

## THELONIOUS MONK: MONASTIC, MAD, MAGICAL

by Gail Brennan/John Clare

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*[This review of the documentary film *Straight No Chaser* appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on September 15, 1990.]*

A red menagerie lion runs around the world, and an equally fabulous thin line separates genius from madness. The second of these propositions is sometimes true, but a thin line also separates many otherwise unexceptional people from mental disorder.

Nevertheless, Thelonious Sphere Monk embodied the genius/madness legend so spectacularly that in the late 1950s, when he finally gained some recognition, it was thought that publicists were playing up his eccentricities.

In fact, the full extent of Monk's strangeness was not made public until the release of the documentary *Straight No Chaser*. It is clear now that his curious detachment assumed, intermittently, the dimensions of schizophrenic withdrawal.

Thelonious Sphere Monk is not a nickname. Monk was given his father's name and passed it on to his son. He spent most of his life in Harlem, first with his mother, and then with his wife and children.

Without a strong woman to care for him, Monk - as his son maintains in the film — would probably not have been able to create his music, and may even have been institutionalised.



*Nellie Monk (left) with Thelonious...*

He repaid the devotion of his wife Nellie — whose thin, black, determined figure appears so movingly in the film — with an apparent lack of interest in other women, which was probably all he had to offer.

Yet Monk was a brilliant scholar and a star basketball player at school. It is not clear when his disorder first manifested itself (although Thelonious Monk Jr says that he is sure Nellie knew what she was taking on).



*Monk at the piano: his style was the modernisation of the earliest forms of jazz piano...*

Monk's first trip away from home as a teenager took him down South as the pianist with a hot gospel show. This influence, as well as that of the great Harlem pianists, was always present in his playing. A home boy, he was the reverse of Duke Ellington, who wrote on trains and buses.

When a degree of fame took Monk out on the road, the stream of brilliant, naive, ingenious and often profoundly beautiful compositions began to dwindle. I last saw him in the 1970s. His final withdrawal was almost complete. He was speaking only to Nellie, oblivious of his old friends Dizzy Gillespie and Max Roach, and he played almost nothing.



*Monk on the cover of Time Magazine...*

Later I saw footage of the same concert package in another city. There, Monk played, and the most amazing, dark and solemnly shining music issued from the piano. Although he was called avant garde, it could equally be said that his style was the modernisation of the earliest forms of jazz piano. With an uncanny ear for the way

intervals "beat" against each other, changing colour as one tone mounted or diminished in volume, he created perhaps the most distinctive piano "sound" of all.

With a system of often blindingly simple additions, subtractions and refractions, he could totally change the character of a traditional sequence, so that his playing seemed to stand in relation to that of his contemporaries as quantum mechanics stands to Newton's laws.

The beginning of a Monk solo can sometimes suggest a drunk pitching a clatter of loose change on the bar, and then shuffling it, magically, into denominations. Where Bud Powell, for instance, flowed and raced in a basically linear style, punctuated by stabbed milestones of the chord progression, Monk created chains of solid, modular forms, and sequences of splashes, thunders, silences, and pings. The solidity of his touch could be formidable.

On the classic album *Monk's Music*, he follows Art Blakey's crescendo drum rolls with heavy, bright chords that are like ingots crashing into shallow water. Whole tone runs follow like bubbles. Beneath all the quantum leaps and flitting allusions, and sonic illusions, lay a beat that practically nagged in its metronomic doggedness.



*Abbey Lincoln: she put lyrics to Monk's composition Blue Monk...*

A hammered dissonance might persist through changing harmonic colours, so tart and stubborn, yet thrilling, that it is like pain experienced under laughing gas. And Monk did persist, through all the years of neglect, despite periods of disorientation, naively confident that his music would be understood.

He is still an enthusiasm of the minority, but that minority is reborn in every generation: Monk, Coltrane, Hawkins, Ornette, Miles ... the deep stuff keeps surfacing.

Abbey Lincoln put words to *Blue Monk*, and they are corny, I suppose - full of paying your dues, life is a school, trial and error, loss and gain, and, oh yes, "Monkery's a long, slow train". Nevertheless, I can't hear them without feeling a smart of tears.

Enjoy these: *Monk's Music*, *Brilliant Corners*, *Monk And Coltrane*, *Thelonious Alone In San Francisco* (Riverside), *Thelonious Monk Underground* (CBS). Study them.