted previously, promises an examination that will go beyond myth and sensationalism to grapple with the particular substance and complexities of Monk's work and experiences. For this reader, at least, the changes in tone undercut that aim and threaten to trivialize the considerable effort that comprised the researching and writing of the biography.

Indeed, there are two areas where, failing all else, I had hoped that Kelley's research might prove more revelatory, or at least more synthetic, than previous work: in its examination of Monk's rumored mental illness and in its analysis of his compositions and performances. Where the former is concerned, Kelley writes in the prelude:

Thelonious suffered from bipolar disorder, the signs of which are evident as early as the 1940s . . . Some writers romanticize manic depression and/or schizophrenia as characteristics of creative genius, but the story of Monk's physical and mental ailments is essentially a tragedy, a story of his slow decline and the pain it caused to those closest to him. Its manifestations were episodic, so he continued to function and make incredible music up until the day of his retirement in 1976. (p. xvii)

Given such a matter-of-fact diagnosis where other writers shied away from saying anything definitive (cf. Gourse 1997, pp. 112–130, 290–292), a reader might expect, again, convincing evidence. Describing Monk's "sleepless nights and early-morning visits to friends" as well as his "crashes" which included his falling asleep at the piano, Kelley suggests that they were early signs of mental illness (p. 68). Almost immediately thereafter, he observes that nightclubs were places where narcotics and alcohol were readily available (pp. 68–69) and that, alongside piano, "Monk's other obsessions . . . were gin and reefer" (p. 74), his purported drunkenness and unreliability costing him paying gigs (p. 78). Still, Kelley does not acknowledge the possibility that the musician's drinking—and his use of amphetamines like Benzedrine—might have factored in both his frenetic activity and his inability to remain awake.

After avoiding explicit discussion for nearly half of the book, Kelley addresses Monk's mental issues in chapter seventeen and suggests that the musician's behaviors were at times "indications of cyclothymia, or a depressed state" and at others "hypomania, or a manic state" (pp. 214–215). To go from "indications" to a certain diagnosis, however, seems premature. Indeed, even as he examines other psychiatric interventions—doctors at Grafton State Hospital near Boston prescribing Monk chlorpromazine (Thorazine) in 1959 (p. 267), others at New York's Gracie Square Hospital switching him to lithium in 1972 (pp. 431–433)—Kelley is unable to present anything other than *prescriptions* and a shaky understanding of the heritability of mental disorders to support his diagnosis. Judith Schlesinger (2009), a reviewer better able than I to assess psychiatric terminology as well as the evidence on offer, has also questioned Kelley's certainty. She observes, for example, that he misconstrues the meanings of cyclothymia and hypomania and that, given the readiness with which White psychiatrists diagnosed Black men as paranoid schizophrenics in the 1950s (a fact which Kelley acknowledges on p. 214), it is strange that no doctors attributed that condition to Monk when he was first hospitalized. Indeed, Kelley's numerous mentions of Monk's drug use, the negative interactions alcohol, amphetamines, and other drugs might have had with Thorazine (p. 268), and the various life events that "triggered" episodes make Schlesinger's suggestion that there might have been other factors at play seem worth considering.

Where the analysis of music and sound are concerned, the text has similar problems. The occasional mention of Monk's use of whole-tone scales or tone clusters notwithstanding, the language used to describe the sound of music is less the precise variety that one might get from musicians or music analysts and more the metaphoric kind one might expect from a critic in the popular press. Thus, in paraphrasing Raymond Horricks, Kelley mentions Monk's disrupting a jam session with his off-beat accompaniment and "strange harmonics" (pp. 172–173). It's unclear whether Kelley is borrowing the latter phrase, but in any event he seems unaware that only a writer unfamiliar or unconcerned with analytic language might use it, since the noun "harmonic" refers not to chords or harmonies, but to the acoustic constituent elements called overtones. Monk definitely played what some musicians and fans regarded as strange *harmonies*, but he wasn't generally given to the kind of experimentation that would have involved his reaching into the piano—the only way he might produce isolated harmonics.

Likewise, commenting on the budding friendship between Monk and pianist Elmo Hope, Kelley writes, "Indeed, in Monk [Hope] found a kindred spirit, a fellow composer committed to creating a new architecture for improvisational music" (p. 80). Rhetorically, the possibility of a "new architecture" seems fitting as a way to index the originality of Monk's contributions to jazz's development. In reality, though,

the changes occasioned by his work were more moderate. Like many other (jazz) composers, Monk played with form, but he didn't fundamentally change the ways in which musicians interacted with one another while improvising. That is, where he deviated from conventions like the 32-bar song form, he did so by substituting *other* forms. In other words, rather than calling "Nice Work If You Can Get It" and having his band improvise using its 32-bar, AABA (8+8+8+8) cycle, he might make them work harder by calling "Coming on the Hudson," which featured an 18½-bar, AABA (5+5+3½+5) cycle, or "Brilliant Corners" (22 bars, ABA', 8+7+7).² In any of those scenarios, though, the musicians were still using repeated cycles—and their attendant melodies, harmonies, and metric frameworks—as a basis for improvisation. The architecture, as such, was less new than it was modified.

Kelley does include, in an appendix, a "technical note on Monk's music" (pp. 459–460) in which he attempts to explain some of the signature elements of Monk's style—e.g., his fondness for minor sixth chords—but confuses the discussion more than he clarifies it. That is, while a C half-diminished chord and an E-flat minor sixth chord do contain different arrangements of the same pitches, their functions are not always identical. In the Western European tonal system and particularly in jazz musicians' adaptations of it, the former is unstable: it has to be followed by or resolve to a limited set of other harmonies. The latter, in contrast, can be for jazz performers a stable sonority, a point of rest (cf. Feurzeig 1997, pp. 70–71). In each case, the context rather than the arrangement of pitches determines the function of the chord. Such moments, where nuance is absent, contribute to the impression that the weakest element of this biography is its discussion of music. Sadly, earlier drafts of the book apparently contained more extensive discussion of Monk's music, but Kelley had to cut more than 70,000 words from his manuscript before publication.³ Accurate or not, Kelley's comments on dozens of individual tracks from throughout Monk's career might lead readers to purchase Monk recordings and to determine for themselves, for instance, how "Monk deliberately roughs . . . up" (p. 128) the performance of "Off Minor" on one of his 1947 Blue Note recording sessions. Those comments might, in addition, lead to a minor reappraisal of the work of Herman Chittison, a pianist whose influence on a young Monk is obvious in hindsight, though Kelley is one of the few commentators to make the connection explicit (pp. 36–37).

Throughout *Thelonious Monk*, Kelley is remarkably sympathetic to Barbara and Nellie Monk. He acknowledges at nearly every available moment the roles that they, as well as the Baroness de Koenigswarter, played in nurturing and financially supporting Monk throughout his life (see, for example, pp. 40, 304). They were there when his income prospects were dim, and were crucially there to intervene when he, for whatever reasons, was incapable of caring for himself in the most basic sense. Nonetheless, Kelley's sympathy for Thelonious Monk is deeper. Indeed, the author seems too willing at points to excuse the musician's bad behavior, perhaps on the grounds that such behavior was a prerequisite or, more charitably, a prelude to musical greatness. In the months before Thelonious Monk III was born, for example, Monk would disappear for up to three days at a time. Kelley explains:

The pressure to make money, the critical dismissal of his music, and the daunting responsibility of [not-yet-born] child were too much for Thelonious. He turned to drugs to help him forget—bennies [Benzedrine], weed, and occasionally heroin. He started hanging out in a shooting gallery on East 14th Street. He was never a *bona fide* junkie; he could go weeks without a fix . . . The day his son was born Thelonious was nowhere to be found. (p. 151)

Kelley observes that Nellie's sister-in-law Geraldine helped her, but says little more about the event other than that when Monk reappeared, "he was ecstatic; he adored his son and doted on the boy like most fathers and tried to do right by his namesake" (pp. 151–152). The recounting of these events, considered alongside an incident with George Wein (p. 308), might have been an occasion for Kelley to explore Monk's selfishness, insensitivity, and misogyny. Instead, he almost implicitly reinforces the connection between madness and creativity that he strives so hard in other places to sever.

These criticisms aside, *Thelonious Monk* is a major piece of work. The depth of Kelley's research, his willingness to pursue the project for more than a decade and his interweaving of cultural history, labor history, and musical history have resulted in a book that, in the end, does present a more complex view of its subject. While readers may come away no more certain of exactly why and how Monk's music was important nor whether and how Monk was mentally ill, they will understand better the frustrations faced by touring and recording African American musicians in the twentieth century, the individual dedication and external support artists sometimes need to develop, and, ultimately, the ways in which figures like Monk are also sons, brothers, uncles, fathers, and friends. The music comes not from some otherworldly space, but from the minds and fingers of flesh-and-blood human beings.

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NOTES

1. An interview with John Coltrane (pp. 224–243), included as an appendix to this book, calls into question the "parallel" (p. 65) Kofsky posits between the life of Malcolm X and the development of jazz from the 1940s to the 1960s. Indeed, in response to the author's repeated attempts to link the musician's work definitively to Black nationalism or protest, Coltrane emphasizes his musical and ethical interest in spirituality and the common core of humanity—in short, in his being "a force for good" (p. 241).
2. From a technical standpoint, there are no "half" bars in "Coming on the Hudson." Its B-section consists of three bars in 4/4 time and one bar in 2/4 time, with the latter being labeled a half bar by Kelley. Interestingly, the text, perhaps because of editing errors, describes the forms of both "Hudson . . ." and "Brilliant Corners" as longer than they are: as twenty-two and thirty bars, respectively (pp. 241, 210–211).
3. See Kelley's "Outtakes!" at <http://www.monkbook.com/outtakes/> (Accessed September 8, 2010).

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