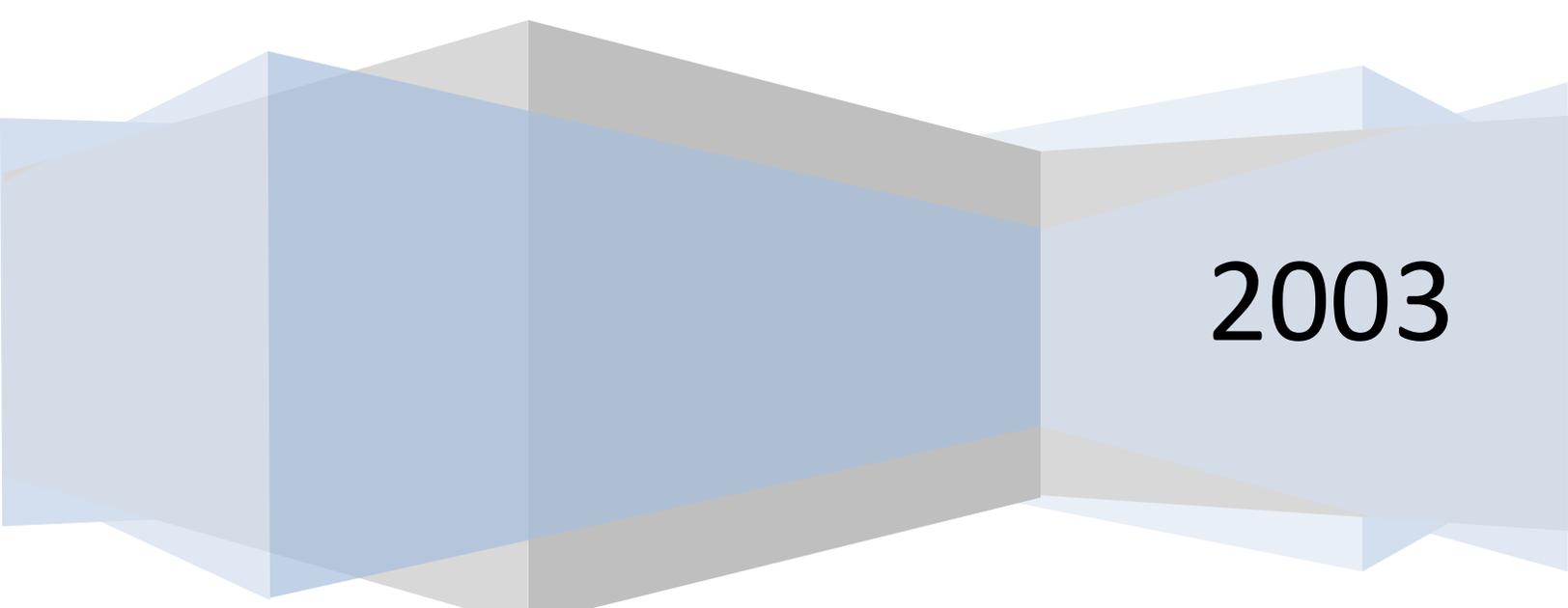


Cool of Jazz:

Thelonious & Miles

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The meandering tempo of the bass guitar delivers me into thought quickly broken as the band transitions to the piano, to the saxophone, to the muted flugelhorn, and finally, the drum. Just as I begin to think that I've heard all that a drummer can offer, he transitions with his instrument, and communicates an unheard-of technique, rhythm, and sound. Like all art forms, music communicates. In jazz, traditions are broken as instruments, independent of each other, speak. This form of stepping away from tradition became one that paralleled my newfound radical inclination in the 1970s, and in this moment, I found just how diaphanous that film is between tradition and non-tradition, good and bad, order and chaos, sane and insane, as I settled into a groove carved out for the "cool." The band continues to transition from player to player until they meet again exploding with harmonious celebration of the return from ingenious chaos.

Thelonious "Sphere" Monk, Jr. and Miles Dewey Davis III were jazz composers that radically expressed themselves through their instruments. Like the radically painted Volkswagen vans of yesteryear splashed with loud-colored flowers and curtains, jazz posed as their vessel radical enough to ride where the possibilities of being unaccepted and/or misunderstood were fewer. As the jazz world stood apart from the rest of the music world, these two jazz greats stood apart from the rest of the jazz world with their music, lifestyles, and stage presence – like antipodes of an already egregious zone. They were deeper than the expected radicalism that most jazz enthusiasts considered deep enough.

My First Thelonious

My childhood friend's father, Charles Taylor, would answer the door and grunt his greeting from behind the thickest mustache that I had ever seen. He was never excited but usually reseated himself as quickly as possible in his over-stuffed armchair positioned

strategically between two large speakers. Vance, my childhood friend, and I would try to hurry through his listening room, but Mr. Taylor never missed the opportunity to introduce the composers and concepts of jazz music that always bumped from those speakers. This particular day, he enthusiastically barked, “This is Thelonious Monk right here boys!” He coolly bobbed his head anticipating our usual swift departure, but this time was different. I processed something more – something advanced, and getting through to Vance’s room to play was not as urgent. Firstly, Thelonious was the name of Vance’s older brother, and secondly, this Thelonious Monk sounded coolly different from music aired by the popular radio stations of the 1960s. Although I did not become the jazz enthusiast right away, my mind received quite a tattoo by these two early realizations involving Thelonious Monk.

My First Miles

In the 1970s, “Bitches Brew,” became required listening for those of us seeking freedom from the norm in music. Not knowing that jazz would be this platform, I sat dumbfound while Miles made me think, made me explore, and in his coolly different style, reminded me of that earlier experience in Mr. Taylor’s listening room. I accepted the challenge of jazz and found its provocation more productive for me than any other genre of that time. I sought to develop an identity with the “cool” of jazz and its world.

Early Thelonious

Thelonious and Barbara Monk, lived in Rocky Mount, North Carolina when young Thelonious was born. Barbara grew “tired of crossing the railroad tracks” as a maid for whites and wanted to take the family to New York City. She had to do so without Thelonious Sr. It is believed that he may have been sick at that time and stayed in North Carolina (Gourse 2). She found work in New York quickly, and shortly thereafter, her husband joined them. Thelonious

Sr. got a chance to see his son's talent discovered before his health forced him back to North Carolina. A teacher, working with Marion Monk, Thelonious' sister, noticed his ability to play by ear impressively and suggested that the family spend money in Thelonious' training instead (Gourse 3-7).

Early Miles

Miles II (known as "Doc") and Cleota Davis provided quite a different backdrop in the development of young Miles III. Doc was a dentist and provided a life more privileged than that of Thelonious'. Doc and Cleota had big ambitions and knew that young Miles needed a bigger stage than Alton, Illinois. Music was in the Davis' blood, and for his thirteenth birthday, young Miles received a trumpet and immediately took to it (Chambers 4-11). He went to New York to attend Juilliard, a prestigious school of music, and fell in love with Thelonious' music, which he tried to play on his trumpet. Miles says that, "If I hadn't met him in 1945 when I came to New York, I wouldn't have progressed so well" (qtd. in Gourse 41).

Music Styles

The style of silence, where most musicians and enthusiasts expect sound to be, was one way that these two greats, similarly, stood apart from the field. Thelonious not only used silence, he expected the listener to accept that silence (eventually defined as "space") and recognize it to have just as much significance as its audible opposite. He and Miles used this "space" and created relief, texture, definition, and even humor (Santoro 498). Miles acknowledges Thelonious' influence in the use of "space," and that use of space became a trademark of his trumpeting (Gourse 41). For Miles, this style indicated a confidence, as his audiences were required to be patient and/or willing to wait for his notes directly contrasting with all preconceived ideas about solo performances in music (Walser 177).

Miles conducted his band by roving on stage as they performed. He developed an unpopular habit of turning his back to his audiences. Before electronic assistance, this was a problem because you could not hear him. Most of the “icons” of Miles (images of him in performance) are of him blowing his horn pointed downward – dark shades – and an expression of intensity on his face (Davis 205). Miles left you with the impression that you were truly watching a genius at work.

Hearing the stories about the man searching under his piano or wandering around on stage adds mysticism to the genius man that you’ve heard Thelonious to be. It is said that Thelonious developed this style of wandering around from an encounter in performance with Miles where the trumpeter insisted that Thelonious “stroll” – “lay out” (terms that mean to not play) during his solo. Thelonious grudgingly complied by wandering around and, on occasion, standing over Miles who was a noticeably smaller man (Gourse 96). Audiences thought Thelonious danced or wandered aimlessly around on stage, but like Miles, he conducted his band this way (Feinstein 56). This style eventually became one that Thelonious mastered.

Lifestyles

Musicians needed a cabaret license in order to perform in New York, but Thelonious had his confiscated twice for off-stage misbehaviors. On one occasion, the Massachusetts state police picked him up and took him to a state hospital, where he stayed for a week (Kevorkian 170).

Even though Miles was subject to bouts of depression and irritability, he did well in most areas of his life (Hentoff 66). He and Thelonious were similar in how they felt closeness to their families and how absorbed they could be in their music (Hentoff 67). An old European friend said about Miles’ later years, “He has become more master of himself. He knows what he wants to express, and he expresses it well, with control” (qtd. in Hentoff 73).

Sadly, drug and alcohol addiction was common in the world of music, but in the world of jazz, a heroin habit was “cool” and performance enhancing. Many great musicians of the time, including Miles, had habits that proved most destructive, but Miles’ thoughts were that you do drugs “cause you like to, not cause it’s a lifestyle,” thus, separating himself further from other known drug users. Miles had a heroin habit (Chambers 140). If Thelonious used heroin, he did not share that part of his life with others. Most accounts of his substance abuse involved alcohol and/or marijuana. Accounts of his using other substances seem to be speculative at best (Gourse 100). Like Miles, Thelonious’ individualism separated him from the rest including even Miles especially when we consider Thelonious’ preference to abstain from some substances.

Thelonious “Sphere” Monk, Jr. and Miles Dewey Davis III were from families of both ends of the spectrum. They met in New York and shared an interest in a style of music that changed the jazz world, but had antipodal styles off stages. I thought it appropriate to listen to the music of these two greats while doing this work, and found that much of their music opened doors of creativity in me that often bordered abstract. I am confident that this was the intent of Thelonious and Miles – to free listeners enough to experience our own radicalism through their music. I’ve expanded, but I’ll continue to consider deep enough – deep enough.

In a 1963 interview, Thelonious was asked, “Excepting New York City and Los Angeles, where in the U.S.A. would you prefer to live?” He responded, “The moon” (Gourse 197).

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