

TRINKLE TINKLE BANG BANG: PIANO JOYS

by Ian Muldoon*

A jazz pianist can cause an atheist to gasp “sweet Jesus”. When Barney McAll plays the blues in a cathedral he makes electricity. A teenager is somewhat bored by Otis Blackwell’s song *All Shook Up* even by Elvis Presley’s efforts interpreting that song, but he hears for the first time Phineas (fine-us) Newborn Jr play Clifford Brown’s *Daahoud* and he is dazzled and excited, completely “shook up”. To some, the piano solo by Bill Evans on *Flamenco Sketches* seems to be art that has existed forever, handed down from years past by Apollo himself.



Phineas (fine-us) Newborn Jr...

In one memorable personal experience I heard Roger Frampton play *Flamenco Sketches* at a recital in Bellingen, NSW, and I made the comment afterwards to him “You should have been where I sat, if I may say so, that was an amazing interpretation of a classic.” He laughed and said, “It is a classic” at which we both smiled.

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child’s ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

What is it about this instrument, the piano? And the pianists, great artists such as the late Mr Frampton?

The composer Purcell used the word “piano” in 1683. Jane Austen used it in her novel *Persuasion*, “James Benwick is rather too piano for me.” In 1922 Aldous Huxley remarked in a letter: “Aunt Nettie is with us; but happily she is in a very calm and piano mood so that she is quite an agreeable companion.” As a noun in 1730, it was described as “an harpsichord on which may be performed either on the *forts* or *pianos*.” It appears in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* of 1759: “that soft and irresistible piano of a voice.” In 1803 *piano* is used in a report as a contraction of *pianoforte*: “There is scarcely a house without a piano.”



The late Roger Frampton: he laughed and said it is a classic...

PHOTO CREDIT BRENDON KELSON COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

In 1946 the word came to include the meaning of playing: “He is studying piano.” “Piano” came to be defined by the OED as "a musical instrument producing tones by means of hammers, operated by levers from a keyboard, which strike metal strings (piano wire made from best quality plain carbon steel is drawn to a tensile strength of 120 tones per square inch), the vibrations being stopped by dampeners; it is commonly furnished with pedals for regulating the volume of sound". Its invention is usually credited to Cristofori of Padua circa 1710 and essentially is a dulcimer, provided with keys and dampers, but in other respects imitates the clavichord and harpsichord which it has replaced.

"Soft loud" - piano forte - and so I have asked myself whilst listening to Gil Evans: is the piano a percussive or stringed instrument?



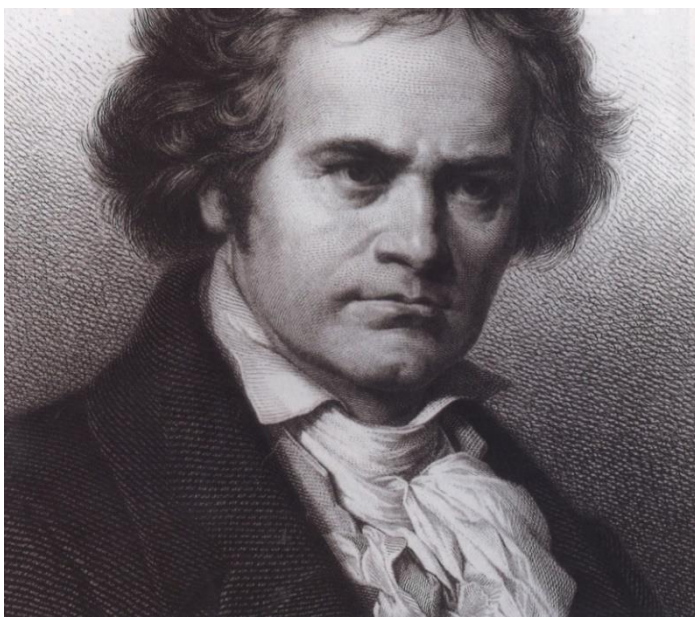
Duke Ellington: banging really unlikely chords with a most un-European physicality... PHOTO CREDIT HERMAN LEONARD

Consider first the master Duke Ellington. Watch, if you may, Duke when he accompanies his orchestra banging really unlikely chords with a most un-European physicality (watch his shoulders and back move in old concert footage). Cecil Taylor has said that these Ducal moves were the starting point, that led him to Monk and Powell, and thence to his “88 tuned drums”.



Cecil Taylor: he approached the piano as 88 tuned drums...

Cecil Taylor approached the piano as “88 tuned drums”. Dave Brubeck and Andrew Hill and Bud Powell had a similar approach. The composer Beethoven explored the extremes of both *piano* and *forte* in his piano sonatas, the former in the first movement of Sonata No 14 which is *pianissimo* then *piano* and the latter in the opening *fortissimo* movement of Sonata No 29 *The Hammerklavier*.



Ludwig Van Beethoven: he explored the extremes of both piano and forte in his piano sonatas...

As to performance, and how it can vary according to the mood, time, place, composition, accompaniment, I recall when walking one evening along Macquarie Place in Sydney and hearing some Taylor-like *fortissimo* piano jazz coming up from a small window near the gutter - it was Judy Bailey performing at The Basement. If one was used to her tinkling on the ABC's *Play School*, then this performance at The Basement showed another side to this amazing pianist.

But for a master class on range and possibilities Roger Frampton's *Pure Piano* of 1992, recorded at 2MBS-FM in 1989 and 1990 on a grand piano, stands as musical testament and legacy of his contribution to jazz pianism.



The first track *Travel Tales* has a powerful percussive opening but later moves into gentle bell-like melodies then meditative moments decaying into silence. *Transformation* at five minutes brings to mind the style of Ran Blake. It also explores discordant sounds and the power of silence. There is a conversation of sorts between percussive insistent chords of sound and gentle plinks. The eleven-minute meditative *Before* explores the high end whilst the left builds to a climax then retreats traversing a range of moods, concluding with a question? *Attacca-Staccato* reminds the listener of Lennie Tristano and his experimental work. *Let's Do It* has a percussive approach in the school of Misha Mengelberg (cf his *Impromptus*).

As for arranging, take a listen to Frampton's take on the warhorse *I Got Rhythm* on the Naxos CD *The Gift*. Roger Frampton was a musician's musician and worthy of inclusion in *88 The Giants of Jazz Piano* by Robert L Doerschuk (Backbeat Books, San Francisco, 2001). Other pianists not included in that book include Jessica Williams and Andrew Hill and Hampton Hawes and Denny Zeitlin. The selection by Doerschuk is personal. Nevertheless, as a pianist he has some interesting musical insights into 88 jazz pianists which can aid understanding especially for students of the music.

As to the instrument, the piano, in its modern variant, there are over 12,000 individual parts.



A relatively young Thelonious Monk: a profoundly original (and difficult) artist...
PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

The documentary *Note by Note: The Making of Steinway L1037* is well worth a look, as it "follows the painstaking yearlong process of building and fine-tuning a handmade nine-foot concert grand piano in the Steinway company's factory in Astoria, Queens". In the film Marcus Roberts, Bill Charlap, Kenny Barron and Hank Jones (among others) give the piano a test run. I choose to remember this film as testimony to the human connection between the idea of the piano and its realisation through hundreds of individual hands that screw, wind, glue, cut, twist, fit, turn, adjust, push, polish, stretch, lever, wind, and so on until the exquisite beast stands before the pianist waiting to be coached into life - to sing, to trill, to paradiddle, to trinkle and tinkle to orchestrate and harmonise and swing.

The Steinway instrument, this piano, the "grand" piano, is the creation of many unique human artisans, so that each edition is in itself unique. A jazz pianist is one who first attempts to somehow attain the skills to "play" this creation, with the long-term goal of finding his or her own voice on it. No small feat. And how distinctive that voice can be! Who cannot recognise Erroll Garner? Or Art Tatum? Or Dave Brubeck? Or Teddy Wilson? Or Bill Evans?

The only right worth fighting for is the right to our own modest peculiarities - a belief manifest in the works of Vasily Grossman, a Russian Jew who lived under Stalin. So the most complex and peculiar of musical objects created by humans becomes the great jazz instrument, because it is through that instrument that individual musicians can best express their individuality, their modest peculiarities more comprehensively than in any other way. Our similarities may be obvious but

our differences illuminate the essence and beauty of creation and “sing the difference electric” to parody Whitman, which is the jazz musician's purpose. Is it any wonder jazz is so reviled by the totalitarian mindset? Moreover, I will argue and hopefully illustrate how the piano can come closest to the heart of jazz, its essence, which is the beguiling complexities of rhythm adopted from African drum rhythms.

My first encounter with the joy of jazz piano was the playing of Fats Waller on a 12” 78 rpm shellac record with *Ain't Misbehavin'* on side A, and *Blue Turning Grey Over You* on Side B.



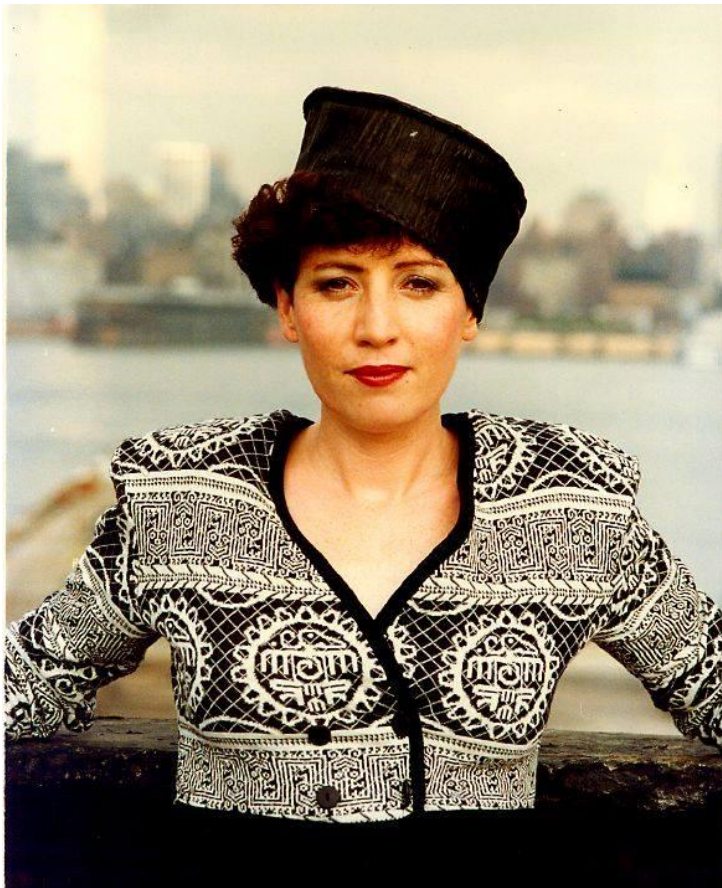
Of all the pianists I have heard, joy was the feeling most associated with Fats Waller... PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES

Blue Turning Grey Over You - the instrumental - opening solo with left hand and a regular beat, right hand inventive - weak tenor solo, guitar strumming, simple drumming, stomping piano backing drum solo, muted trumpet - then piano solo

using the darker end of the piano closing with right hand repetition of theme. A simple stomp of a number repeatedly played on my wind-up record player. It is a fun tune with an easy swing at a medium tempo. Of all the pianists I have heard, joy was the feeling most associated with Waller. Yet his organ playing, for example, hinted at the deep feelings the Church must have played in his life. He had the copyright for over 400 songs and one of my favourites is *Jitterbug Waltz*.

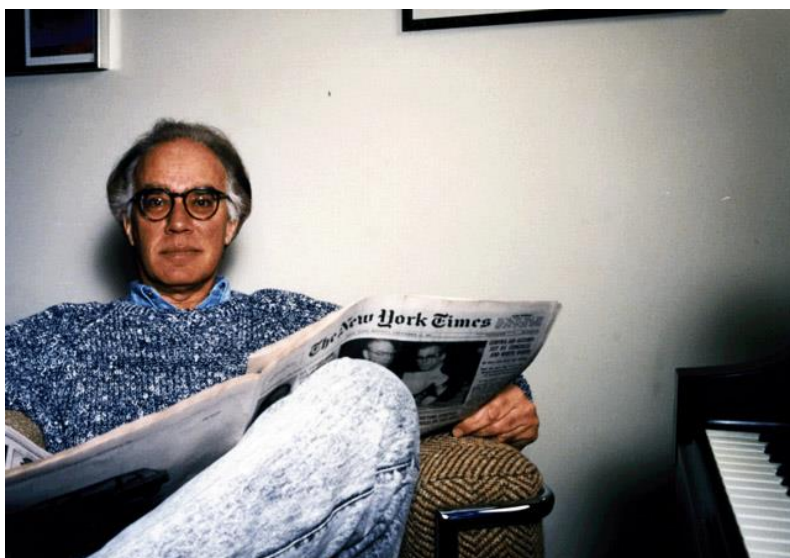
Jitterbug Waltz, now a jazz standard, has been recorded by *inter alia* Bobby Hutcherson, Art Tatum, Charles Mingus, Enrico Pieranunzi, and Greg Osby, whilst Chris McNulty on her album *The Song That Sings You Here* has done a superb vocal (including scat) version supported by the guitar of Paul Bollenback emphasising the blues element. The great lyric by Maxine Manners ends:

*My man would slip away
My arms just won't let go
I think...*



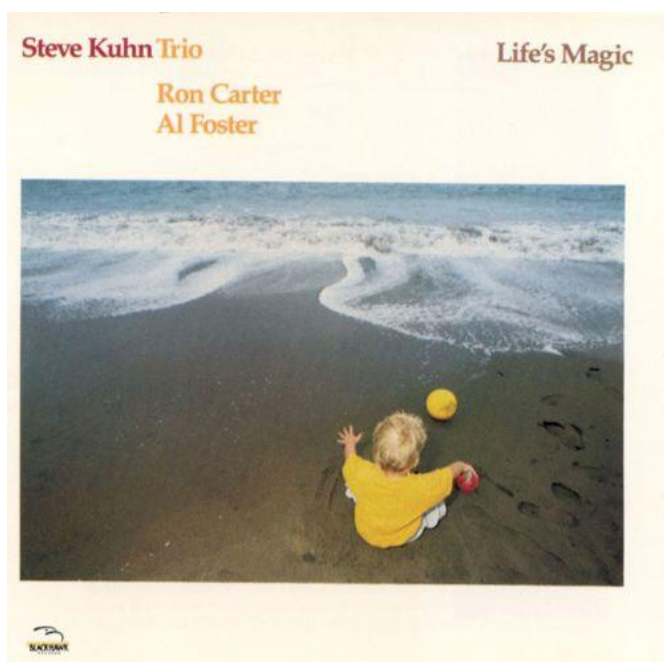
The Australian Chris McNulty: a superb vocal (including scat) version of “Jitterbug Waltz” on her album “The Song That Sings You Here”... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

On his album *Swailing*, Julien Wilson on soprano sax swaggers through a cheeky up-tempo version of *Jitterbug Waltz* which (I love it!) recalls Waller’s persona at the piano, where he had a small porcelain resting on the upright piano labelled “Feed the Kitty” a reminder of the rent parties held in New York in the 1920s.



Steve Kuhn: another fine version of “Jitterbug Waltz” revealing more complex feeling... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Another fine version revealing more complex feeling was recorded at the Village Vanguard in 1986 by pianist Steve Kuhn which begins searchingly then enters with the familiar waltz-run theme backed by drums and bass, followed by a long solo by Ron Carter, with an intriguing back solo by Kuhn, almost another tune improvised from the chords, away from the waltz, in a swinging improvisation suggesting a historical sweep of jazz piano, coming in at nine minutes. Al Foster is the drummer. The album is called *Life's Magic*. Kuhn is one of my favourite Evans-influenced pianists after I heard his ECM album *Trance* recorded in 1974 with Steve Swallow the bassist of the quartet. A later album again with Steve Swallow whom he has partnered for over 50 years, is *Wisteria* which Kuhn recorded in the Avatar Studios, New York in 2011. Joey Baron was the drummer.



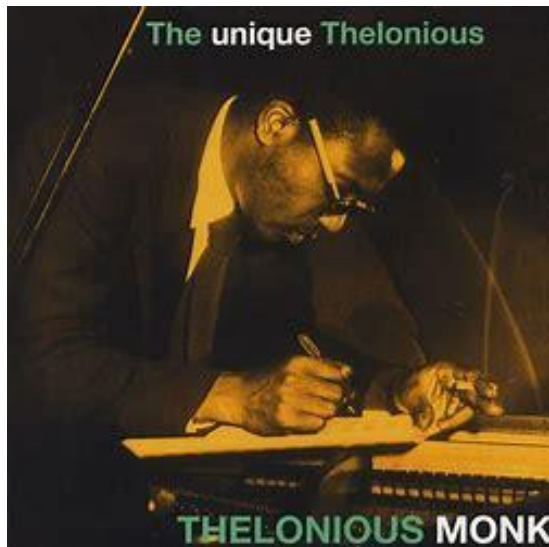
As well as *Jitterbug Waltz* and *Ain't Misbehavin'* and *Blue Turnin' Grey Over You* - in retrospect, for a young boy, what glorious introduction to the "piano joys" of jazz these songs were! - my exploration of Fats Waller included his popular number *Honeysuckle Rose* composed by Waller in 1929 with lyrics by Andy Razaf for the stage review *Load of Coal*. The version of *Honeysuckle Rose* that Waller recorded in 1934 was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999. The personnel on that track, recorded in New York on 7th November 1934, were Bill Coleman (trumpet), Gene Cedric (clarinet or tenor sax), Fats Waller (piano), Albert Casey (guitar), Billy Taylor (string bass), Harry Dial (drums). Except for a riff chorus by the full band at the bridge, the performance is a piano solo and vocal by Waller.



Fats Waller (right) snapped at a Victor Records session in 1942 with his Rhythm and the Deep River Boys... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FORDHAM'S THE SOUND OF JAZZ

Other longer versions by the composer issued on 12" 78 rpm shellac records were instrumental only, indicating how popular the number was with musicians. The 1937 version at 4' 32" featured Herman Autrey (trumpet), Gene Cedric (alto sax), Fats Waller (piano), Albert Casey (guitar), Charles Turner (string bass), and Wilmore 'Slick' Jones (drums, vibes) and has no vocal. Solos by the band include guitar, vibes, piano, trumpet, drums and sax (and clarinet in the coda); the performance has the feeling of a "jam". Perhaps the ultimate "jam" for the piece was its selection by Benny Goodman at his Carnegie Hall performance for playing by representatives of the Duke Ellington and Count Basie Orchestras along with Goodman musicians and, at 14 minutes, was the longest piece played at that famous event. A considerable accolade for the music of Fats Waller.

Naturally, I kept my eye open for other performances of Waller material. Checking out Edel's in Pitt Street (an "electrical" store which was a very good jazz record outlet in the 1950s) I came across *Honeysuckle Rose* on a record called *The Unique Thelonious* on Riverside.



The *Unique Thelonious* also had in my view an appealing cover with the bearded bespectacled performer leaning into a grand piano pencil in hand making some changes to a sheet of music with the obligatory smoke curling up from the cigarette in his left hand. It spoke to my intellectual pretensions regarding "serious" music, or "art", where creativity was prominent and transcended entertainment. These pretensions of mine were not, as I later learned, foolish posturing. As Bill Evans said to Bert Vuijsje in a radio interview in May 1978, "I know I play for myself



Bill Evans: I do want to communicate, but primarily with myself... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

in the first place. The audience can be a stimulus; when you don't really feel like playing, the audience can move you to do your best. But the problems I'm concerned with are very personal, solitary problems of expression and aesthetics. My music doesn't intend to establish interaction with the audience. I do want to communicate, but primarily with myself. And I know that if the music communicates with myself, communication with the audience will follow."

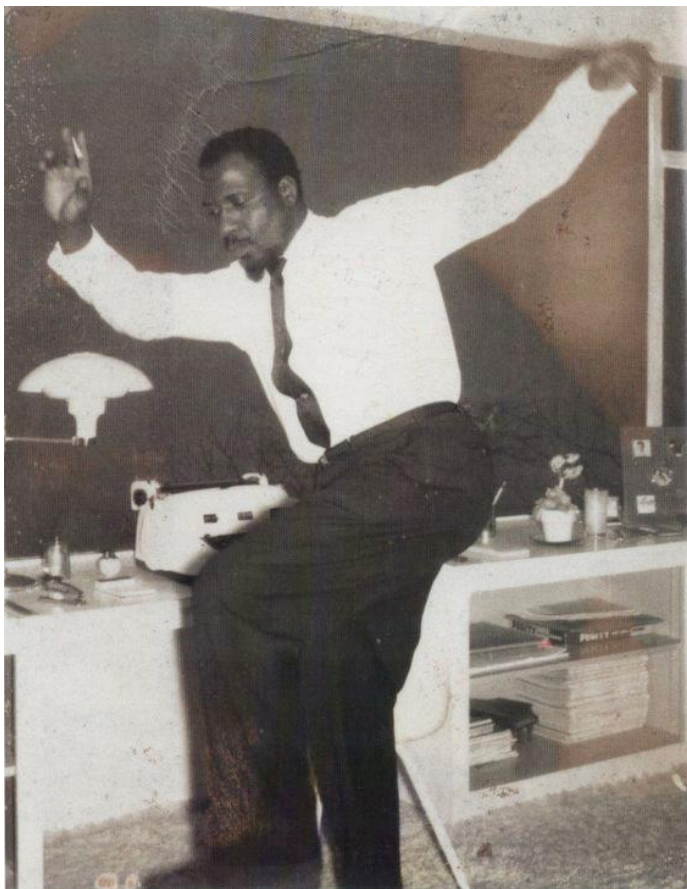
The artist struggling with his or her creativity like Bill Evans may not be concerned with marketing his music or indeed have any skills in doing so. Orrin Keepnews started the label Riverside. Randy Weston was the first artist he signed. It was a 10" LP called *Randy Weston plays Cole Porter*. Monk was Riverside's second signing. Keepnews's sympathetic curatorship finally brought him the status he deserved. So-called A & R men such as John Hammond, George Avakian, and Ahmet Ertegun had a profound influence on the evolution of recorded jazz and their choice of repertoire was important in launching careers. Notably, Alfred Lion of Blue Note, Manfred Eicher of ECM, and Keepnews of Riverside all launched their labels with original recordings of pianists. The economics were compelling - one artist, or at most a trio, and a decent piano.



*Orrin Keepnews
(in check shirt)
with Thelonious
Monk, who was
Riverside's second
signing...*

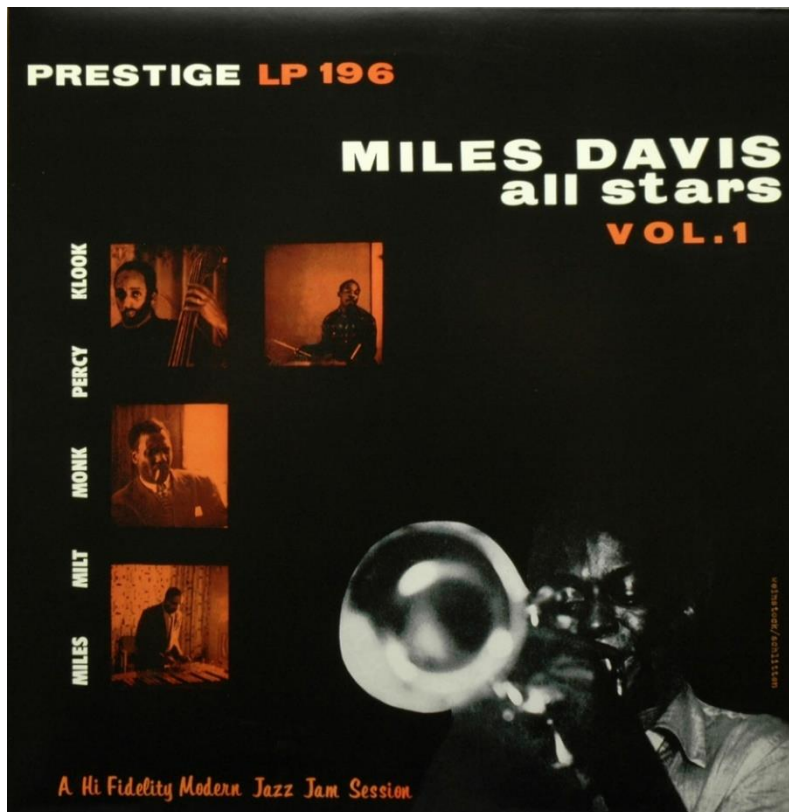
Thelonious Monk then, as a profoundly original (and difficult) artist, was very lucky to have a producer like Orrin Keepnews of Riverside Records. In 1955 Riverside Records quickly released *Thelonious Monk Plays The Music Of Duke Ellington* with Oscar Pettiford and Kenny Clarke. *It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing, Sophisticated Lady, I Got It Bad And That Ain't Good, Black And Tan Fantasy, Mood Indigo, I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart, Solitude* (unaccompanied) and *Caravan* were the selections. The second release was the aforementioned *The Unique Thelonious*.

So it came to that singular moment for 'the-exploratory-music-loving-teenager' when the needle is lowered for the first time onto a new record. What joys await? Being quite familiar with Fats Waller's version of *Honeysuckle Rose* I was stunned by Monk's approach to *Honeysuckle Rose*. The melody was still there, sort of, unadorned, but the improvisations on the up-tempo rhythm were percussive miracles to me - plink.....(silence)....plink bang bang bangetc.. a long bass solo.....a percussive conversation with the drummer... amazing repetition... of notes and phrases most at the high end...the bass churning away.....Art Blakey and his familiar runs....and the single note take on the melody.. and it all had a sort of weird humour. It was funny! Monk's genius included a suggestion in his playing of Waller's fun and entertaining side, his quips, asides, and wit. Monk was having fun, or so it seemed. And it seemed to be played with deep affection as if in honour of the composer. I was hooked. More Monk for moi!



Monk (pictured left) was having fun, or so it seemed... PHOTO TAKEN BY BARONESS PANNONICA DE KOENIGSWARTER

I next came across a record on Prestige *Miles Davis All Stars, Volume 1*, a 10-inch LP album by Miles Davis, released in 1955 by Prestige Records. The two side-long tracks on this LP, and two others, were recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's Studio, Hackensack, New Jersey, on December 24, 1954. This was the first of two 10-inch LPs sourced from the same session, which featured major bebop contemporaries Milt Jackson and Thelonious Monk, along with the same rhythm section that had been used on Davis's other recent albums. Milt Jackson, Percy Heath, and Kenny Clarke who were at the time of recording three quarters of the Modern Jazz Quartet. After the 10-inch LP format was discontinued, the track *Bags' Groove* was reissued on side



1 of the 12-inch LP *Bags' Groove*, paired with an alternate take. *Swing Spring* would reappear on the 12-inch album *Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants*, alongside the two other songs recorded at the same session. On *Bags' Groove*, as fine as the solo by Miles Davis is, and that of Milt Jackson, that by Monk is electrifying in how it cuts through the familiar, and astonishes and moves the listener. Monk's solo has been written about by Andre Hodeir. He described the F sharp that follows the series of Cs and Fs in Monk's first chorus "one of the purest moments of beauty in the history of jazz."*

The satisfaction and relief of the anticipated climax in musical structure or the fulfilment of the expectation in that note or chord sequence has its own beauty and comfort but the unexpected note, the "sound of surprise" that Monk had was beautiful and exciting and memorable. Just as we return to Oscar Peterson for the familiar beauty of his playing we return to Monk for beauty too and the excitement of his daring, harmonically and rhythmically. Monk famously (or infamously) refused to speak except through his music but at one point in 1960 he remarked to *Jazz Magazine*:

Bud Powell? I'm the only one he really digs... Oscar Peterson never gives me any credit... George Shearing copies me... Bird is a God they said. He wasn't to me! No, and no one else was either!

*Quoted in *Notes to Miles Davis Chronicle - The Complete Prestige Recordings 1951-1956*.

We make of these comments what we will. In rehearsals he might lead his band over a minute segment of his music for two hours without telling them they were practising at a slow tempo. As Robert Doerschuk says, “The feeling of a piece, and its overall contours, were always more important to Monk than getting all the notes right.”*



Monk: as a boy, he practised hours every day on the Steinway grand piano his family had got him... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

As a boy, Monk practised hours every day on the Steinway grand piano his family had got him. A mirror had been mounted on the ceiling over the piano to reflect the rise and fall of the hammers (p 113 *ibid*). He played piano and organ for two years in his mother's Baptist Church on San Juan Hill, NY. At his first recording session he brought with him his favourite hymn, composed by William H Monk (!) the favourite also of Fats Waller. Harlem stride piano was an influence on him. And in relation to bop and its major proponents he argued that (other significant musical adventures aside) they did not pay enough attention to swing, either the horns or rhythm section. He claimed to make up his own chords and melodies. For the likes of Powell, Parker, and Gillespie - loud, showy, noticeable - it proved easier for musicians to imitate the flashy intricate runs than to imitate the

* “88 *The Giants of Jazz Piano*” by Robert L Doerschuk (*Backbeat Books, San Francisco, 2001*), page 119.



mystery of Monk's simpler lines and chords. Monk's fame was a long time coming, (*Time Magazine* cover 1964) but when it came, it was sensational. His legacy may well be the most significant of all the so-called bop innovators. Maybe the final word on Monk might be that of Herbie Nichols: "One might say that Thelonious Monk is forever having a battle of music at the piano and always comes out the winner. This is probably true. His eyes light up when he speaks of instrumentalists getting the right 'sounds' out of their instruments. He is forever searching for better 'sounds' as he loves to say. He doesn't seek them elsewhere. He creates them at his ...piano. This way of thinking throughout the years has resulted in the creation of a system of playing which is the strangest I have heard and may someday revolutionize the art of swing piano playing"*.



Herbie Nichols: maybe the final word on Monk... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

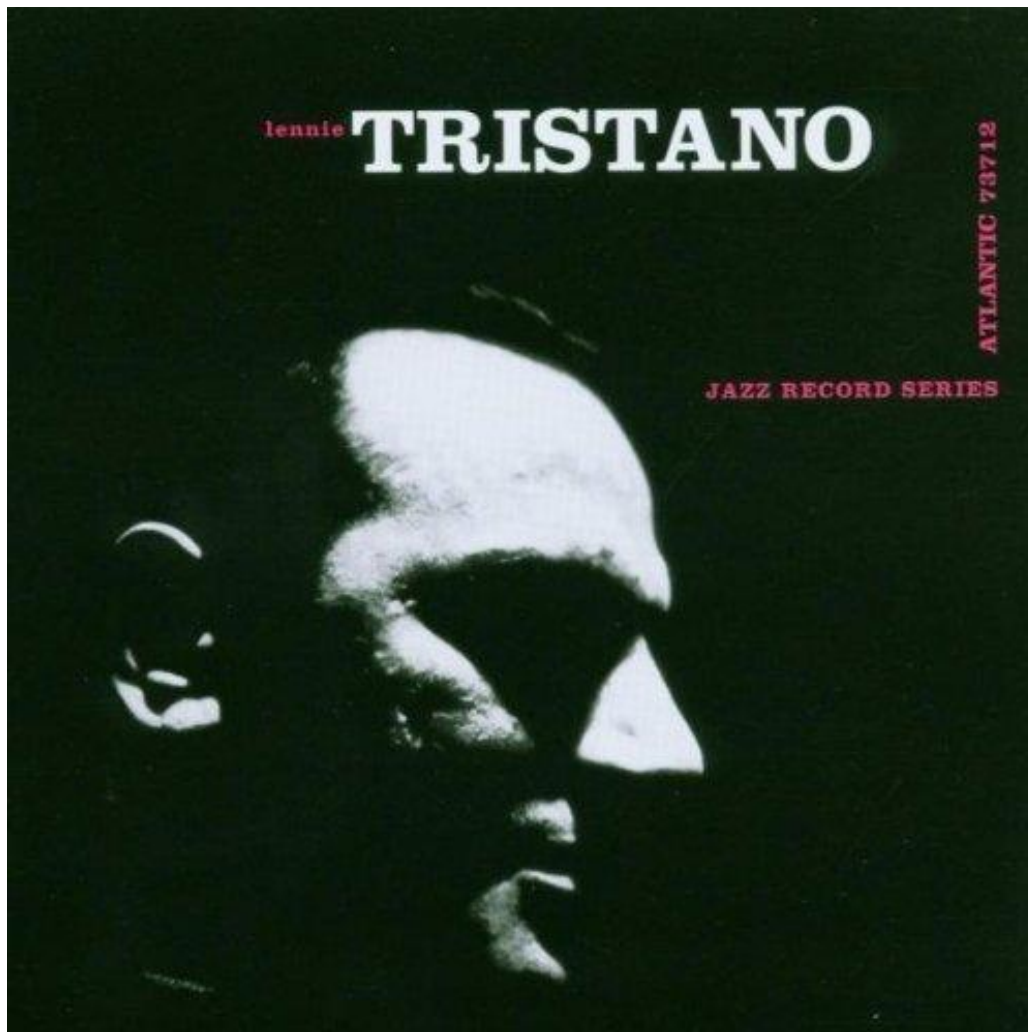
*"The Jazz Pianist - Purist", *Rhythm Magazine*, July 1946 p 28.

The next pianistic surprise for me after Monk's solo on *Bags' Groove* was the title track on the Riverside album *Brilliant Corners*. Keepnews had 25 takes of it and the release was an aggregation and edit of takes none of which involved the band having played the (extremely difficult) composition to completion. That put paid to my idea that musicians choose a program, rehearse a lot, and enter the studio raring to go and get it right after one or two takes. My surprise was in short, that a brilliant musical performance on record may be the result of bits pieced together, which in artistic visual terms, considered the aural equivalent of the collage invented by Braque at the turn of the 20th Century. Why not I thought, as in music, there are different instruments with different players rather than different "forms"?

Similarly, the art of cinema, such as Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* is the result of thousands of images, sounds, and human skills pieced together to make a unified work. *Brilliant Corners*, and most modern recording of music of any genre, is more or less, a collage of sorts. I saw no reason then to argue about "authenticity" of performance when the technique must be secondary to the finished work of music, and *Brilliant Corners* is a brilliant work, as is *Turkish Mambo* on the other record I bought at Edel's that day. Nevertheless, there was controversy at the time that may even persist today.



The very first track of *Lennie Tristano* was *Line Up* which had an immediate impact - like pow! It opens with an up-tempo arresting acoustic bass played by Peter Ind. Enter the piano at the lower end of the keyboard. And it surges to the end, relentlessly. The second track, a dirge-like solo homage to Charlie Parker, called *Requiem*, alters one minute 25 seconds in, then a pause, same tempo left hand repeated chords bass like, right hand blues improvisation, 30 seconds from coda third hand of music enters, fade out. Third track, deep bass piano notes, then piano figure dark notes, then improvisation over both these, then another improvisation over that higher up the keyboard, to fade-out of deep bass notes.



The standards *These Foolish Things*, *I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You*, and *All the Things You Are* quartet tracks on the album were far less interesting to my ill-educated ear. It seems Tristano was allowed complete control over the programme of music and the recording process. Multi-tracking occurred on *Turkish Mambo* and *Requiem*. The tape speed was altered on *Line Up*. That year Ampex had produced the first one-inch tape on an eight-track recorder which was sold to Les Paul for \$10,000. Tristano may have taken advantage of this process. The playing was much *fortissimo*. As was the style of another favourite pianist of mine of that revolutionary time in the 1950s: Dave Brubeck. Brubeck was also influenced by Duke Ellington and not Fats Waller.

Fats Waller inspired the likes of pianist Gene Schroeder, long associated with Eddie Condon and the “Chicago” jazz scene and it was Eddie Condon who was one of the most articulate defenders of so-called “traditional” jazz. Condon became especially riled around 1954 when pianist Dave Brubeck was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* in an article in which Brubeck expressed shock at the alcohol



consumed by patrons at jazz clubs when the focus in his view should be on the music. Not only was Brubeck playing music Condon considered “Chinese music” and not jazz by his definition, Brubeck was also condemning excessive drinking, a practice which Condon was famous for. Brubeck’s popularity at the time, especially with the college audiences, was emblematic of the dividing line that had emerged between the jazz that had been associated with clubs and dancing and swing on the one hand, and the “new” music that was intent on exploring new sounds and new ideas, the sounds of Charlie Christian, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk, on the other. It was yes, a break with tradition. Where had tradition brought the world, some might have asked, on the eve of its destruction? Where had tradition brought the black man, others might have asked? To entertain nightclub patrons? To provide a few laughs in a movie a la Step N Fetchit or even Louis Armstrong in *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (1932) wearing a leopard skin whilst he plays his trumpet creating one of the most racist short movies in all cinema? Brubeck with his horn-rimmed glasses and look was out of the clubs and into the colleges.



Brubeck's album *Jazz Goes To College* which had alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, Bob Bates on bass and "bomb dropping" Joe Dodge on drums, had an explosive impact on its release in 1954 under the auspices of producer George Avakian. This was somewhat ironic as the first ever jazz "album" is usually credited to be the one Mr Avakian made of Eddie Condon in 1939 consisting of six 78" records. Eddie Condon's "mouldy fig" attitude is in contrast to the open-minded Mr Avakian who championed Miles Davis, Monk and others, giving them the marketing power of Columbia Records. To emphasise the sophistication if you will, of the change in direction of "jazz", was another Brubeck release called *Red Hot and Cool*, the



album of 1954/1955 recorded live at two separate appearances at New York's Basin Street East Club. This open-minded attitude was reflected in the marketing conducted in liaison with the Helena Rubinstein company for a new lipstick. Those who bought the lipstick also got a copy of *Jazz Combo Too*, a small Columbia six-inch, red-orange vinyl record at 78 rpm speed which included excerpts from [Eddie Condon](#) and [Turk Murphy](#) on its *Jazz Combo Hot* side, and [Pete Rugolo](#) and Brubeck on its *Jazz Combo Cool* side. There is no record of Condon's response to this event.

Jazz Goes to College has seven tracks, three from the Great American Songbook, *Out of Nowhere* from 1931 which was Bing Crosby's first hit and is now a jazz standard, and two jointly composed originals *Le Souk* and *Balcony Rock*. The latter is a blues-based, medium-tempo stomp, building inexorably, using low-end piano, blues-tinged chords, tension building, always in control. But this approach reaches its percussive highpoint on *Le Souk* where Brubeck pounds his way to a wildly receptive climax. The inspiration for this pianism of Duke Ellington's follows with a version of Duke's signature theme song, Strayhorn's *Take the A Train*, which opens startlingly with drummer Dodge and Brubeck dropping a "bomb" as they cover the famous piano solo of Duke in its numerous recordings. This was at the time of Brubeck's college excursions when he was playing in as many as 90 colleges in a four-month period, and it was Brubeck who inspired Cecil Taylor.



Cecil Taylor: inspired by Brubeck... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

Jazz Advance was an album released by Cecil Taylor in 1956 and the opening track was *Bemsha Swing* by Thelonious Monk. The track has taken Monk's approach further by having a percussive dialogue with the drummer Denis Charles with [Buell Neidlinger](#) providing a steady foundation. His attack and intensity and energy are remarkable. Taylor is perhaps the sublime example of the art in jazz, of jazz, where the philosophical question is raised: is the effort by the artists and thereafter by the listener worth it? His uncompromising dedication to his art and his vision culminated in documents such as the 1988 Free Music Production of 13 discs and 14 hours recorded in Germany in 1988. Every aspect of his life's work, from solo piano to small combos to large bands, is represented. One example is *Spots, Circles and Fantasy* is a 74-minute duet with percussionist Han Bennink.



Cecil Taylor's 1956 "Jazz Advance" album: is the effort by the artists and thereafter by the listener worth it?...

And because the music (Is it music some might ask?) is different, unfamiliar, long, discomforting, perhaps irritating, an audience, listeners, may not bother to pay attention. Yet a similarly resistant point of view may deter any person from participating in any of the arts in any depth. Just to consider the thousands of hours of human effort, the years of training, that go into a successful Shakespearian production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for example. To do so is to wonder at

the delirious beauty of human creativity. In the same way a film such as Malick's *Days of Heaven*, or Claire Denis's *Beau Travail* or Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog* - a series of ten short films set in a Warsaw tower block, each nominally based on one of the Ten Commandments - is to experience the best efforts of hundreds of individual technicians and artists under the guidance of one auteur and his or her vision.

And so when you see and hear Thelonious Monk in *Jazz On A Summer's Day* and the first notes of *Blue Monk* assail your ears you feel like screaming joyously in affirmation and gratitude for outstanding endeavour that has put that 12,000-piece piano together, put the musician though 30 years or more of playing, searching, practising, thinking, writing, listening, to go "dah-de-dah-dahhhh, dah-de-dah-dahhhh, dahhh dedahdedahdedah dum....etc" - so simple it seems, yet so perfectly imperfect just like the human being itself. Is it worth the effort to give time to listen to such art? Why bother reading *War and Peace* or *Moby Dick* or *If Not Now, When?* Why take the time to discover the beauty of *Blue Poles*?



Thelonious Monk performing in the film "Jazz On A Summer's Day"...

A B Spellman writing about Taylor, remarked: "There is only one musician who has, by general agreement even among those who have disliked his music, been able to incorporate all that he wants to take from classical and modern Western composition into his own distinctly individual kind of blues without in the least compromising those blues, and that is Cecil Taylor, a kind of Bartok in reverse."*

The pursuit of modern European music by jazz musicians was undertaken by the likes of Jimmy Guiffre, Paul Bley and Carla Bley. John Lewis and his explorations at Lenox, Massachusetts in what was called Third Stream Music was considered by some to be evidence by those musicians that yes, we can play "classical" music, but we choose to play the blues. Taylor on his liner notes to his album *Looking Ahead*

**"Four Lives in the Bebop Business"*, MacGibbon & Kee, London, 1967, p 5.

said: “Everything I’ve lived, I am. I am not afraid of European influences. The point is to use them - as Ellington did - as part of my life as an American Negro. Some people say I’m atonal. It depends, for one thing, on your definition of the term..... I have been atonal in live performances..... Basically, it’s not important whether a certain chord happens to fit some student’s definition of atonality. A man like Thelonious Monk is concerned with growing and enriching his musical conception, and what he does comes as a living idea out of his life’s experience, not from a theory. It may or may not turn out to be atonal.”



A B Spellman, author of the book “Four Lives in the Bebop Business”...

Taylor, speaking about his music said: “Music is the organisation of sound existing in time, its dimensions in space. The problem was reorganisation of ingredients to discover surprise.” (Spellman *ibid* p38) “... I want to get colours out of sound the way Ellington did.” (Spellman *ibid* p39) “I learned more music from Ellington than I ever learned from the New England Conservatory.” (Spellman *ibid* p55) “I was very impressed with the depth and texture of (Brubeck’s) harmony... it also had a rhythmical movement that I found exciting.” (Spellman *ibid* p 61).

An anonymous public review on Amazon talks about Taylor’s style:

Cecil basically has a storehouse of little blue motifs, they can be fanfares, little abstracted bop lines, train blues, Ravel-esque ballads, all short and clipped; many recur, slightly altered, through his work, giving the impression of one big meta-piece; he often begins by rotating them around, contrasting them against one another, and then starts to disassemble them into soloistic flights of unbelievable density and speed and dexterity, often, as on Silent Tongues, culminating in earthquake runs down the entire keyboard that sound like tectonic plates creating new continents by means of massive seismic events. (Ever heard a piano scream?) Taylor has his own private cosmology, alluded to in titles and poems, wherein the registers of the piano have some sort of astral significance (bass=abyss, high notes=heaven), and there is much jazz-like call and response between these note groupings, stabbing clusters (fists and elbows) in the bass, waterfall flights of fancy

in the higher register. Eventually the celestial logic of the improvisational flight of fancy reassembles itself into the next motif, and the process starts all over again of thematic announcement and juxtaposition, deconstruction into solo improv, and re-assembly into the next set of motifs. He can do this for 20 minutes, or four straight hours. And just when you think your head is going to explode, Cecil will cool things out with teasingly gorgeous balladry, for as little as you can stand.

That lineage, from Duke Ellington to Cecil Taylor where the percussive emphasis of pianism prevails, doesn't mean there is any lack of appreciation of other pianists whose style might be described as in the manner of say Debussy. Bill Evans obviously, and Steve Kuhn, and Fred Hersch. One of my long-time favourites has been Ahmad Jamal. In 1958 he had a "hit" LP with *But Not For Me* now with Vernel Fournier on drums instead of Ray Crawford on guitar. Jamal's minimalist approach which, counterintuitively, empowered the melody, and his use of repetition and silence, enlarged the role of bass and drums, to the extent that his music did not feel like piano supported by drums and bass, but a meeting of equals where each seemed significant to the music, more than usually in a piano trio. On *Surrey With a Fringe On Top* it was way up-tempo with sparkling high-end melody way above the rhythm bed and became one of his most renowned pieces. Although not fortissimo his approach emphasised the percussive and rhythmic elements of the piano as much as melody. As is always the case one song leads to another, one artist to another and Jamal sent me looking into George Gershwin and eventually the glorious five-LP edition of the *Ella Fitzgerald George and Ira Gershwin Songbook* on Verve.



Ahmad Jamal: his music did not feel like piano supported by drums and bass, but a meeting of equals where each seemed significant to the music, more than usually in a piano trio... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

The pianist who is constantly referred to as the greatest, is not one that has ever excited me, or moved me, say in the way that Brubeck, or Jamal, or Taylor, or Monk have: that is of course Art Tatum. That's my problem. I have listened to him many times especially his complete solo series made for Norman Granz in 1956. I have listened with much admiration, but have felt little. On the other hand Oscar Peterson, who, in that style of complete technical command, I feel as well as admire.



Oscar Peterson: his "Black Forest" series remain a perennial listening experience. ... PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES

Oscar Peterson and his songbook series in the 1950s and his albums made on MPS - the *Black Forest* series - remain for me a perennial listening experience. Others I return to are Andrew Hill, Herbie Hancock, Paul Bley, Ran Blake, Geri Allen, Don Pullen, Brad Mehldau (*Countdown* is brilliant), Jessica Williams (love her Monk interpretations), Nat King Cole, Sonny Clark, Teddy Wilson, Jelly Roll Morton, Count Basie, Keith Jarrett (trio work mainly - the *Koln Concert* is a nostalgic favourite described by some wag as Elton John without the singing), McCoy Tyner and Andrea Keller.

Like many modern music fans I've succumbed to the iPod and listen in the gym, and when walking, and in my car system, to a random compilation of music from the thousands stored in my iTunes folder. Classical music, including opera and Schoenberg, from the Renaissance to 20th century, blues, any kind of jazz, Sinatra, Dylan, Doris Day, Tony Bennett, slave era African American music, middle eastern music, Japanese music, Indian ragas, Bob Wills, bluegrass, Hank Williams too - it's all good to hear from time to time.

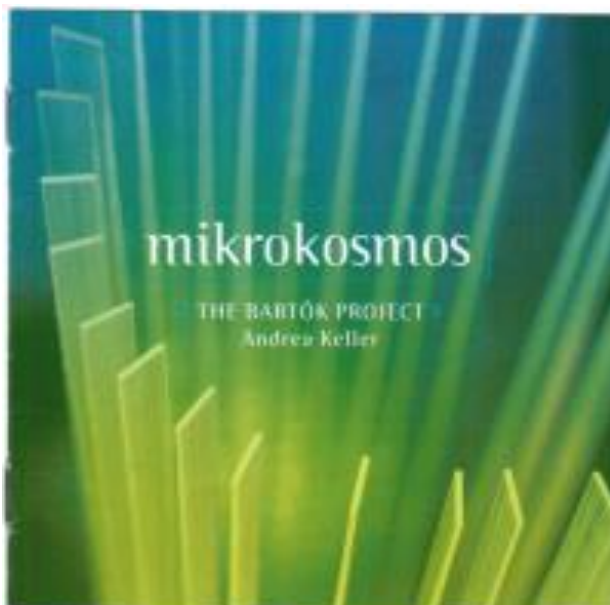
What interests me are the times I hear something that surprises me and makes me pause - in the past decade, a number of times it turns out to be the music of pianist Andrea Keller. Just to call her a pianist, is inadequate and lazy. I have 15 albums of Keller's and have seen her perform in various locations in various settings: experimental works at the Adelaide Arts Festival, trio in club, quartet, duo, big band, and so on. I find her music consistently intriguing, sometimes exploding with feeling, always "intelligent" in the way Canadian Paul Bley seems to be musically intelligent, but whereas Bley's emphasis tended to be on space and sustain, perhaps a different

emphasis to that of Keller, I see a common interest in their concern with mixing freedom and form and an “intoxication” with pure sound.



Here I am, pictured with one of my favourite pianists, Australian Andrea Keller: mixing freedom and form and an “intoxication” with pure sound...

First of all may I refer to her album *Mikrokosmos*, subtitled *The Bartók Project* where Keller leads a quintet consisting of herself on piano, Tim O’Dwyer on alto sax or bass clarinet, Adrian Sherriff on bass trombone, Anita Hustas on double bass, and Danny Fischer on drums. The music is inspired by pianist and composer Bela Bartók’s 26,000 plus indigenous recordings made over 30 years in his treks through Hungary, Romania, Transylvania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Serbia, Croatia, Turkey, and the Czech and Slovak Republics. There are 17 tracks on the album and 69 minutes of



music. To me much of the brilliance of this work rests on Keller's arranging. And is this art not a fair part of the genius of the likes of Gil Evans, Duke Ellington and Don Grolnick (*Nighttown*)?

A signature feature of Keller, it seems to me, is to set up an intriguing simple recurring figure (in the bass for example) and improvise over it. The disc opens with *No 61 Pentatonic Melody* with a strong bass figure which continues whilst an arc of dramatic piano improvisation plays itself out over it. Next track *No 126 Change of Time* is a bass figure with an improvised alto solo punctuated by piano chords rising in intensity. *No 62 Minor 6ths in parallel motion* is an up-tempo march-like motif with a changing bass, a trombone solo punctuated by clashing cymbals, a pause, then a re-entry of the march theme. *No 56 Melody in tenths* begins with a dirge by the band of bass clarinet, arco bass, and bass trombone, then it is pinged by bell-like piano sounds and sweet melodic invention for a brief 1'34". *No 8 Repetition* has a percussive clapping, range of growls and grumps and mocking from the bass trombone, a plinking punctuation of piano, and a circus feel to the music. This is a programme of great variety and interest, featuring all the musicians in a range of roles.



Andrea Keller: an accomplished composer, she preferences her own work... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL

Secondly, Keller is an accomplished composer. Apart from the album tribute to Wayne Shorter *Footprints*, where she arranges his compositions, or in the Bartok album, where again, she arranges Bartok pieces and performs, she eschews others' work for her own (except very occasionally eg Monk on her album 2015 *Travellers* where she swings like mad and with considerable swagger and fun works her way through *Hackensack* in front of an appreciative audience.) Like the great piano artists in the genre, Ellington, Monk, Nichols, Waller, and Carla Bley, Keller too composes and preferences her own work in the documents she has so far released. Thirdly she is exploring the interaction between contemporary "classical" music and jazz (improvised) music, the sophisticated structures of one and the freedom of the other. For the layman it can be difficult to place some contemporary music made by classically trained musicians, so close does it appear to be to contemporary (especially European) music associated with Manfred Eicher and ECM.

Keller also seems to me to be, like Paul Bley, grappling with, exploring, paying beautiful attention to, for want of a better word, “pure sound”. May I suggest as Exhibit I her composition *Golden Strawberries* from the album *Family Portraits* which is music for solo piano, Boss RC50 loop station, Line 6 delay pedal & preparations. *Golden Strawberries* is the opening track which begins quietly with the listener conscious of the beauty of the sound and its lingering with the use of sustain, then there is repetition used to impressive effect, a little bounce of joy, explorations at the upper end with splashes of colour, glistening, golden sounds, waves of sounds in the climax dissolving into aural cascades, restatement of theme, resolution, quiet, pause, quiet, stop. A brilliant and very satisfying musical journey of eight minutes.

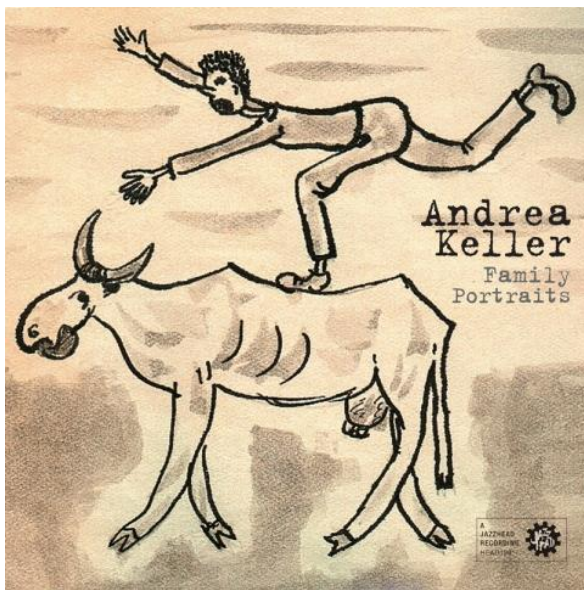


Exhibit I (above): Keller's composition "Golden Strawberries" from the album "Family Portraits"... Exhibit II (below) is a composition by Wayne Shorter called "Go" from Keller's album "Footprints"...

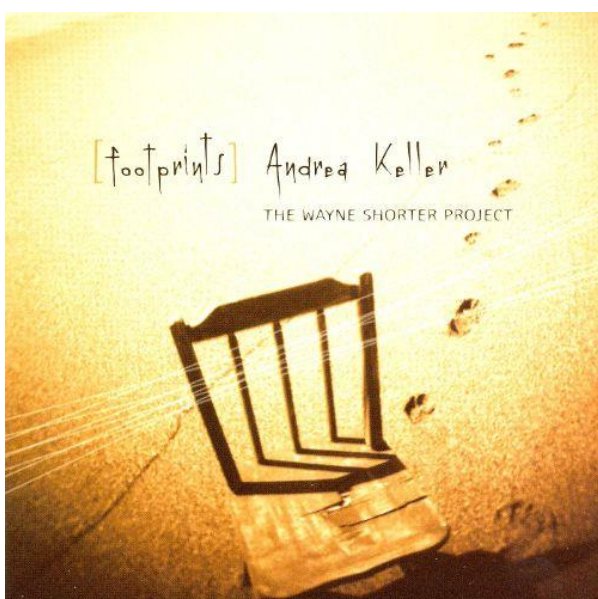


Exhibit II is a composition by Wayne Shorter called *Go* from her album *Footprints* with Keller on piano or Nord (The Nord Stage is a digital keyboard or stage piano, manufactured by Clavia Digital Music Instruments of Stockholm in Sweden.) The opening sounds again are a delight, joyful and ringing with beauty. The drama of the piece is emphasised as opposed to its rhythm and there is a division at about halfway with overdubbing with the right-hand channel providing rhythm (Nord?) and the left improvising. It is an incredibly beautiful exhibition of pianism.

In a live concert at The Czech House Melbourne, with Tamara Murphy on double bass and the late great Allan Browne (looking relatively young) on drums, two standards are played - the first *Alone Together* seems to be improvised on the chords with a long bass solo by Murphy and extended piano improvisation by Keller where the melody seems long gone. With *Days of Wine and Roses* the improvisation seems melodic. On the original *Broncoscopy* there is a focus on the up-tempo percussive conversation between the drums and piano.



A live concert at The Czech House Melbourne featured, L-R, Tamara Murphy (bass), the late great Allan Browne (drums) and Andrea Keller...

The intriguing and quite beautiful collaboration between bassist Anita Hustas and Keller on the album *Icedreaming* is something of a revelation, being so moved by the sound and capabilities of the bass as I am. The title track, which is a conversation of sorts between the arco bass and the piano, reminds me of elements of Paul Bley in the intriguing and beautiful sonorities produced by Keller in her extended improvisation. *Colour Whirl* has a haunting up-tempo bass figure repeated with a bell-like chord improvisation with a sudden move uptone by the bass figure and the piano takes over the repetitive figure whilst the bass improvises. The composition *A Paddock Offering* has initial bass and piano up-tempo percussive fortissimo opening, free improvisations, waltz like elements, jaunty sections, deep bass up-tempo and covers quite a sonic landscape - duo! Bass and piano!



Andrea Keller is developing a body of work likely to resonate not just in the genre but for contemporary music generally for a very long time...

Andrea Keller's artistic journey thus far is substantial and she is developing a body of work likely to resonate not just in the genre but for contemporary music generally for a very long time. If I had to sum up the listening experience in relation to Keller I would say: intelligent joy with a love of "pure sound" worthy of repeated deep listening over one's lifetime. Piano joy indeed!