

THE PIANO MAN WHO DUG BE-BOP

By Ira Peck

THE NEWEST CULT in jazz today, and the one that is being debated most hotly by people who take their jazz seriously, is be-bop. It is difficult to define be-bop adequately, for the simple reason that it is like no other jazz. Jazz critics have called it a kind of "surrealist" jazz and have drawn analogies between it and the works of Picasso and Dali. Musically it has been likened to the works of Stravinsky whom most be-bop musicians are known to admire. It is a dissonant, staccato-like jazz, usually played at a break-neck pace. Technically, it is characterized by the accenting of passing notes, especially flatted fifths and flatted ninths.

Few musicians are moderate in their opinions of be-bop. Either they like it enormously or they won't have anything to do with it. Eddie Condon, who adheres to the old-time Dixieland school of jazz had this to say about it:

"I can't stand it. I can't understand it and I can't see how those guys who play it can either. That type of music—that weird, try-to-figure-it-out serenade-to-a-toilet-in-mid-ocean stuff seems to me as musical as tonsillitis."

Young, wonderful minds

Duke Ellington, on the other hand, is sympathetic to be-bop. "Why be surprised that be-bop is ridiculed," he said. "Jazz and swing got the same treatment in their early days, too. Anything that's alive must progress and music is alive. This is 1948 and there are young minds, wonderful minds working on fresh musical ideas. Those ideas have spread and some part of them will certainly survive and become incorporated into the music of tomorrow."

Eugene List, classical pianist, is another admirer of be-bop. "Be-bop is to jazz," he said, "as atonality is to classical music. It uses the enlarged harmony structure of jazz but is more cerebral than emotional. I like it. Any intellectual exercise in music is fun if you want to take your mind off anything. I wish I could play first-rate be-bop."

Dizzy Gillespie, the best known exponent of be-bop, was on a European tour and unavailable for comment when this was written.

In a communique last week Blue Note records announced it had "actually found the one person who was responsible for this whole new trend in music. The genius behind the whole movement—and we have had the privilege of being the first to put his radical and unorthodox ideas on wax—is an unusual and mysterious character with the more unusual name of Thelonious Monk. Among musicians, Thelonious' name is treated with respect and awe, for he is a strange person whose pianistic continue to baffle all who hear him."

Downbeat, a jazz trade publication, confirmed these claims about Monk. In fact, one of their own reporters, Bill Gottlieb, had managed to corral Monk once very briefly last fall and regarded this as such an achievement that he began his story in this manner:

Mother's favorite

"I have interviewed Thelonious Monk. It's not like having seen Pinetop spit blood or delivering the message to Garcia. But on the other hand, it's at least equal to a scoop on the true identity of Benny Benzdrine or on who killed Cock Robin."

Before interviewing Monk, I was warned that he was an "enigma" and was volunteered the following information about him:

Monk is about 29 and has lived all his life with his family in one apartment on 63d Street between 11th Avenue and the West Side Drive. Besides Monk, the present occupants of the apartment are his mother (his father died a few years ago), a sister, brother-in-law, and nephew. An older brother, who had once been a prize fighter, lives in a neighboring house. The youngest of the Monk children, Thelonious is also his mother's favorite. He depends on her for a great many favors. "He frequently says, 'My mother will take care of that for me.' Leave the message with my mother."

Monk's room is his "inner sanctum,"

Out-of-tune pianos disturb Thelonious Monk but the controversial surrealist jazz he started is music to his ears and to a growing new cult

and he seldom leaves it to mingle with the rest of the family. On the other hand, he has been known to jam as many as 10 people in it when he has entertained on the piano.

Monk holds jobs only infrequently, and it is doubtful whether he could get by financially if he did not live at home. He has turned down work for a variety of reasons. For one thing, he does not like to play "commercial" jazz. He has also refused to play at clubs simply because he felt the piano was out of tune.

"Once," one of my informants said, "right in the middle of a number he stopped, got up from the piano and walked away. 'The B note rings,' he said. 'It disturbs me.'"

Monk's eating habits are equally erratic. On waking up he usually plays the piano for a couple of hours, then has a couple of beers, and later on, when he gets hungry, a sandwich. He eats a meal only when he feels like it.

"I honestly don't believe," a friend of his told me later, "that food means a thing to him."

Monk seldom sleeps more than five hours a day and has occasionally gone as long as three days without any sleep at all. During that time he wanders around from one friend's house to another, or from one club to another, working out his ideas on the piano. Apparently, nobody says no to him.

"He'll go to Mary Lou Williams' house at four o'clock in the morning and she'll just say, 'Come in, there's the piano, go

ahead' and then go right back to sleep." At the end of one of these periods, Monk is so exhausted that he is likely to sleep straight through three days. Then he sleeps so deeply that it is almost impossible to wake him.

Monk listens to records almost as much as he plays the piano and is extremely uncomfortable unless there is a phonograph or a piano wherever he is.

Women are a 'heckle'

Monk seems to care very little for girls, although he is occasionally seen in their company and is admired by many. One girl who lives in the same apartment building drops in frequently to clean his room and wash his dishes.

"The girl idolizes him. He sits there and she puts cigarettes in his mouth and lights them for him. Yet he hardly speaks to her. He tells me that women are a 'heckle' sometimes. He doesn't want to be tied down to anything except his music."

Armed with this fill-in, I visited Thelonious' home next day. It was a typical tenement flat—dark, tiny, and dilapidated. The central room was the kitchen in which an old cot had been placed to provide extra sleeping quarters. A tin ceiling, walls darkened by stove soot, linoleum worn through to the floor boards in places contrasted incongruously with a large, new, shiny white refrigerator and, next to the cot, an expensive-looking console model radio and phonograph.

There were two bedrooms off the kitchen and from one of these Monk

emerged to greet me. He was a tall, well-built, gentle-mannered chap, unusual-looking only in that he wore green-tinted, horn-and-gold rimmed glasses and a small goatee. These, I learned later, are standard equipment among be-bop musicians.

Monk invited me into his room. It was just large enough to accommodate a small upright piano, a cot, a dresser, and a chair. There was only one window which, because it faced an alley, admitted very little light. A feeble lamp on Monk's dresser provided most of the light in the room. There were several pictures around the room. One of Billie Holiday, was pasted on the ceiling next to a red bulb. Monk said he liked to lie back on his cot and gaze at it. On the wall near his cot was a picture of Sarah Vaughan and, above the piano, one of Dizzy Gillespie. This was inscribed, *To Monk, my first inspiration, Stay with it. Your boy, Dizzy Gillespie.*

I found out soon enough why Monk had been called an enigma. Although polite, he maintained a stone-wall reserve throughout the interview. To most of my questions about himself, his answer was "I don't know." He seldom spoke two consecutive sentences. About his music he was almost as uncommunicative. He defined be-bop only as "modern swing music" but would not elaborate.

I was able to gather, however, that he first began experimenting with be-bop about six or seven years ago while working with a quartet at Minton's Playhouse, a Harlem night club on West 118th Street. He and the other musicians, Kenny Clark, drummer, Nick Fenton, bass fiddler, and Joe Guy, trombonist, "started making up melodies. In order to play what we wanted to play we had to make up our own tunes. Just like Duke Ellington had to make up his own music and sounds to express himself."

Be-bop, he said, "just happened. I just

Photo by Morris Gordon



Thelonious Monk, apostle of a new jazz cult, be-bop, playing a few bars for Teddy Hill at Minton's, where bop was born.

tell it . . . it came to me. Something was being created differently without my trying to."

The kind of be-bop being played today by Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, he said, is not the same he originally worked out at Minton's. He felt that Gillespie, who used to engage in after-hours jam sessions with him, had improvised on the original and then turned out his own version of be-bop.

Monk went into the kitchen and put on a recording of one of his piano solos. It was more subdued and slower than most be-bop I've heard, but the principles were the same: there was no melody pattern—one never knew where the music was going next—a lot of unharmonious chords, and a steady, insistent rhythm. It was imaginative, interesting music and it was plain that Monk was striving for something different.

Underground in be-bop

Monk felt that one of the reasons he has not achieved the fame and commercial success of Gillespie and Parker is his reticence.

"I don't get around as much," he said. "People don't see me as much. I'm sort of underground in be-bop."

Another reason, he felt, is that most musicians have difficulty playing with him. The exceptions are drummers and bass fiddlers "because they have more beat."

Most people, I mentioned, have found be-bop pretty weird.

"They don't know what it's all about. They don't understand the music and in most cases never heard it. Weird means something you never heard before. It's weird until people get around to it. Then it ceases to be weird."

That was all I could get from Monk. But still curious about him I called that evening on Teddy Hill, the former band-leader who is now part-owner of Minton's. Hill, I was told, probably knew more about Monk than anyone around.

I found him in his office at the club, a short chunky man with small eyes set closely together in a wide face. When I told him of the difficulty I had had with Monk he nodded.

"Monk is definitely a character," he said. "He's the type of fellow who thinks an awful lot but doesn't have much to say. Yeah, I've known a lot of musicians who were characters, but none just like him."

Absorbed in music

Monk, Hill said, is so absorbed in his music he appears to have lost touch with everything else.

"He just doesn't seem to be present unless he's actually talking to you and then sometimes all of a sudden in the middle of a conversation his mind is somewhere else. He may still be talking to you, but he's thinking about something else."

"Some nights I've seen him in here with a girl. She's sitting back there and he'll get into a conversation with someone else, forget she's there, and the next thing you know he might get up; get his coat, and start walking out until somebody reminds him that his girl is there. She looks like a very nice girl but I wonder what the guy ever talks to her about. I've hardly ever seen him say two words to her."

Monk's preoccupation with his music, Hill said, makes him equally erratic when he is working.

"When I had him here, the band used to come to work at 10. He'd come in at nine but at 10 you couldn't find him. Maybe an hour later you'd find him sitting off by himself in the kitchen somewhere writing and the band playing didn't make any difference to him. He'd say, 'I didn't hear it.'"

"I always used to be so disgusted with him and yet you never saw such a likeable guy. Plenty of times I'd have been happy to hire the guy as piano player in my band but I couldn't depend on him. Everybody liked the guy. Dizzy and Kenny Clark once said they'd assume responsibility for getting him there on time if I'd hire him, they liked him so much. Everybody wanted him but everybody was afraid of him. He was too un dependable. He'd just rather mess around at home."

As the leader of a cult, Monk is much sought-after, but he chooses his friends carefully.

"He doesn't run around with just any guy who falls all over him. If a guy doesn't dig him, he doesn't waste any time with him."

Hill reached for a cigar and lit up.

"Tell you something else peculiar about Monk," he said after he had cleared away some of the smoke. "I've never seen him have any emotion. I've never heard him in an argument seriously with anybody yet. He'd much rather take the worst of it than to argue too much about anything. I've never seen him excited except when he's playing. It only comes out in one place and that's when he sits down at a piano."

"He'll come in here anytime and play for hours with only a dim light and the funny thing is he'll never play a complete tune. You never know what he's playing. Many times he's gone on so long I've had to come back and plead with him to quit playin' the piano so I could close up the place 'cause it was against the law to keep it open any longer."

I asked Hill about the roles of Monk and Gillespie in the creation of be-bop.

Monk was actually "the guy who dug the stuff out," Hill said. Gillespie had packaged the goods and delivered it to the consumers.

"Monk seemed more like the guy who manufactured the product rather than commercialized it. Dizzy has gotten all the exploitation because Dizzy branched out and got started. Monk stayed right in the same groove."

Front and back

"Of course, what Dizzy is playing today is not altogether what Monk had in mind. But the fundamentals are the same. Dizzy just twisted it a little bit. He decided instead of starting at the front to start at the back. But the stuff is essentially what Monk worked out."

The reason Monk had not obtained recognition, Hill felt, was not that he was lacking ability. It was his unavailability.

"One reason for it, I guess, is that he was living at home with his own people. Maybe if the guy had to stand on his own two feet it might have been different. But knowing that he had a place to eat and sleep, that might have had a lot to do with it. Dizzy had to be on time to keep the landlady from saying 'You don't live here any more.' Monk never had that worry."

"I think Monk has possibilities of becoming outstanding in his field—provided he ever finds himself personally and makes a stand on his own instead of just being pushed and shoved all the time. He waits and sits until everybody does everything for him. I don't think Monk would ever get a job if other people didn't ask for him."

Hill wouldn't make any predictions as to the future of be-bop generally. We gathered it had plenty of obstacles to overcome.

"It's difficult stuff to play," Hill said. "Right now you have good musicians trying to play it and they sound horrible. The stuff played improperly can be offensive—it hurts your ears. You never hear a big band except Dizzy play it. You may hear a few guys take a riff or so but that's about all. And who's gonna write it—all those chords clashing and everything. A lot of guys don't think it's worthwhile to invest their time in it."

An original talent

It was after 10 o'clock when I walked out of Hill's office and I could hear the almost hysterically fast strains of a small jazz band coming from the club room. Unlike most night clubs it was a bright, cheerful, gaily decorated place and the customers seemed to be enjoying themselves. Many of them were visibly stimulated by the music but only a few made any attempt to dance to it.

I saw Monk, looking as withdrawn as he had earlier in the day, with a group of friends who were urging him to play for them. When the band took a break Monk walked up to the piano and began testing it. Satisfied that it was in tune, he sat down and began playing. At first he played fairly conventional, recognizable tunes to which he gave his own twist but as he progressed he played more and more of his own music.

People shook their heads and marveled at his playing. Most of them agreed that Monk has an original talent.

"His chords, his way of thinking, his beat—they're absolutely unique," one listener said. "He's just enough off the norm to be a genius."

I spoke to Monk again a little later and asked him whether he thought be-bop would catch on.

"It has to," he said. "It's the modern music of today. It makes other musicians think—just like Picasso. It has to catch on."