Rob van der Bliek, ed. *The Thelonious Monk Reader.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xvii, 286 pp.

Reviewed by Brian Priestley

The music of Thelonious Monk has evoked increasing interest in the twenty years since his death. His themes, which used to be thought unappetizing for others to play, are now eagerly lapped up by performance students, as well as by those professionals for whom honoring "the tradition" is an important activity. Already since the 1960s, when the concept of avant-garde jazz meant so many different things to different people, Monk's combination of surface irregularity with a ruthless inner logic has been consistently influential; in particular, the organic and unstilted use of motivic development in his themes is widely seen as an ideal to aspire to. Meanwhile, his own documentation of these themes—both the original recordings dating principally from 1947–56 and the later extended versions representing his live performance methods—have been remastered and reissued in great profusion.

It is understandable that, especially among those absorbed in the music, and among those less captivated by it too, there is also still considerable curiosity about Monk's history. *The Thelonious Monk Reader,* a collection of previously published journalism and criticism, usefully focuses on a life of marked contrasts, as far as his public reputation and visibility were concerned, but one balanced by a private existence that was seemingly more stable and unruffled than that enjoyed by most jazz musicians. Brought up from the age of five in the San Juan Hill area of New York City, he continued to live in the same apartment with his widowed mother after marrying his wife, who supported him financially until his earning capacity increased significantly in the 1960s, by which time Monk was in his forties. His third important female protector was the "Jazz Baroness," Nica de Koenigswater (by birth, a member of the British branch of the Rothschild family), who offered Monk hospitality, space to compose, and finally a permanent room within her own house.

His career, on the other hand, seems to have developed by fits and starts. Obscurity still beckoned while he was already in his mid-twenties and, were it not for his employment by the forward-looking Coleman Hawkins and the early recording of two of his pieces by Cootie Williams, it might have definitively claimed him. After World War II, however, his innovative work a few years before in the house-band of Minton's Playhouse became public knowledge, first as a by-product of the promotion of rising star Dizzy Gillespie and then through the release on disc of informal ses-

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sions actually made at Minton's with Charlie Christian. Though this led to him recording officially and fairly regularly, he was still regarded as an acquired taste for odd-ball listeners until 1957, when he suddenly became flavor of the month in critical circles. A few years later, he achieved a wider popularity, a comparatively lucrative recording contract, an increasing number of engagements and, more unexpectedly, a cover story in *Time* magazine. By the end of the 1960s, however, frequent illness and a stultified muse led him to withdraw gradually into the safety of the Baroness's house, where he spent his last decade not composing and rarely playing. One of the more inexplicable comments in the *Reader* appears in Gerald Early's otherwise instructive essay, which includes Monk among a group of jazzmen who "died without having the luxury of ceasing to work" (235). Monk was, in fact, highly unusual in experiencing precisely that luxury.

There is also the fascination of his frequently inscrutable public persona. Though he was articulate and could apparently be talkative at times with trusted friends, these included few performing colleagues and virtually no journalists. Most of his published statements were lapidary, to say the least, and many were positively Delphic. As early as the mid-1940s, tantalizing hints were being dropped that Monk was perhaps a little unhinged. His own rejoinder to Barry Farrell, the writer assigned by *Time* to profile him, was "I can't be crazy, cause they had me in one of those places [mental hospitals] and they let me go" (153), which, incidentally, undermines the anthology editor's assertion that "Farrell came up with virtually no significant quotes from Monk that had not been published before" (150). It wasn't until the appearance of the posthumous documentary film *Straight No Chaser* in 1989 that there was some official acknowledgement of the pianist's clinical depression, in interviews with his manager and his son.[1]

Initially, it may seem surprising that no written biographies of Monk were published before the late 1990s, at least in English (Fitterling 1997; de Wilde 1997; Gourse 1997). As it happens, the first two such books were translations of works from Western Europe (where important jazz musicians are often taken seriously sooner than they are in the U.S.), but both are more suitably described as extended monographs than full-fledged studies. The focus of Thomas Fitterling's work is squarely on Monk's albums, with cover illustrations reproduced and with the comments on musical details taking second place. Sadly, too, Fitterling shoots himself in the foot by claiming that Monk is not present on the key Minton's recordings, a rumor now laid to rest in a new publication (Sheridan 2001). The approach of de Wilde's book is that of a fellow pianist, one who grew up when Monk was already in the pantheon; but, alongside many astute musicological comments, his Gallic version of journalistic language sits rather

awkwardly. Gourse's standard-issue biography, on the other hand, is only capable of dealing with the music—and, indeed, with some aspects of the life—at the intellectual level of a press release, despite her valuable original interviews. Meanwhile, the promised book by Peter Keepnews, whose chapter on the pre-Minton's Monk is included in the present compilation, seems still a long way from being published, and the Monk research of the late Mark Tucker may not be in pubishable form.

One of the factors that strongly commends the *Reader* to the constituency of this journal is its musicological content. Though they only constitute a portion of the book, the extremely useful contributions by Max Harrison, Ian Carr, Ran Blake, and Scott DeVeaux (and, at a more speculative level, André Hodeir) range widely over Monk's output, and concentrate on compositional and improvisational tactics that not only identified his style but influenced others. One can question individual statements, of course: it's a gross oversimplification for Harrison to call Monk's delightfully convoluted "Skippy" "a version of *Tea For Two*" (39), while DeVeaux makes a little too much of Monk's minor-ninth chords in two specific contexts (274–76), since Monk uses them all over the place. Nevertheless this new article by DeVeaux (who just happens to be the series editor of O.U.P.'s *Readers*) makes the point, far more forcefully than other writers, that the pianist's approach to the interpretation of American popular song is central to his procedures.[2]

By contrast, the one piece described as "ethnographic in nature" (the book's editor trained as an ethnomusicologist) is rather disappointing, if seen in that light. Indeed, this Martin Williams report for *Down Beat* magazine, describing Monk's semi-participation in a rehearsal directed by Hall Overton of Overton's large-ensemble arrangements of Monk material, could be positively misleading. Should anyone be tempted to think that this rather commonplace collective endeavor was in any way typical of the gestation of the composer's music, they would be mistaken. As a recently published interview extract with saxophonist Charlie Rouse makes clear, Monk always wanted to be in total control of how his themes were played,[3] and John Coltrane told of similar experiences in an interview that is only partially quoted in Orrin Keepnews's contribution here (233). Of course, Williams quotes some fine examples of musicians' humor, as when Thad Jones says of a particularly difficult phrase, "It is kind of ignorant, ain't it?" (198), though one should be alert to the irony intended in such comments.

The *Reader* includes relatively little pertaining to the role of improvising sidemen in Monk's music—except for Gunther Schuller's strictures about Rouse, Donald Byrd, Phil Woods, and Pepper Adams at the 1959 Town Hall concert, and Max Harrison's implied criticism of everyone on the classic 1947–52 recordings, apart from Milt Jackson, Art Blakey, and Lucky

Thompson. Schuller seems much more interested in the Overton arrangements and, in particular, balks at the concept of orchestrating Monk's earlier recorded improvisation on "Little Rootie Tootie," on the grounds that,

> In the first place, many of us have admired Monk for years because, among other things he seemed to write for the instruments not as an arranger but as a composer. The instrumental parts of many of his compositions of the late forties seemed to be part and parcel of the original inspiration; they were truly independent yet integrated parts of the composition, and well suited to the character of the instruments chosen. (96)

It is a pity there was no space in the book for dissent from this view, since both the account of Rouse referred to above, and the findings of other commentators who have merely listened to these works, tend to support the diametrically opposite view: namely, that Monk wrote at the piano and for the piano and, in his groups, used whatever instrumentation was at hand. Nor, by the way, is André Hodeir's 1959 assertion still tenable that "because the world of music is now based on the notions of asymmetry and discontinuity [Hodeir refers to Boulez and Stockhausen and adds a plug for painter Paul Klee] . . . Monk is to be hailed as the first jazzman who has had a feeling for specifically modern aesthetic values" (125). Gene Santoro, typically, tries to go one better and compares Monk's music with John Cage's *4′33″*.

One imagines that the pianist, whose preferred painters are rumored to have been the French impressionists, would have greeted such theories with dismissive monosyllables.[4] The "Blindfold Test" interview by Leonard Feather includes Monk's notorious reaction to a record by an un-favorite pianist: "Which is the way to the toilet?" (186).[5] Other examples of Monkish wit are to be found throughout, from the early profiles by somewhat baffled journalists to later, more aware pieces; his *bons mots* were clearly worth the writers' patience. Equally amusing, but in a different way, is the tone of self-confident ignorance characterizing some of the early 78-rpm record reviews, for instance a vintage example from *Down Beat* containing the phrase: "*[Well You] Needn't* doesn't require a Juilliard diploma to understand, but *['Round] Midnight* is for the super hip alone" (31). Given the endless possibilities of gee-whiz writing about this subject, which infects even the Martin Williams piece described above, the general seriousness of the writers is welcome, the only major exception being the pre-superstar manifestation of Albert Goldman (how did he get in here?). The introduction also reassures us that "not represented is the small body of fictional and poetic writings that use themes from Monk's life and titles

of his compositions as inspiration" (xvii), for which relief one offers much thanks.

Having shown enthusiasm for the idea of this *Reader* when it was a mere proposal, the present reviewer is gratifyingly stimulated by the eventual contents while experiencing some dissatisfaction with their arrangement. Introducing a piece from *Harper's Magazine,* van der Bliek underlines the journalist's division of Monk followers into the "hip"-fanciers, the image-fanciers (is there really such a distinction between these two?), and the music-lovers. The editor then observes that "In reality, of course, many listeners would easily fit all three categories simultaneously" (113). As so often in subject "companions" or "readers," many of the compiler's choices would also fit into one or more of his own chosen categories. The generally beneficial decision to reprint whole articles, rather than excerpts, leads to the inclusion of pieces covering more than one aspect of the subject, so that there is a considerable and welcome overlap between what van der Bliek files under "Reports from Selected Venues," "Critics," "Critical Summaries," and "The Music."

What does work well is the largely chronological order of the material, giving an insight into the evolution of writing not just about Monk, but about jazz itself. I am puzzled as to why the two late 1950s articles by "Critics" are printed with their chronology reversed, since Michael James's thoughtful insights (if read first) would have aided comprehension of André Hodeir's patrician philosophizing, in particular providing the context for Hodeir's unfootnoted reference to the "famous solo in *The Man I Love*" (126). Van der Bliek might usefully have commented on two instances of Hodeir translating from the English into his native French, only to be re-translated incorrectly in the U.S. edition of his book. Without any editorial demurral, Hodeir has Monk saying, "I sound a little like James P. Johnson" (126), whereas Peter Keepnews (6) has the accurate quote, "I sound just like James P. Johnson"—irony or no, there is a difference. Hodeir also gives Miles Davis's statement about Monk as "I like the way he plays, but I can't stand behind him" (121). What Miles actually said referred to Monk's accompaniment: "I can't stand him behind me."

The editor's introduction includes the conventional bromide: "Obvious factual errors have been footnoted with corrections" (xvi). Given this intention, the preface to his first chapter gets off to an unfortunate start by stating that "Back in New York between 1936 and 1939, [Monk] seems to have worked sporadically at a number of musical jobs, including work with Cootie Williams" (1). This assertion is seemingly founded on no less an authority than Dizzy Gillespie's autobiography, which, like most oral history-based works, is no authority at all as far as chronology is concerned. The relevant section of Gillespie's book, later quoted in full, asserts that he

"first met Monk during the early days, 1937 and 1938. Monk used to be with Cootie Williams up at the Savoy, and then, in 1939, he got the gig down at Minton's" (19). Van der Bliek notes that the latter reference is a year too early, but fails to mention that every day of Williams's life between 1937 and October 1941 is accounted for by his employment with first Duke Ellington and then Benny Goodman, as shown in the relevant reference works. It has been amply documented that Williams first formed his own band after leaving Goodman, thus employing Monk subsequent to the Minton's period. When another Williams, Mary Lou, is quoted as claiming that the move to Minton's post-dated a short-lived rehearsal band for which "Monk was writing arrangements and Bud Powell and maybe Milt Jackson" (12), we are not informed that in 1940 Powell and Jackson turned seventeen and sixteen, respectively, nor that Jackson moved to New York only in 1945.

There is an unfortunate tendency in such anthologies, perhaps especially when the editors are academics, to neutralize the material they include. This trap, which van der Bliek does not entirely avoid, consists in writing sectional introductions that sometimes go too far in telling the reader what to expect. Instead of merely situating the author and his chosen contribution, we are directed to what the editor finds most important, thereby diminishing our response to whatever else the original may be saying. In the most egregious cases, the editor, having decided on a salient phrase that he believes encapsulates the item to follow, will extract it and, beating his contributor to the punch-line, quote it verbatim in his introduction. It's probably unworthy to suggest that this is ever done for an editor's self-aggrandisement, when a more likely explanation is that of pandering to college students' need to have their sources filleted and predigested. If so, surely this is to be deplored; if they're interested in Monk, then let them read the whole book, not just the chapter that addresses their essay problem.

As hinted already, the editorial approach veers from over-zealous to deficient. At the more laid-back end of the scale, the introduction claims that tracing the usage of the "meager set of facts and stories [about the pianist's early life] that are perpetually recycled and restated . . . would in itself be a laborious undertaking" (xiv). One can't, however, expect the average biography to go into such matters, so it would be useful, for instance, to show that the reference to Monk's "claims to have played bop since 1932" (5), quoted from a 1951 edition of the British *Melody Maker,* which is highly unlikely to have done its own research, clearly derives from Paul Bacon's 1949 interview included here. Equally, it should not be beyond the editor's scope to query the stories of Monk sleeping on the job, the earliest reference to which is in the 1948 comment by Minton's

manager, Teddy Hill: "Monk would fall asleep at the piano all the time. He'd stay there hours after the place closed, or get there hours before we opened" (55). So, one might ask, was Gillespie corroborating or fancifully elaborating in his 1979 statement: "Monk'd be asleep at the piano. To wake him up, I'd mash the quick of his finger and wake him up right quick" (19)? And was Leonard Feather being merely partisan or gratuitously offensive in 1949, when he wrote that "Monk, who has been touted as a 'genius' and a 'high priest of bebop,' would wander in and out of Minton's, often falling asleep at the piano" (2)? Then again, if van der Bliek is content not to follow up such matters, why create a footnote to illustrate the Blue Note company touting their artist, when the same sixty-nine words are quoted in Ira Peck's 1948 piece a few pages later?

For much of the time, van der Bliek is intent on giving record catalog numbers for individual tracks mentioned in the text, but later thinks better of it (and, indeed, there was surely a better way to accommodate this information). The comparative wealth of footnotes also contrives to rob the impact and in-period relevance of those footnotes that were part of the original author's piece, as in the contributions of Hodeir, Raymond Horricks, and Grover Sales, or Martin Williams's comment about Monk playing songs associated with Bing Crosby (who is not indexed, by the way). A typically unnecessary note calls into question Paul Bacon's mention of a recent return engagement at Minton's, with the portentous words: "There are no other accounts of Monk's having played at Minton's after the 1940–1941 period" (62). This seems unwise, as Bacon was one of the pianist's only boosters at the time, and especially as Sheridan (2001), who lists van der Bliek in his acknowledgements, is able to give exact dates and personnel for the engagement in question. On the other hand, it would have been worth a footnote to explain that Martin Williams is wrong about "Let's Call This" being based on the chords of "Sweet Sue." Another might have pointed out that of the few early writers on Monk, Bill Gottlieb is the only one to claim that the owner of Minton's was not Henry Minton, but one Morris Milton (who duly appears in the index). Van der Bliek also seems unaware that Lorraine Gordon and Lorraine Lion, both indexed, are one and the same person.

When it comes to the *Time* section, the footnoting service switches off for a dozen pages or more. Is the magazine's publisher Henry Luce (mentioned six times by different authors, but only by his surname or in humorous formations such as Luceland) really so proverbial across the world that those spoon-fed students don't deserve an explanatory comment? Ditto Rock Hunter, as in "success-spoilt Rock Hunters" (172)? In addition to not mentioning that Thelonious Monk, Jr. (as he was called in 1971) is

now a professional drummer known as T. S. Monk, the editor asserts he was born in 1951 (69), despite printing two contributions confirming the published birthdate of 1949 (76, 161). The Ellington piano piece described as "Jimmy Blanton's Blues," and alleged to be "typical of the mature Monk" (204) is actually called "Mr. J. B. Blues." A footnote stating that "there is no double-time playing" on the Blue Note record of "Misterioso," contradicting an anonymous reviewer (32), is ill-judged, considering Art Blakey is heard doing just that from the outset, and most audibly between 2′40″ and 3′10″. Monk's description of the bridge of a tune as the "inside" of the piece is hardly "a very revealing comment" (77), when this was already a common colloquial usage found elsewhere in the book (186). In addition, one learns that Monk's 1964 bassist is influenced by Oscar Peterson (168) rather than Oscar Pettiford, who was correctly cited in the original, while the standard song "April in Paris" is credited not to its composer Vernon Duke, but to Duke Ellington (274).

Clearly, some minor revisions would be desirable if the book runs to a reprint, which its selection of material would certainly justify. There is, however, one long-standing biographical problem which van der Bliek does at least tackle head-on, namely the question of Monk's possible attendance at Juilliard, on which even the present reviewer has hedged his bets before now (Priestley 1999). Despite reporting the findings of Peter Keepnews (which I am happy to accept) that there is no evidence for this, the editor feels obliged to point to the program notes for Monk's funeral, which claimed that "contrary to popular rumor that he was a self-taught musician, Thelonious studied theory, harmony and arranging at the Juilliard School of Music while he was in his late teens." Van der Bliek's comment is gentle and judicious: "It seems plausible that the organizers of the funeral service used this story to enhance a formal occasion" (224). However, the missing piece of the jigsaw, recently posted on the internet, probably came too late to be of use. Namely, the suggestion that Hall Overton was, at the time of his abovementioned Monk arrangements, on staff at the college and that, when the pianist visited him there, comments on the musicians' grapevine (e.g., "Did you hear that Monk went up to Juilliard?") got a bit out of hand.

Despite the feeling that aspects of this anthology might have been better handled, its general excellence is not in doubt. Not only will it be essential reading for any future biographer, but it constitutes a challenge for the next book on Monk to deal with the detail of his music. The impending arrival, as this review is completed, of two musicological volumes, on Billy Strayhorn (Van de Leur 2002) and Charles Mingus (Bayley, forthcoming), makes the lack of such a study of Monk all the more regrettable.

Notes

1. *Straight, No Chaser,* directed by Charlotte Zwerin (Warner, 1988).

2. DeVeaux's essay first appeared in the issue of *Black Music Research Journal* (Fall 1999) edited by Mark Tucker and entirely devoted to Monk. Its other contributions also deserve to be read in conjunction with the present anthology.

3. Rouse's salient comments include the following: "He would sit down [at the piano], he would say, 'Rouse, play this an octave higher' . . . and then eventually it would start meshing. Because I'm listening to how he's playing it, and automatically it just comes together" (quoted in Keepnews 2001).

4. One imagines, too, that his wife Nellie didn't waste her time reading his reviews to him, especially as *Time* revealed that she was subtly dismissive herself (as well as affectionate), referring to him as "Melodious Thunk."

5. Interestingly perhaps, this famous quotation was not restricted to this one occasion, but was also uttered in order to evade a well-wisher and would-be interviewer, in the person of the present writer.

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