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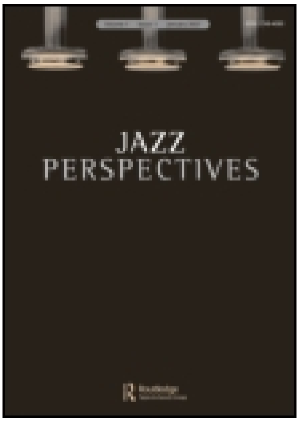

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The Right Mistakes: Confronting the "Old Question" of Thelonious Monk's Chops

David Feurzeig

> Technique is a very technical word. I figure technique means playing all kinds of ways —everything. As far as a perfect technique, I never heard it. Because I never heard anybody play everything that could be played on the piano yet. So nobody has any technique that I know of. Everybody needs to learn their technique. Then maybe some day I could hear somebody play the piano right![1]
>
> The piano ain't got no wrong notes.[2]

Introduction

Thelonious Monk, while always highly regarded as a composer, was initially dismissed as an incompetent pianist by most jazz fans, critics, and fellow musicians. Though he has long since come to be celebrated for his innovative playing as much as for his compositions, what Chick Corea once dubbed "the old question of Monk's chops"[3] continues to occasion a curious critical unease. Even today, while no longer ubiquitous or pronounced as it once was, a defensive stance is detectable in many discussions of Monk's technique—despite his well-established position in the pantheon of jazz pianists.

What accounts for this incongruity? A close reading of defenses of Monk's pianism suggests one reason the technique question persists: from the beginning and until very recently, discussions of Monk's playing have tended either to de-emphasize or to "forgive" the peculiarities that raised questions about his ability in the first place.

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[1] Les Tompkins, "The Classic Interview: Thelonious Monk," (n.d.), repr. in *Crescendo International* xxiv, no. 6 (1987): 13.

[2] Thelonious Monk, radio show call-in, March 1976, as related by Phil Schaap, "A History of WKCR's Jazz Programming: An Interview with Phil Schaap," conducted, transcribed, and edited by Evan Spring (October 5, 1992). http://www.columbia.edu/cu/wkcr/jazz/schaap.html.

[3] "Chick Corea on Thelonious Monk," *Keyboard Magazine* vii, no. 7 (July 1982): 19.

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These idiosyncrasies include a loping unevenness,[4] an avoidance of flashy passagework, a corollary expansive employment of space (typically framed by disorienting interjections), and frequent jarring dissonances. These dissonances, which sometimes strike unfamiliar listeners as mistakes, are an essential element of Monk's style. They need to be closely examined, not sidestepped, in any serious exploration of his playing.

After reviewing previous considerations of Monk's dissonance usage,[5] I present an analysis of Monk's 1968 solo recording of "Round Midnight" which focuses on such "wrong notes." My analysis suggests that striking, even seemingly inept dissonances are neither egregious errors nor pardonable, insignificant imperfections, tangential to some more meaningful abstract musical content. Neither are they merely aspects of Monk's characteristically harsh tone, as some analysts have suggested, chosen out of simple predilection for biting sonorities. While such "timbral" dissonance is unquestionably fundamental to Monk's keyboard approach—a vital component of his abrasive, adenoidal piano sound—the significance of certain odd-sounding moments is bound up with their "wrongness," with a sense of contradiction or surprise. These "syntactically" (as opposed to timbrally) dissonant events make sense *because* they sound wrong, but in a meaningful way, as significations on musical norms. Considered in various pertinent contexts—the chord changes, the jazz piano tradition, and the improvisational process—Monk's "mistakes" evince a profound underlying logic, wry humor, and a precision that speaks directly to lingering uncertainty regarding his technical accuracy.

My title refers to Monk's putative remark, on reviewing a playback, "I made the wrong mistakes."[6] Monk's most mischievous moments—the *right* mistakes—manifest his delight in playing with listener expectations, in daring to do the wrong thing that turns out to be right.[7]

Reception History, or A Chronology of Apology

> Opinions, as one would expect, have been sharply divided over Monk and his music. (1959)[8]

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[4] I am referring here to Monk's microtiming, in particular the signature jerkiness of his fast runs and arpeggios. Musicians and critics alike—even those who deprecated his playing overall—generally praised Monk's "time," presumably referring to his rocklike solidity at the level of the beat despite the abundant ametrical runs, delays, and anticipations. Numerous comments by Monk himself to or about his sidemen suggest that he placed an even higher priority on "good time" than many other jazz musicians.

[5] Analyses by Gunther Schuller, Ran Blake, James Kurzdorfer, Mark Tucker, Scott DeVeaux, and Benjamin Givan are discussed below.

[6] Luciano Berio, *Two Interviews,* translated and edited by David Osmund Smith (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985), 84. See the Postscript of the present article for more on this attribution.

[7] Compare Monk's reply when drummer Ben Riley's inquired about rehearsals: "Why do you want to do that, so you can learn how to cheat? You already know how to play. Now play wrong and make *that* right." Ken Micallef, "Ben Riley: Power of the Lion, Patience of the Ages," *Modern Drummer* 292 (February 2005): 82. Cited in Robin D. G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 351.

[8] Raymond Horricks, *These Jazzmen of Our Time* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1959), 23. In order to make Monk's reception chronology clear to the reader, in this section each comment is tagged with the year it was made or first published, regardless of the date of the source cited in these notes (which in some cases is a later compilation or reprint).

Much ink has been spilled about Monk's technique, "or supposed lack of same," as Gunther Schuller once put it.[9] In fact, Monk's first review notices, mostly new-discovery pieces by friends and promoters, were favorable. Herbie Nichols's 1944 write-up for the *Music Dial* even touted innovator Monk's old-school bona fides: "I'd rather hear him play a 'boston' than any other pianist."[10] A boston meant a kind of stride piece or a striding solo piano chorus; thus fellow pianist Nichols is alluding to Monk's grounding in the venerable and virtuosic stride piano tradition—a point which would become thematic among Monk's defenders more than a decade later.

The handful of early appreciations quickly proved to be exceptions. Years later, recalling his enthusiastic review and the overwhelmingly negative criticism that followed, Nichols said, "I raved about him … Leonard Feather and those other people didn't even know what he was doing; they hated him."[11] "Those other people" were not only critics. Saxophonist Coleman Hawkins recalled the typical response of fellow musicians when he hired Monk as a sideman: "Why don't you get a piano player?"[12] The classic formulation of what could be termed the first Monk consensus is Leonard Feather's, from his 1949 book on bebop: "[Monk] has written a few attractive tunes, but his lack of technique and continuity prevented him from accomplishing much as a pianist."[13] Note the past tense: case closed. In the late 1940s, Monk's inability was indeed accepted as fact; for instance, even a *positive* notice in *Down Beat* conceded, "Monk's technique is not the greatest."[14]

Following reviews of his first recordings as a leader in 1947, little was written about Monk for several years. His records sold poorly and received little attention; he performed only sporadically in New York, and practically never anywhere else. In 1951, a narcotics conviction led to the loss of his New York City cabaret card, barring Monk from playing in any establishment serving alcohol. His performing career effectively halted, listeners had little occasion to reconsider the received view that Monk was a talented composer but a poor player.

In 1957, Monk's cabaret card was reinstated, allowing him to play Manhattan clubs for the first time in years. Monk began a celebrated six-month stand at the Five Spot, which marked a dramatic turnaround in critical opinion. "If there are any doubts about Monk's musical abilities, attendance at a couple of sets in the Five Spot should dispel them."[15]

Typical of these later assessments was a sudden impatience with what one reviewer now dismissed as the "usual cliché about Monk's limitations."[16] Professing surprise at "any doubts" regarding Monk's technique, critics even adopted a tone of incredulity:

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[9] Gunther Schuller, "Reviews: Recordings," *Jazz Review* i, no. 1 (November 1958): 27. Benjamin Givan has also written recently on the history of Monk's reception in "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," *Journal of Musicology* xxvi, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 404–42.

[10] Herbie Nichols, "Jazz Milieu," *Music Dial* (August 1944): 24.

[11] A. B. Spellman, *Black Music* (New York: Schocken, 1970; orig. published as *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*), 162.

[12] Leonard Feather, liner notes to *Big Band Monk* (Columbia 32892, n.d.).

[13] Feather, *Inside Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976; orig. published 1949 as *Inside Be-Bop*), 10.

[14] George Hoefer, "Pianist Monk Getting Long Awaited Break," *Down Beat*, November 2, 1948: 11.

[15] Dom Cerulli, "Heard in Person," *Down Beat*, September 5, 1957: 33.

[16] Max Harrison, review of *Down Beat Jazz Record Reviews, vol. 3*, in *Jazz Review* ii, no. 10 (November 1959): 54.

"Part of the extensive mythology about Monk, given credence by more than one preeminent critic, is that his playing is 'technically limited'" (1960).[17] "It … is ironic that for many years comment on Monk centred around his supposed incompetence as a pianist" (1961).[18]

Others sounded positively weary of defending Monk (emphases mine): "For those who *still* tend to doubt Monk's ability…" (1958).[19] "Some enthusiasts *still* look upon him as … lacking … technique" (1960).[20] Soon, the very existence of residual skeptics was questioned, at least rhetorically: "Critics who still talk about this pianist's 'limited technical abilities' (are there any left?) should really be read out of the club" (1963).[21] "Nowadays if you say anything against Monk you're a dog" (1963).[22]

The tone of this second consensus presents a paradox: the critics protest too much. If Monk's detractors had become so scarce or so quiet as these comments suggest—a quiescence confirmed by an extensive search of the contemporary jazz press[23]—what were Monk's champions defending him *from*?

The fierceness of Monk's admirers in the early 1960s, and their peculiar habit of addressing moldy critiques, can be understood as natural reactions to the exceptional hostility of earlier judgments. And though Monk's fellow modern jazz pioneers had been comparably ill-treated in the press at first, bebop was soon acknowledged as the mainstream of jazz development, while the initial dismissal of Monk was followed by years of obscurity and critical neglect; perhaps it seemed necessary to call forth the decade-old criticisms in order to quash them definitively. Additionally, many jazz writers habitually embrace a contrarian or underdog posture, implicitly bestowing insider status on writer and reader alike. As Gary Elder put it, "the brotherhood of battle provides a … definition of identity … most jazz people value the battle itself, the identifying separation, over any conceivable or real victory."[24]

But what, then, are we to make of the fact that in the spate of tributes and retrospective articles that appeared following Monk's death in 1982, a defensive attitude toward Monk's pianism is still evident—*thirty years* after virtually all serious criticisms were leveled? For example, in the July 1982 issue of *Keyboard* magazine, all three features on Monk (by Orrin Keepnews, Ran Blake, and Chick Corea) raised what Corea called the "old question of Monk's chops." Yet the only writers posing this question in 1982 were Monk devotees, thoroughly convinced of his technical mastery.

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[17] Grover Sales Jr., "I Want to Make It Better: Monk at the Black Hawk," *Jazz: A Quarterly of American Music*, 5 (Winter 1960): 35.

[18] Harrison, *A Jazz Retrospect* (New York: Crescendo Publishing, 1976), 28.

[19] Schuller "Reviews: Recordings," 27.

[20] Michael James, *Ten Modern Jazzmen* (London: Cassell, 1960), 81.

[21] LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 32.

[22] Spellman, *Black Music*, 162.

[23] David Feurzeig, *Making the Right Mistakes: James P. Johnson, Thelonious Monk, and the Trickster Aesthetic* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms 9804968, 1997), 103–14.

[24] Gary Elder, "Well, You Needn't," in *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, edited by Rob van der Bliek (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 176. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this article for bringing my attention to this point.

Even this slew of eulogies did not put the matter to rest. In his 1995 book on bebop, Thomas Owens wrote: "Clearly [Monk] had a considerable command of piano technique."[25] Intending to put Monk's technical ability beyond doubt, Owens inadvertently calls it into question: if it really were "clear"—and had been for almost 40 years at the time of writing—it would be peculiar to say so. (Consider how odd a comparable adverb in reference to an *un*equivocally acknowledged virtuoso would sound: *Bud Powell was actually a fine technician.*) Similarly oxymoronic qualifiers echo across decades of favorable Monk criticism (all emphases mine): "The Monk is *undoubtably* [*sic*] a man of considerable ability both technically and harmonically" (1948).[26] "*Actually*, Monk does many technical things other pianists would have difficulty with …" (1960).[27] "*Obviously* Monk sacrificed techniques of manual dexterity for techniques of expressiveness" (1970).[28] "*It is obvious* from the Minton's recordings that Monk was a pianist with enviable facility" (1982).[29]

Since the early 1980s a number of writers have addressed Monk's idiosyncratic pianism in analytic detail. This has clarified aspects of Monk's piano style and helped to mute the defensiveness surrounding the subject; but the defensive posture has by no means entirely disappeared, as the Owens excerpt and the following representative quotes illustrate: "Monk was surely a very great piano player in his way" (1985).[30] "Thelonious Monk, a melodious thunk / No mistakes were made with the notes he played" (1990).[31] "I think it is fallacious to state that Thelonious Monk *lacked* technique" (2000, emphasis in original).[32]

Even the most recent and expert writing often evinces, however subtly, a continuing sense that Monk's pianistic competence requires affirmation. Robin D. G. Kelley's 2009 biography begins with the story, newly related by Monk's niece Benetta Smith, of a visit to the Monks' apartment around 1959. Seeing a Chopin score on the piano, Smith expressed skepticism that her uncle could read music; Monk not only did so, but played the piece in front of him "ten times faster than anyone could," by his own assessment.[33] Kelley's decision to open his monumental study with this engaging but seemingly incidental anecdote suggests the importance he attached to substantiating Monk's technical and score-reading abilities.[34]

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[25] Thomas Owens, *Bebop: The Music and its Players* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 141.

[26] Tom Parker, record review, *Down Beat*, April 21, 1948: 19.

[27] Dick Katz, quoted in Hentoff, "The Private World of Thelonious Monk." *Esquire* liii, no. 4 (April 1960): 137.

[28] Martin Williams, *The Jazz Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 3rd edn, 1993), 151.

[29] Chris Sheridan, "Portrait of an Eremite," *Jazz Journal International* xxxv, no. 5 (May 1982): 25.

[30] Gerald Early, "The Passing of Jazz's Old Guard: Remembering Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, and Sonny Stitt," *The Kenyon Review* vii, no. 2 (Spring 1985); reprinted in van der Bliek, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 240.

[31] Gang Starr, "Jazz Thing," Keith Elam, L. E. Elie, B. Marsalis, and Chris Martin (EMI April Music, Gifted Pearl Music, Ill Kid Music, 1990).

[32] Eric Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and his Masterpiece* (New York: St Martins, 2000), 123.

[33] Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009), xiii–xv.

[34] Kelley confirmed that he gave pride of place to this story "mostly because it destroys so many myths," not only about Monk's technique but regarding his personal relationships and the breadth of his musical interests as well. (Robin Kelley, email message to author, June 16, 2010.) Of course, the present article, despite explicitly addressing the peculiarity of the critical situation, itself belongs to the literature of Monk apologia.

The Owens and Kelley books, like the Gang Starr lyrics cited above, are works of jazz *history*, and if these excerpts were intended to address the original criticisms of Monk's playing in their historical context, their vindicatory stance would be self-explanatory. But they come from passages that are *not* primarily or explicitly concerned with Monk's early reception. The misappraisal of Monk in the 1940s, however egregious and however significant historically, seems insufficient to account for the persistence of the technique question into the 2000s. Why, in the virtual absence of latter-day criticism, have commentators on Monk's pianism continued to qualify, defend, or proselytize?

Talkin' 'bout T's Technique: Defenses of Monk's Playing

At least part of the answer lies in the oblique, vague, and even evasive nature of most considerations of Monk's technique. Defenses of his playing have generally avoided specific, detailed examination of the trademark characteristics—including the striking unconventional dissonances—which raised doubts about his competence in the first place, and which continue to astonish new listeners today.[35] While Monk's advocates point out other interesting and difficult things he achieved at the keyboard, the unaddressed dissonances fester. The result is the perpetual tone of apology, the continual resurfacing of "the old question" despite the supposed longstanding consensus regarding Monk's piano mastery.

The most common approach of those who tout Monk's technical skill has been to point out occasional examples of conventional virtuosity in his playing.[36] This tack can be subdivided into what I call the "Wilson–Tatum" (or right-hand) defense, and the "Stride–James P. Johnson" (or left-hand) defense. The Wilson–Tatum defense is almost ubiquitous in discussions of Monk's playing, even those that purport to minimize its significance relative to consideration of more idiosyncratic aspects of his style; it may be regarded as the mainstay of Monk apologia. Pianist Mary Lou Williams' 1954 recollection of the teenage Monk is, to my knowledge, its first published appearance:

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[35] In fact, the early negative reviews in the popular jazz press rarely identify the specifics of Monk's purported technical shortcomings—which apparently struck his reviewers as self-evident—so his perceived inadequacies must be surmised from recordings or inferred from writings that *defend* his playing. The following comments, dating from 1944 to 2010, suggest the centrality of "mistakes," in the sense of pitch inaccuracy, among Monk's supposed weaknesses: "It took me a while to realize that what I thought at first were mistakes and missing notes were right according to what he was trying to do." Trumpeter Floyd Standifer describing his initial reaction to Monk in 1944, in Robert Dietsche, *Jumptown* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press), 7; cited in Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*, 109. "In the passion of the moment, he may even strike a note in mistake (as did Schnabel playing Beethoven), but we all know none of this detracts from his greatness." Martin Williams, liner notes to *Solo Monk* (CBS SBPG 62549, 1965). "Monk's playing is like a painter who stands across the room and throws paint at a canvas. You can't object too much to the way it turns out because he has chosen such beautiful colors to throw." Unattributed "view expressed in Chicago" in Nat Hentoff, "Just Call Him Thelonious," *Down Beat*, July 25, 1956: 15–16. "Monk's pungent voicings … could easily have been taken for incompetence." Brian Priestley, "Thelonious Monk: Reflections," *The Wire* (London), 10 (December 1984): 35. "When people listen to Monk for the first time, people think, hey, this guy's missing keys—he's playing the wrong notes." Douglas Gorney, "The Secret Life of Thelonious Monk," *Atlantic*, March 29, 2010, www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2010/03/the-secret-life-of-thelonious-monk/38128/ (accessed June 20, 2010). Further quotes in the discussion below about "sloppy" playing and "unintended" dissonance indicate that the matter of accuracy is key to negative opinions of Monk's skill.

[36] For another discussion of the history of Monk's reception and the defenses of his playing, see Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 408–24.

> While Monk was in Kaycee, he jammed every night, really used to blow on piano, employing a lot more technique than he does today. Monk plays the way he does now because he got fed up. I *know* how Monk can play.[37]

The first reference to Tatum or Wilson specifically, soon to become reflexive among those making this argument, is from 1958:

> Seldom does one hear the flashy, long, single-line runs that characterize so many refugees from Bach, Bud Powell, and Art Tatum … [yet] Monk *can* make these runs. I recently heard him do it at the Five Spot. He did it so adeptly that he stopped all conversation for the rest of the set.[38]

From later in the same year:

> Incidentally, for those who still tend to doubt Monk's ability to play technically fluent piano, listening to his almost Teddy Wilson-like work on the 1941 Minton's Playhouse LP (Esoteric 548) in "Swing To Bop" and "Stompin' at the Savoy" can be a revelation.[39]

Even Monk argued it once:

> I guess those people are surprised when they hear certain things that I've done on records. They must feel awfully silly about saying that I don't have no technique. Because I know you've heard me make some fast runs. You can dig how stupid the statement is.[40]

Like many discussions of jazz piano playing, these comments assign a narrow meaning to "technique," implicitly equating it with rapid right-hand passagework. Still, the argument here is persuasive enough, as far as it goes. It establishes that Monk was not, as some thought, "an elaborate fraud"[41] who formed his style around an inability to master traditional techniques. Its weakness is that it addresses only exceptions: it avoids discussing the overwhelming preponderance of Monk's playing which is not Tatumesque or Wilsonian, the playing which is most revealingly "Monkish" and which sparked controversy about his technique to begin with.

One might ask, that is, what if Monk had *not* played those occasional fast right-hand runs? Would we be at a loss to make the case that he was not, in fact, inept? The question turns out to be more than rhetorical. Most expositions of the Wilson–Tatum defense cite Jerry Newman's live amateur recordings made at Minton's Playhouse, the "birthplace of bop," in 1941:

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[37] Quoted in Max Jones, "Then Came Zombie Music," *Melody Maker*, May 8, 1954: 11, reprinted in van der Bliek, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 12 (emphasis in original).

[38] Frank London Brown, "A Profile of Thelonious Monk," *Down Beat*, October 30, 1958: 15 (emphasis in original).

[39] Schuller "Reviews: Recordings," 23.

[40] Tomkins, "The Classic Interview," 13.

[41] Orrin Keepnews, "Thelonious Monk: A Remembrance," *Keyboard Magazine* vii, no. 7 (July 1982): 17.

> The style of the [Minton's] "Savoy" solo is curious: it stems more or less from Teddy Wilson's fluent, many-noted approach. That solo … should answer the question of Monk's "technique."[42]

> It is obvious from the Minton's recordings that Monk was a pianist with enviable facility … Both [the Tatum and the Wilson influences] should help to kill the canard that Monk was ever a pianist without technique.[43]

However, more recently several writers have questioned Monk's presence on certain of Newman's recordings. On some tunes, the tone and technique in fact closely resemble Monk's later recordings, while the fluid-sounding pianist heard on others was probably misidentified by Newman.[44] As Jacques Réda put it emphatically, "The pianist … on 'Swing To Bop' and 'Stompin' at the Savoy' is not, could not be, and never was Thelonious Monk."[45]

In the present context, it is not important whether or not Monk played on the disputed Newman tracks. The mere fact of the controversy underscores the fundamental shortcoming of this line of argument, namely its basis in a few atypical or youthful moments. At most, the Wilson–Tatum defense establishes that Monk played the way he generally did—i.e. without long, clean, smooth runs—by choice; but it tells us nothing about why he chose to play that way, or why such playing should be valued. In any event, this argument, already hoary when Sheridan made his prediction in 1982, has evidently not managed to "kill the canard" about Monk's technical incompetence.

Other writers employ the related "Stride–James P. Johnson" defense, pointing to the occasional passage of fast stride in Monk's playing and taking this as *prima facie* evidence not only of impressive technique but of Monk's deep roots in the jazz piano tradition. As noted above, the stride influence was remarked as far back as 1944 by Nichols, in the first published account of Monk's playing—in that instance undefensively, before the onslaught of negative reviews. The first substantive and musically detailed exposition of the argument is by pianist Ran Blake:

> We can also discover, once in a great while, Monk acknowledging his debt to stride piano. In his solo in "Thelonious," for example, after a first chorus that consists mostly of a high B-flat octave played over and over, Monk abruptly launches into a stride statement of the changes, with a typically laconic Monk phrase in the right hand. With the possible exception of the left-hand chord on the fourth beat of bar 8 of the example, which doesn't seem to fit with the C-flat^7 harmony of the third

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[42] Williams, *The Jazz Tradition*, 151.

[43] Sheridan, "Portrait of an Eremite," 25.

[44] See, e.g., Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 409 and Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk*, 98–99.

[45] "Le pianiste … dans 'Swing To Bop' et 'Stompin' at the Savoy' n'est pas, ne peut pas être et n'a jamais été Theolonious Monk"(translation mine), Jacques Réda, *L'improviste: une Lecture de Jazz* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1990), 240–41. See also Thomas Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk* (Waakirchen: Oreos [Kösel], 1987), 57. Compare Dizzy Gillespie: "I never heard him play like Teddy Wilson. I never heard him play like that." Gillespie and Al Fraser, *To Be Or Not … To Bop* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 136.

> beat, there is certainly nothing in this passage that could be called sloppy or technically deficient.[46]

But as Blake himself notes, such stride passages, while not limited to a handful of disputed recordings, occur only "once in a great while." Réda even opines that the "slightly sarcastic character" of such stride "or rather *alla Stride*" passages "contrast[s] with the specifically Monkish elements."[47] Their existence does not of itself tell us much about Monk's technique as he plays the rest of the time. Whatever the merits of these arguments, the focus on exceptions in order to establish Monk's competence is essentially, and unsatisfyingly, apologetic.

Timbral versus Syntactic Dissonance

Monk's advocates have, to be sure, also engaged the "specifically Monkish elements" of Monk's style more directly, positing that Monk's playing manifests a quite different kind of virtuosity from the conventionally valorized speed and fluency. As Martin Williams wrote in 1959: "Monk's technique was all musical …. He was a virtuoso of the basic materials of jazz: time, metre, accent, space."[48] This is more to the point than references to sporadic conventional passages in his output—but also more difficult to flesh out succinctly, concretely, and convincingly, especially in the non-technical vocabulary of much jazz writing.[49] At its breeziest, such discussion seems to suggest that the creativity, expressiveness, or "musicality" of Monk's music somehow transcend mundane considerations of technique:

> Obviously Monk sacrificed techniques of manual dexterity for techniques of expressiveness—for the techniques of music, specifically of his music … Monk's virtuosity, and he has real virtuosity, has developed in the specific techniques of jazz.[50]

Here, Williams sets up a dubious dichotomy. Monk's "expressiveness"—i.e. his ability to *express* something through his playing—was dependent on his manual dexterity.

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[46] Ran Blake, "The Monk Piano Style," *Keyboard Magazine* vii, no. 7 (July 1982): 28.

[47] "L'insertion relativement fréquente, dans le jeu de Monk, de passages en effet *stride*, ou *alla stride* plutôt, si l'on singe a leur caractère quelquefois un peu sarcastique et, en tout cas … à la manière dont ils contrastent avec les éléments spécifiquement monkiens" (translation mine); Réda, *L'improviste: une Lecture de Jazz*, 231. My own analysis will suggest that stride elements in fact permeate Monk's playing style more generally, though often in subtle ways. This is at odds with Réda's viewpoint, if not with Blake's, as the phrase "*acknowledging* his debt to stride" suggests that Blake is thinking specifically of the up-tempo, archetypical stride outbursts that are, indeed, quite rare on Monk's recordings. But the Stride—Johnson defense rests on precisely these showily, conventionally virtuosic stride episodes, and thus shares the basic flaw of the Wilson–Tatum argument: it concerns itself with a few unusual moments in Monk's music.

[48] Martin Williams, "Bebop and After: A Report," in *Jazz*, edited by Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Rinehart, 1959), 299. Williams' characterization was repeated almost verbatim by Max Harrison two years later: "His strength lay not in complex executive feats but in a deployment, at once sensitive and vividly incisive, of some of the basic elements of jazz: time, metre, accent, space." Harrison, *A Jazz Retrospect*, 28.

[49] As van der Bliek puts it: "Subtleties in rhythm and sound production are never quite captured through analytical tools, especially with Monk's piano playing. In fact, musicological discussions of timbre, or the production of sound, often suffer from a decided lack of coordination between theoretical notions and psychoacoustical phenomena." van der Bliek, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 247.

[50] Williams, *The Jazz Tradition*, 151.

Presumably Williams intends "dexterity" as a synonym for rapid, smooth finger work, but the implied distinction between physical facility and an ethereal-sounding "technique of expressiveness" or "of music" comes off as evasively vague, particularly when framed by the defensive "obviously" and the beseeching " … and he has real virtuosity."[51]

In his *Keyboard* appreciation, Keepnews posits a similarly problematic opposition:

> Monk was certainly far more involved with *what* he had to say than with how listeners reacted to it, with creativity rather than communication. To such an artist, orthodox technique is obviously quite secondary; if something can be expressed by use of an elbow, if it takes awkward or "wrong" fingering to produce the desired dissonance, so much the better.[52]

Read by the well-disposed public he could expect in 1982, Keepnews's description appears straightforward enough: Monk pursued his vision singlemindedly, without regard to the size of his following; and he employed decidedly unorthodox technique and fingering to obtain what Keepnews aptly asserts were "desired" dissonances. Indeed, Monk himself commented on the importance of non-standard fingering in achieving the results he sought:

> Of my playing, and the statements made to the effect of me having a restricted technique, I would say: that's true. I can't do everything I want to do all the time …. But other musicians that are supposed to have good technique can't do it the way that I'm doing it. They can't do it as good as me because I know the right fingering. I have to figure out certain kinds of fingering [different from what] they taught you in the European school of music. Sometimes that don't work—playing what *I* play. I *know* the right fingering, but I have to use my own some of the time."[53]

But Keepnews's opposition of "creativity" and "communication" does not withstand close scrutiny. Monk's pianistic (as opposed to strictly compositional) creativity would be unknown—in fact, would not exist—had Monk not had the technical means of *communicating* it, however unconventional the fingering (or elbowing) involved. Despite the cogency of his observations, Keepnews's account retains a whiff of equivocation. The reader might well wonder whether Monk's playing is good because of his facility or in spite of his limitations.[54]

It is telling that in their original contexts, the above-quoted appeals to "specifically jazz" or "musical" technique are accompanied by expositions of the Wilson–Tatum defense, as are many similar discussions of Monk's pianistic idiosyncrasies. Monk's advocates appear to sense that the Wilson–Tatum argument is persuasive but

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[51] Williams does, however, continue with more concrete illustrations of what he takes to be Monk's virtuosity (see below).

[52] Keepnews, "Thelonious Monk: A Remembrance," 19 (emphasis in original).

[53] Tomkins, "The Classic Interview," 12–13.

[54] Reviewing similar defenses of Monk, Givan comes to the conclusion that "his advocates have tended to concede his technical shortcomings but to dismiss them as inconsequential," and even that "Monk's putatively flawed pianism has if anything raised his standing as a modernist intellectual artist" by elevating the abstract over the physical. Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 414, 419.

tangential, while efforts to describe the truly characteristic virtues of Monk's core style are problematically vague. What is missing from these discussions is a detailed consideration of the dissonances (or the jerkiness, sparseness, or discontinuity) in Monk's playing, something to help us appreciate *why* these elements are, as Keepnews says, "desired" and desirable.

When commentators have addressed the harsh dissonance of Monk's playing more explicitly, it is typically to characterize it as an aspect of his distinctive tone—what I will call *timbral dissonance*. Monk's highly individual sound was noted by several defenders, mostly fellow jazz musicians, who pointed out the virtuosity inherent in his tonal range:

> He can get more varied colors, sounds, rhythms and shapes out of the piano than anybody I know. He gets more out of one note than any other piano player … He's got fabulous technique. They talk about him having no technique, that's absurd.[55]

> They don't understand about technique, they don't understand about tone. These people think that if you play fast—or that you play a lot of notes—but the ability to project sound is just as much a part of it as anything else.[56]

Monk employed a powerfully percussive attack to create a sound described as crude, acid, biting, and the like. Even when attacking notes "cleanly," Monk often hit the keys forcefully enough to create a dissonantly jangling tone: at extreme attack velocities the anharmonic response of piano strings increases, an effect often exaggerated in recordings when a sharp attack causes transient distortion, rendering even simple pitch elements distinctive and novel. Bassist Bill Crow describes an experience that will resonate with anyone who has transcribed Monk's playing:

> I told Monk that some of his intervals surprised me. They would sound unusual, but when I checked them out, they were ordinary fifths, sixths, sevenths. It was his touch that made them sound different. He nodded and said, "It can't be any new note. When you look at the keyboard, all the notes are there already. But if you *mean* a note enough, it will sound different."[57]

Of course, this timbral dissonance is even more pronounced when adjoining keys are struck as well. Martin Williams, elaborating on Monk's "techniques of jazz," was one of the first to point out his unmatched ability to evoke between-the-keys effects on the piano:

> Or when Monk actually *bends* a piano note: offers, by a special manipulation of fingers, piano keys, and foot pedal, a true blue note, a curving piano sound, not two tied-notes or a momentary resort to minor.[58]

Schuller connects Monk's percussive, flat-fingered attack with the extensive use of "crushed" blue notes in his playing, hypothesizing that Monk cultivated what were

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[55] Saxophonist Steve Lacy, quoted in Joe Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 27.

[56] Pianist Cecil Taylor, quoted in Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 27.

[57] Bill Crow, *Birdland to Broadway: Scenes from a Jazz Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 148.

[58] Williams, *The Jazz Tradition*, 151.

initially accidental added seconds and developed them into a deliberately dissonant style:

> I've formed the following opinion or theory. Monk uses his fingers not in the usual arched position pianistic orthodoxy requires but in a flat horizontal way. This determines a number of characteristics in Monk's music. Aside from the tone quality it produces, it makes, for instance, the playing of octaves very hazardous. In playing an octave of two E's, let us say, it would be easy to also hit by accident the D (a tone below the upper E) and the F (a tone above the lower E). I imagine that Monk soon discovered that he could exploit his unorthodox finger positions, and began to make use of these "extra" notes which others would have heard as "wrong" and tried to eliminate. The old tradition of approximating blue notes by playing a minor second also fit in here. In this respect Monk went even further. The clash of a minor second became so natural to his ear that on top of one blue note he began to add another right next to it, as in "Misterioso" where the D-flat —already a blue note—has another blue note, the C, attached to it, like a satellite …. This factor takes on added importance for Monk because of a striking feature of his talent. Where many pianists less original than Monk are exclusively concerned with playing *the* "right" (or acceptable) notes, Monk, at his most original, thinks in terms of *overall* shapes and designs of ideas.[59]

Crushed notes are fundamental to blues piano—allowing a pianistic approximation of the microintervals and guttural timbres of the vocal blues tradition—and constitute an important element of the broad tonal palette of Afrodiasporic music generally. Significantly for Monk's early reception, though, they were less prominent in the swing, stride, and bebop styles that provided immediate context for Monk's first critics.[60] Blake makes explicit the connection between Monk's bluesy effects and his perceived incompetence:

> To those who aren't familiar with jazz keyboard in general, Monk often sounds clumsy or deficient in technique because of his predilection for split notes (minor or major seconds played simultaneously as though they were a single note). This is a standard jazz technique, used to provide variety of articulation in a line, but it's true that Monk used more split notes than almost any other pianist.[61]

Having situated Monk's split notes in the larger jazz tradition, Blake demonstrates their intentionality by pointing to instances where they are so persistent or so physically inconvenient that they could not have been accidental:

> When we look at *how* he uses them, however, we find that they were clearly intentional, and not the result of sloppy fingering. The seventh chorus of "Bag's Groove," for example, is built entirely on the idea of hitting a minor second and then letting one of the two keys up. Elsewhere, as on "Hornin' In," Monk composes

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[59] Schuller, "Reviews: Recordings," 27. (This account, like so many other descriptions of Monk's distinctive, mature style, continues with an exposition of the "Wilson–Tatum" defense.) Givan ("Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 421) takes issue with Schuller's theory, pointing out instances where Monk plays octaves cleanly, but this does not rule out the origin of such dissonances in Monk's practicing or juvenile playing, which I take to be Schuller's intent.

[60] James P. Johnson, with whom Monk is often specifically compared, was something of an exception among stride players, employing a percussive tone and frequent crushed notes. Though—in stark contrast to Monk—Johnson was considered an exemplar of technical accuracy, his playing is often "dirty" in a way that prefigures Monk's sound.

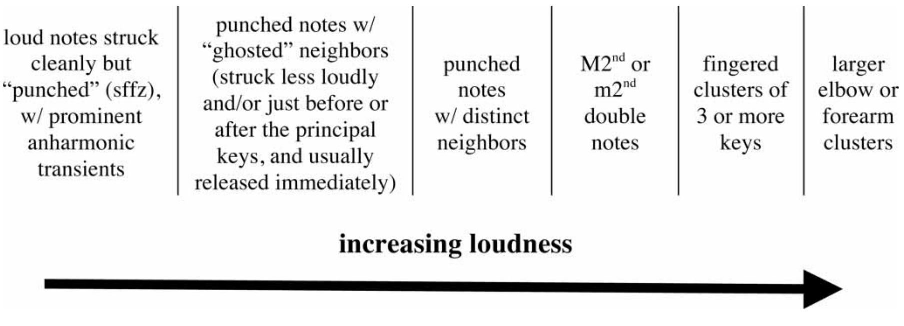
[61] Blake, "The Monk Piano Style," 28. Reprinted in van der Bliek, ed., *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 259–60.

> a unison line for the horns and then doubles it on the keyboard in major seconds, playing both the horn notes and the notes above them.[62]

While the fact of Monk's guttural, dirty tone,[63] its intentionality, and its accordance with the Black music tradition all seem clear enough, this is nonetheless a thorny topic for writers seeking to substantiate Monk's technical control. Though Schuller, Blake, and others take pains to point out special cases whose intentionality appears beyond dispute, much of Monk's timbral dissonance has a fortuitous quality. His crushed notes often result from seemingly inadvertent glancing contact with neighboring keys in the course of a strong attack on the principal note. While the overall effect is in no way accidental, neither is every ghosted or crushed neighbor specifically premeditated. In light of Monk's comments about his own fingering, it may be that Schuller's hypothesis, and Blake's defense against "sloppy fingering," are partly backwards: in a sense, Monk's fingering (really, his whole physical approach to the keyboard) was indeed "sloppy"—designedly so, in service of the broad, dissonant, and spontaneously variegated tone he sought.[64]

Monk used dissonance to approximate what on other instruments or voice would be continuous microtonal effects such as growls, slides, and multiphonics. When these are projected onto the fixed-pitch grid of the keyboard, they are necessarily resolved into an integral number of discrete keys. Such digitized or "pixelated" keyboard dissonance can be considered intentional in a probabilistic rather than a note-by-note sense. For example, a broad, unfocused vocal tone might be thought of as wider than an individual piano note but generally narrower than the intervallic span of a second; rendering this notional and variable tone on the keyboard, Monk would realize it sometimes with a single key, sometimes with a key plus ghosted neighbor, sometimes with a clearly attacked dyad, and occasionally with a wider cluster.

Timbral dissonance in Monk's playing tends to increase with volume, and the dissonance itself adds to the perceived dynamic intensity. Monk employed a continuum of sforzando attacks, from the merely forceful single note to the ferocious elbow and forearm clusters that mark the upper extreme of his tonal range:


loud notes struck cleanly but "punched" (sffz), w/ prominent anharmonic transients
punched notes w/ "ghosted" neighbors (struck less loudly and/or just before or after the principal keys, and usually released immediately)
punched notes w/ distinct neighbors
M2nd or m2nd double notes
fingered clusters of 3 or more keys
larger elbow or forearm clusters
increasing loudness

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[62] Ibid.

[63] I use "dirty" here as an antonym to the common descriptor "clean"—i.e. hitting keys adjacent to the structural ones rather than only the main note "cleanly."

[64] Givan argues that "Monk's own piano technique was also geared toward his distinctive, intensely percussive sonic palette" and cites earlier writers who have made similar observations. Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 428, 440. See also Vijay Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 393–403.

Monk often built solos by moving gradually up and down this scale of attacks over the course of several choruses—not monotonically, but with medium-term ebb and flow as well as short-term "scatter," such that there is a natural variety of articulations and intensities in each passage. It in no way deprecates Monk's control to suggest that he did not expressly choose each particular instant of dissonance and its exact degree, but rather, aimed for a certain "dissonance density" as averaged across a region. A specific appoggiatura or crushed note is not necessarily particularly purposeful nor utterly accidental.[65]

For all these reasons, it makes sense to understand timbral dissonance on the keyboard as controlled in a sometimes statistical way, rather than the note-for-note sense understood in conventional piano technique. But the qualified or nuanced intentionality of Monk's splattered-note lines does not make for the most straightforward and convincing response to doubts regarding his technical accuracy. Presumably this is what spurs writers to highlight examples of Monk's dissonance usage that are particularly insistent or physically awkward, and thus unequivocally purposeful.

Such more fully "premeditated" dissonances, though, often turn out to be of a qualitatively different sort: moments where, in Schuller's interpretation, Monk "went even further," to the point where the dissonances are not aspects of timbre but more like "extra" notes that "others would have heard as 'wrong.'" As Schuller seems to suggest, these more demonstrably deliberate discords often sound purposefully incorrect. Such moments are examples of what I term *syntactic dissonance*, which has received little analytic attention.

Where timbral dissonance in Monk operates within a traditional Afrodiasporic sonic conception (however extreme and idiosyncratic Monk's realization), syntactic dissonance is typically predicated on a *challenge* to norms of harmonic progression and voice leading. Timbral dissonance is basically right-sounding (even if Monk's was not always so to less acculturated listeners), while syntactic dissonance is fundamentally

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[65] Video of Monk's playing helps illuminate just how "specifically" or "statistically" Monk intended certain dissonances. For example, in his solo on "Blue Monk" recorded in Oslo (included on the DVD accompanying the CD release of *Monk in Paris: Live at the Olympia* Thelonious Records TMF 9316, 2003; this solo is also analyzed by Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 438), Monk exhibits a variety of dissonant attack types with varying degrees of intensity and, apparently, of intentionality. The first chorus features a single-line melody played mostly with repeated index finger, strongly punched yet mostly attacked cleanly. In the second chorus the melody acquires frequent crushed notes that sound and look fortuitous: i.e. appropriate and desirable, but not aimed at note by note. At the end of the chorus, Monk strikes a clearly deliberate B-flat/A-flat$_3$ major second. This dyad becomes thematic at the start of the third chorus; at m. 5 it is transposed to the subdominant, becoming a repeated E-flat/D-flat$_4$, but with an occasional D-natural in between. The inner pitch may sound casual, but it is repeated and requires the use of a third finger: Monk appears to finger the cluster 4-3-2, though the video is not clear here. This three-note cluster is then transferred to the upper tonic (B-flat/A-natural/A-flat$_4$) in m. 7. At the V chord in m. 9, this motif reverts to the simpler outlining dyad (now F/E-flat$_4$) but with a hint of an E-natural appoggiatura. In choruses 4 and 5, the major second gives way to a variety of other dyads, with one or the other of the pitches often (but seemingly casually) embellished by a third, crushed note; in the sixth chorus, Monk plays two-hand chords with a more distinct and deliberate neighbor on each top principal note. Through these six choruses, there is a gradual increase in energy, and a corresponding purposeful increase in the average thickness and dissonance of the sonorities. Whatever the general dissonance density, within any phrase or segment there is always a natural and easy variety of attack intensities, lending individual dissonances a potentially serendipitous quality.

contrary, surprising, subversive, mischievous, or ironic. It manifests a trickster aesthetic, a delight in playing with listener expectations and musical conventions.

Despite the usefulness of these two conceptual categories, there is a gray area between them, and a given dissonance may function in both ways. Whenever any dissonant gesture is repeated as a motif, it becomes an element of the melodic vocabulary, no longer merely a facet of tone. A common Monk soloing strategy is to take a seemingly casual dissonance—whether planned or fortuitous is often unclear—and develop it (now clearly deliberate) through one or more choruses, thus transforming it from the timbral to the syntactic realm.[66]

Certain trademark dissonant sonorities are repeated not just within individual Monk improvisations, but from song to song, and are even incorporated into his compositions. James Kurzdorfer catalogs Monk's "apparently systematic exploitation" of various unconventional dissonant combinations in his composed heads. These include his two signature double-chromatic chords (i.e. those containing a <012> trichord): the dominant-quality chord with both major and minor seventh, and the dominant-quality chord with both major and minor ninth. While Kurzdorfer speculates that these chords may have originated from timbral predilections in Monk's "uniquely anachronistic approach to the blues" (a hypothesis similar to Schuller's), their repeated use is syntactic. Because these chords do not resolve but rather function as goals, even as final cadential sonorities, Kurzdorfer characterizes them as "consonant" in Monk's language. Yet—though a listener familiar with Monk can hardly be completely surprised by their recurrent tonic function—these ultra-dissonant chords remain, as Kurzdorfer says, "outrageous," a brazen challenge to convention, their consonant usage tonally subversive.[67]

Another dual-function dissonance is described by Mark Tucker in Monk's 1954 recording of "These Foolish Things."[68] Monk harmonizes the initial melody in parallel minor seconds—a timbral effect. Displaced from the blues to a gentle, sentimental standard and executed with dogmatic persistence, this basically coloristic dissonance takes on, in Tucker's hearing, an ironic function that is syntactic: Monk uses the seconds "to acidify the tune and lampoon the sentiment."[69]

Scott DeVeaux also addresses Monk's stylistically unconventional dissonance use in standards playing.[70] DeVeaux shows that some of Monk's seemingly capriciously dissonant reharmonizations in fact reveal possibilities latent in the song's original structure. Hinting at the timbral/syntactic distinction, DeVeaux concedes that Monk's harmonic dissonance is sometimes simply "a 'manner' that can be applied to virtually any tune" (as could be said of the parallel-second harmonization of "These Foolish Things") but that "it is important to recognize the extent to which the tunes he chose to play *invite* these interpolations" which are "not so much imposed on the tunes as *derived* from them."[71] A variant of the Schuller theory of origin again appears, as DeVeaux speculates that a particularly striking major-seventh-over-minor-seventh dissonance may have developed out of a one-time accident, "thereafter becoming part of Monk's conception of the tune." Here, though, the hypothetical accident is what DeVeaux describes as a harmonic "wrong turn," i.e. a conceptual (functional/syntactic) slip rather than a physical one.

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[66] The "Bags' Groove" solo mentioned by Blake and the "Blue Monk" solo discussed in note 65 above are among innumerable examples.

[67] James Kurzdorfer, "Outrageous Clusters: Dissonant Semitonal Cells in the Music of Thelonious Monk," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* no. 8 (1996): 181–201.

[68] *Thelonious Monk Trio*, Prestige PRLP 7027; CD reissue, OJCCD-010-2.

[69] Mark Tucker, "Mainstreaming Monk: The Ellington Album," *Black Music Research Journal* xix, no. 2 (Autumn 1999): 235. Givan interprets Monk's intent differently, suggesting that he chose to play the melody in parallel minor seconds in response to a badly tuned E-flat unison; in Givan's interpretation, Monk's choice is fully explained by timbral considerations. Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 427–28.

[70] Scott DeVeaux, "'Nice Work if You Can Get It': Thelonious Monk and Popular Song," in van der Bliek, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 260–78.

The conflict between DeVeaux's initial characterization of Monk's dissonances as "unsettling and inexplicable" and his eventual exegesis of "the logic behind Monk's unorthodox harmonization"[72] suggests the paradox implicit in Monk's syntactic dissonances: they are both astonishing and apt, at once structural and subverting. It is this sort of trickster dissonance, teasing at the fabric of tonal organization, which I wish to explore further.

Corea averred that "[Monk's] playing was so incredibly precise and structured. There are those who listen to it who think it's sloppy or something, but they're missing the soul of the music. He intended each note .... Monk never played random things."[73] Similarly, critic Max Harrison observed, "It is surely significant that none of those who speak of Monk in this way has ever pointed to a specific passage in one of his records and told us what notes Monk would have liked to play had he been able."[74]

In effect, I seek to test Corea's assertion and answer Harrison's challenge in reverse, that is, to make a case that Monk *did* intend to play precisely the most glaringly wrong-sounding notes. My analysis of Monk's 1968 solo recording of "Round Midnight" will focus on the most jarring clashes and propose that such clumsy-sounding moments are central to Monk's meaning. These bitingly unorthodox *syntactic* dissonances are vital to Monk's style, and until they are addressed in detail and with analytic rigor, they remain an irritation on the body of Monk criticism, continually re-inflaming unspoken doubts about Monk's accuracy.

Aside: Holistic versus Reductive Analysis

My consideration of syntactic dissonance entails a decidedly "notist" focus on details of pitch and its relation to harmonic structure. Notism, a term coined by John Brownell, is the tendency in jazz analysis to treat transcriptions of recorded improvisations like composed scores, and to focus on precisely those elements that are conducive to notation, as well as on the values associated with well-crafted compositions.[75]

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[71] Ibid., 271–72; emphases in the original.

[72] Ibid., 262, 274.

[73] "Chick Corea on Thelonious Monk," 19.

[74] Harrison, review of *Down Beat Jazz Record Reviews, vol. 3*, 54. While Harrison's implication is well taken, the absence of such specific, technical musical analysis is not at all remarkable, given the very generalist, fan-oriented nature of the vast majority of jazz criticism at the time of writing. It is equally unremarkable that Monk's defenders, likewise, have until recently rarely explicated his wrong-sounding notes with any specificity.

There is at present a salutary trend in jazz writing towards more holistic approaches. In an oft-cited comment on John Coltrane's technique, Cecil Taylor wrote, "You can't separate the means that a man uses to say something from what he ultimately says."[76] Recent articles call into question the sometimes arbitrary or misleading distinctions between the intellectual content of an improvisation and its realization, between mind and body, between sound and social setting. In approaching Monk's playing from an "embodied" perspective, Benjamin Givan[77] and Vijay Iyer[78] account for multiple dimensions of Monk's sound as manifestations of a unifying physical impulse. Timing, touch, articulation, and even pitch choice can all be considered results of Monk's style of bodily engagement, as much as the reverse.

My notist bent, and my distinction between syntax and timbre, run counter to these analytic trends. I undertake the following "squarely" pitch- and harmony-oriented analysis for several reasons. First, while theories of embodiment and holistic perspectives may feel more in keeping with the spirit of Monk's music than reductionist approaches, we do not yet have the vocabulary to discuss tone, timing, and physical gesture with the sort of detail that is possible with more traditional pitch-and-rhythm analysis. Discussions of these aspects are compelling at the level of general description, but encounter difficulty in weaving observations into a cohesive, interpretive analytic narrative.[79] Second, while the current turn towards more Afrological angles in jazz analysis is a much-needed corrective, the fact remains that jazz is a syncretic music with a deep basis in Western harmonic, formal, rhythmic, and melodic practice as well. To eschew entirely perspectives informed by jazz's European roots for an overly narrow focus on the "Black" elements of Monk's playing would itself be a kind of inverse Eurocentrism, taking only what is "other" as noteworthy. Finally, to show that some of Monk's trademark "wrong-note" dissonances are not merely (Afrological) manifestations of his grainy sound, but rather, flow from purposeful signification on (European) harmonic and melodic norms, is to demonstrate a different *sort* of precision in his playing, a different kind of technical control, than has generally been described, thereby shedding new light on the mysteriously undead question of Monk's chops.

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[75] John Browell, "Analytical Models of Jazz Improvisation," *Jazz Research* 26 (1994): 9–29.

[76] Cecil Taylor, "John Coltrane," *Jazz Review* (January 1959): 34.

[77] Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism."

[78] Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation."

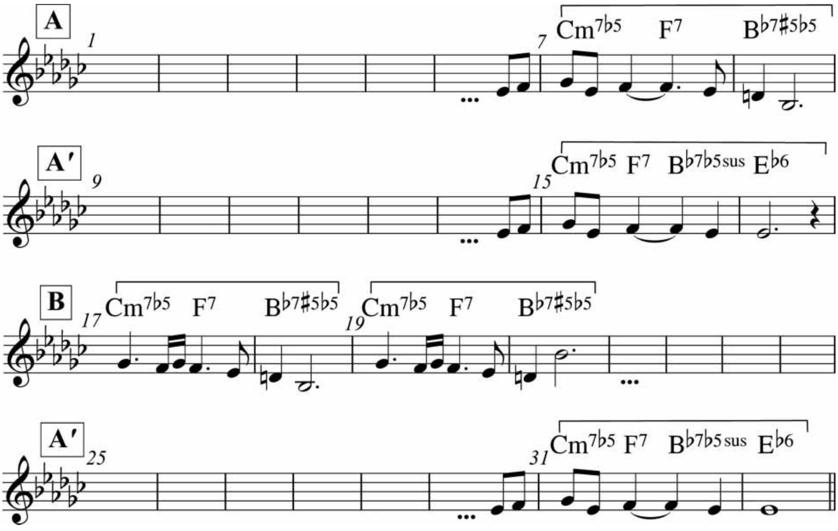
[79] Givan finds that even Iyer, despite his interest in broader perspectives, focuses on matters of pitch, while Givan himself ends up focusing largely on fingering because of all his observations about Monk's physical approach to the keyboard, fingerings are the "most readily quantifiable for interpretive purposes" ("Thelonious Monk's Pianism," 424, 438). There are undoubtedly limits with analytic approaches altogether as ways of mediating our experience of Monk, as suggested by the large literature of poetic responses to Monk's music, some of them quite musically incisive and detailed. See Sascha Feinstein, "Epistrophies: Poems Celebrating Thelonious Monk and his Music," *African American Review* xxxi, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 55–59.

Analysis of "Round Midnight": Monk's Trickster Aesthetic

> Get the records, sit down, and dig. (Monk)[80]

Monk composed "Round Midnight" while still in his twenties. Though his best-known composition, it is perhaps the least idiosyncratic, and is often performed as a pretty, sentimental ballad, without the angularity and surprise turns that typify Monk's music.[81] Monk's own recorded renditions, by contrast, are decidedly Monkish: edgy, discontinuous, and full of sardonic twists. In Monk's hands, the piece evokes not so much the romantic connotations as the mischief, even terror, of the midnight hour.

"Round Midnight" is in 32-bar song form, each A section ending with the cadential progression VI–II–V(–I), that is, Cm7♭5–F7–B♭7(–E♭). The bridge begins by restating this progression twice, along with its associated melody. Example 1 locates these passages in the song's structure.



Example 1 "Round Midnight," VI–II–V–(I) progressions.

A close consideration of Monk's playing on this progression reveals a playful purposefulness behind some of the most awkward-sounding moments of the recording.[82] Example 2 shows three early statements of the progression.

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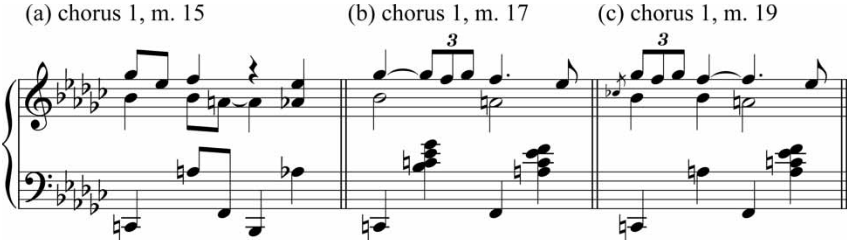
[80] Quoted in Hentoff, "Just Call Him Thelonious," 15–16.

[81] The romantic slant owes much to the torchy lyrics Bernie Hanighen put to the tune in 1949, while the smoky-smooth approach was made standard by the landmark 1955 Miles Davis Quintet version (*'Round About Midnight*, Columbia CL 949, released in 1957), which was instrumental in popularizing the tune. Interestingly, Davis relates that Monk expressed strong disapproval of the way Davis played the tune at the 1955 Newport Jazz Festival, which is when he introduced his muted-trumpet interpretation. Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 191.

[82] See the Appendix for a transcription of the complete recording.



Example 2 Three VI–II–V progressions.

The second beat of measure 15 (example 2a) presents a typical Monkian clash. Going into the F7 harmony, Monk suspends the right-hand B-flat of the preceding Cm7♭5. Simultaneously, his left hand articulates the F harmony with a so-called backwards tenth, such that the mid register A3 falls on the beat along with the right hand's suspended B-flat^4. The resulting dissonance violates two robust norms of jazz harmony: the avoidance of the vertical minor 9th (other than over the root in a dominant seventh chord) and the stricture against presenting a dissonant suspension simultaneous with its own resolution (other than a 9–8 over the bass).[83] As if to ensure that this acerbic and heterodox dissonance not be lost on the casual listener, Monk highlights it by restriking the suspended B-flat. The result is just the sort of zinger that might inspire doubts about Monk's competence. Yet the seeming "mistake" results from the simultaneity of two sanctioned devices—the suspended fourth and the backwards tenth. The latter, a characteristic stride gesture, even showcases Monk's deep-rootedness in the jazz piano tradition: Monk is not carelessly breaking rules here so much as *flouting* them.

The intentionality of the moment is supported by examination of the immediately following passages. In measure 17 (example 2b), the suspension and inverted left-hand pattern are gone. The absence of syncopation and the slower harmonic rhythm make this iteration almost parodistically square, as if Monk were announcing "I got it right this time!" But two measures later (m. 19, example 2c) the B-flat/A-natural collision recurs, combining the longer rhythmic values of measure 17 with the backwards tenth of measure 15: what had been a fleeting dissonance in measure 15 is now flagrantly prolonged. As before, Monk restrikes the B-flat, accenting the clash.

The augmented note-values of measure 19 do more than simply prolong the moment of dissonance; they give it a new twist by intensifying the harmonic displacement and ambiguity. Back in measure 15, the backwards tenth clashes with the right hand but without disturbing the underlying harmonic rhythm. The left hand outlines the F major chord where it is "supposed to be," notwithstanding the (sub-metrical) conflict with the suspension. But in measure 19, the B-flat is not in fact suspended; rather, it is the left-hand A-natural that is displaced, *anticipating* the F major chord (which at this point in the tune ought to fall on the third beat) in the lowest-sounding voice.

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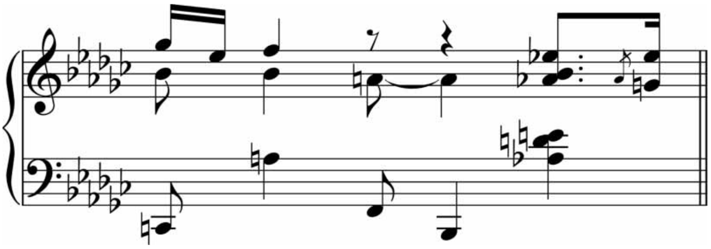
[83] Such 4–3 simultaneities, along with Monk's double-semitone clusters, form one of the "outrageous" dissonances Kurzdorfer discusses. Kurzdorfer, "Outrageous Clusters: Dissonant Semitonal Cells in the Music of Thelonious Monk," 184–85.

Instead of an upper-voice dissonance against a stable harmonic grid, we hear the harmonic grid itself displaced. The distinction is subtle, but illustrates the thoroughness with which Monk explores the possible ramifications of the by-now thematic minor ninth clash. The left-hand anticipation here is reminiscent of another prototypical stride piano maneuver, the "back beat," in which the pianist disrupts the normal "oom-pah" pattern by interchanging "ooms" and "pahs." Again, it is noteworthy that Monk employs a traditional, even moldy-fig, device to generate his modernistic dissonance.

Meanwhile, the rhythmic diminution of the upper line of measure 19 compresses the first two beats of measure 17 into a single beat in measure 19. The melody thus arrives on F on beat two, anticipating the third beat melodically as the left hand does harmonically—further supporting the deep-seated purposefulness of this "accidental-sounding" event.

The ordering of these three statements parodies a timeworn improvisational technique for salvaging a mistake: namely, to make it sound intentional, or at least meaningful, via immediate repetition. But here, the "mistake" of measure 15 recurs in measure 19 *after* the progression has already been "corrected" in measure 17—and it is repeated in slow motion to boot.

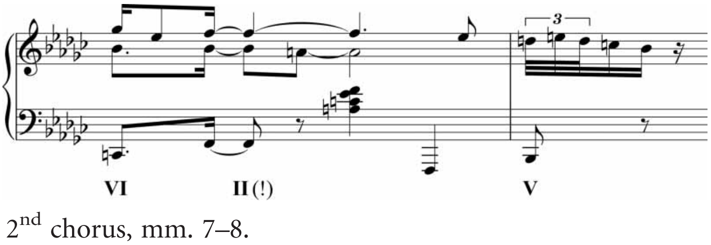
The final cadence of the first chorus (example 3) combines the harmonic/melodic syncopation of measure 19 with the faster harmonic rhythm and original melody of the first occurrence (measure 15).



Example 3 1st chorus, m. 31.

The resulting rhythmic diminution is comical. The left hand suddenly and unidiomatically accelerates the oom-pah pulse to the eighth-note level, while the right hand transforms the melody of measure 15 into frantic sixteenths: the right must speed up in proportion to the left so that the reattacked B-flat occurs in time to clash with the A-natural!

In the next statement, at the end of the first phrase of chorus 2 (example 4), Monk explores a different kind of harmonic ambiguity. This time there is no conflict on the sonic surface; rather, Monk manipulates the harmonic rhythm, creating a structural metrical dissonance.



Example 4 2nd chorus, mm. 7–8.

The speeded-up rhythm of the right hand combines with the left hand's early chord change to F on the second beat (actually just before) to set up a strong expectation that the dominant, B♭7, will arrive on the third beat. In other words, it sounds like we are going to hear the closed form of the progression (full cadence), as we would in the second and fourth A phrases of the AABA form, whereas in fact we are at the end of this chorus's *first* A phrase, which calls for the open progression (half cadence). Monk is acting as if he were lost in the form, accidentally playing the second A phrase in place of the first.

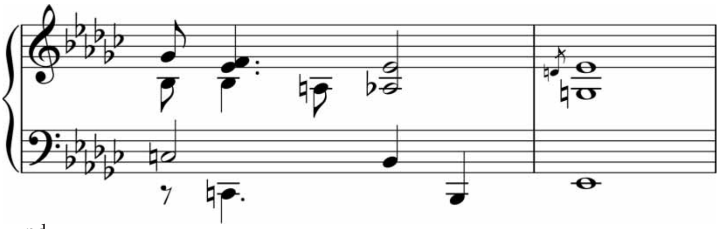
closed progression (as in mm. 15-16, ex. 1a)	**VI**	**II**	**V**	**I**
open progression (normally) (as in chorus 1, mm. 7-8)	**VI**		**II**	**V**

Having arrived on II early, Monk has to tread water harmonically, biding his time until the change to V on the following downbeat:

open progression (altered) (chorus 2, mm. 7-8, ex. 3b)	**VI**	**II**	**(…)**	**V**

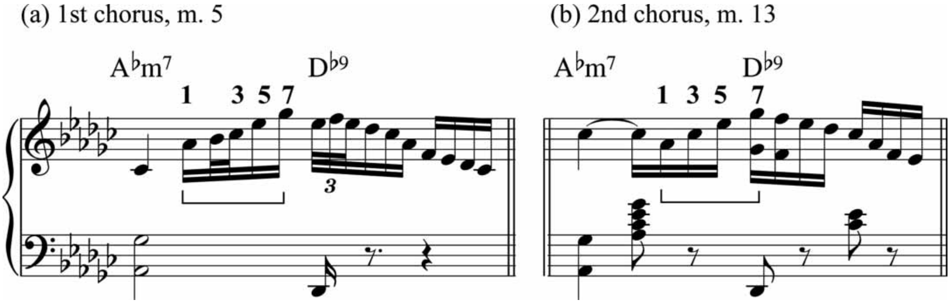
Coming after the rhythmic diminution of the first beat, and the sixteenth-note anticipation of the already anticipatory bass F on beat two, this three-count harmonic stasis is elegantly leaden, a metrical "ugly beauty." As in measure 19 (example 2c), what Monk plays here is a stride-type anticipation of the third-beat harmony change. Here, though, the subversion of the harmonic rhythm is more persuasive because the early chord change is signaled by an "oom" in place of the expected "pah." The reversal of the stride pattern (oom oom-pah oom) underscores the metric/harmonic mix-up, as melody, harmony, rhythm, and left-hand pattern collude to challenge the listener's sense of time and place.

The last statement of this cadential pattern—the final cadence of the piece, shown in example 5—avoids the B-flat/A-natural conflict altogether by having the left hand omit any articulation of the F major chord. The bass instead moves from C directly to B-flat, giving the sense of a VI–V progression (though the right hand in fact sounds the intervening II, resulting in an F^4_3 sonority). The circumvention renders the progression sufficiently consonant to bring the piece to an effective close, yet without an overt resolution of the harmonic and rhythmic ambiguities evoked earlier. Such a resolution would sound pat, a Hollywood ending out of place in Monk's wryly cool aesthetic.



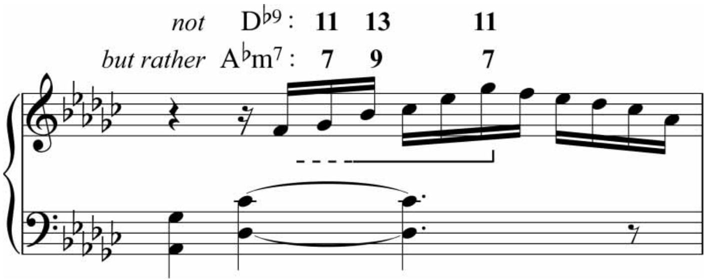
Example 5 2nd chorus, mm. 31–32.

A hallmark of Monk's playing style is his proclivity for distorting the normative harmonic rhythmic of the chord changes. This often takes the form of misalignment between harmonic and melodic elements. Examples 6 and 7 present another progression subjected to increasing distortion, as the right and left hand go out of sync via a progressively delayed arpeggio figure. Example 6 shows the fifth bar of the A phrase in its first two appearances. In the second statement (example 6b) Monk begins the A♭min7 arpeggio a sixteenth note late, such that its climactic G-flat is transformed into an appoggiatura over the third-beat harmony, a D♭9 chord.



Example 6 Progressive LH/RH displacement.

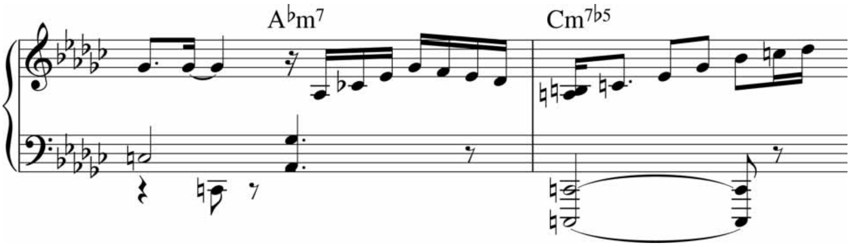
Example 7 shows a corresponding measure from the second chorus. The right-hand arpeggio has been altered and extended still further into the third beat, while the left hand has advanced to the second chord a beat *early*. As a result, the two hands are harmonically out of sync for almost two beats.



Example 7 2nd chorus, m. 5.

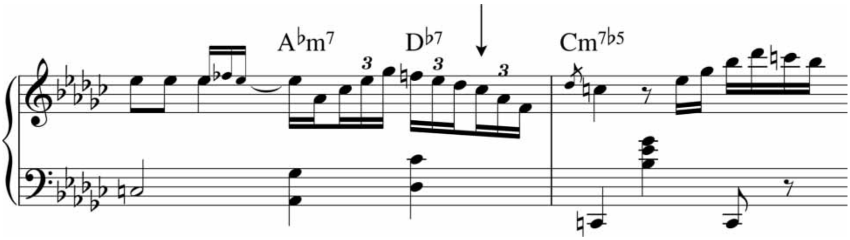
This gives the harmony an exotic quartal coloring; yet the conception here is not of a stable D♭^{11} chord but of harmonic dissonance and misalignment. The double contradiction of the expected timing—one hand early, the other late—suggests that Monk is purposefully manipulating harmonic rhythm, the governing framework of most tonal jazz improvisation. The analysis given here argues against interpreting such peculiarities as extended harmonies, as some Monk apologists have done.[84] A harmonically "liberal" listener interpreting this passage as expressing an expanded chord concept—hearing the G-flat as an added 11th—would be missing the off-color effect it has in context. The right-hand G-flat does not *fit into* a quartal D♭11 harmony; it *dissonates against* a more traditional D♭7 sonority.[85]

A similar harmonic misalignment may be behind the striking clinker on the downbeat of measure 11 in the second chorus (example 8). Monk's right hand strikes not an individual pitch, but the major second B-natural/A-natural, which he immediately "corrects" to C on the second sixteenth.



Example 8 2nd chorus, mm. 10–11.

This may well be a bona fide error. But it is nonetheless entirely in keeping with the kind of harmonic displacement Monk uses elsewhere deliberately. If it *is* a mistake, it is not a physical inaccuracy—had Monk intended to play C-natural on the beat, it is unlikely that he would not just undershoot his mark by one key, but hit the key below *that* as well—but a mental slip, a harmonic wrong turn. The B-natural on the downbeat (understood as C-flat) is the logical continuation of the right-hand line over a D♭7 chord—the harmony that was expected on the fourth beat of the preceding measure, but which never materialized. Compare the parallel measures from the first chorus, shown in example 9:



Example 9 1st chorus, mm. 10–11.

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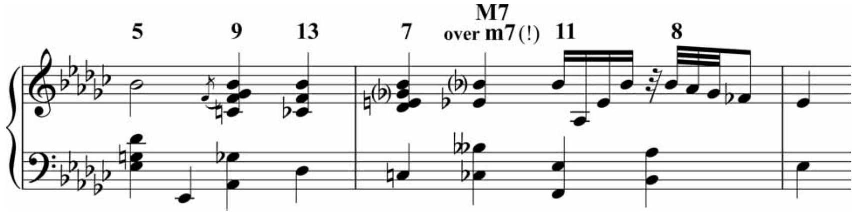
[84] Compare Kurzdorfer's (qualified) classification of such dissonances as "consonant" in Monk's style. Kurzdorfer, "Outrageous Clusters: Dissonant Semitonal Cells in the Music of Thelonious Monk."

[85] This harmonically "conservative" reading is consistent with Monk's generally low estimation of free and modal jazz, whose proponents were sometimes surprised by the lack of support from someone they saw as a precursor and kindred spirit of experimentalism.

The surprise dissonance of example 8 could also be understood as a grotesque intensification of the more conventional D-flat appoggiatura of the earlier parallel passage, adding logical emphasis to the deceptive progression at this point in the changes (the Cm7♭5 substituting for the usual E-flat minor).[86]

Here, indeed throughout my exegesis, the analysis runs into the intentional fallacy. We cannot impute a performer’s state of mind from the sounds on a record. Is Monk playing a trick on the listener at this moment? Or has he tricked *himself* into playing outside the harmony? The two scenarios could yield an identical result. But in either case, we can say that Monk has established a harmonic landscape that is *tricky*. It is impossible to know whether or not Monk intended this particular zinger; the appropriate analytic response is that if it is a mistake, it is a *right* one.

Other particularly brash dissonances result from Monk’s penchant for unusually insistent pedal tones. A pedal can render almost any dissonance unobjectionable, but Monk finds exceptions! Example 10 shows the final bars of the introduction. The upper-pedal B-flat builds to a climax of dissonance as a major seventh over a C-flat dominant-seventh chord. Here again the reattack of the dissonant tone is essential to the effect.



Example 10 Introduction, mm. 7–8 petal to the metal!

A similar major 7th/minor 7th sonority occurs in chorus 2, measure 28, as the D-sharp grace note is sustained into the beginning of the E^7 chord (example 11). This D-sharp can be understood as part of an intermittent E-flat upper pedal tone. This sonority is akin to Monk’s trademark variation on the standard final blues chord (I dom^7), which he liked to play with both the major 9th (on top) and the minor 9th (in the right-hand thumb), the two upper pitches forming the interval of an augmented octave, just as the conflicting chord sevenths do here.[87]

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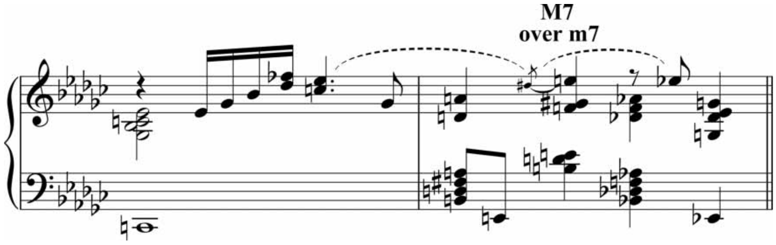
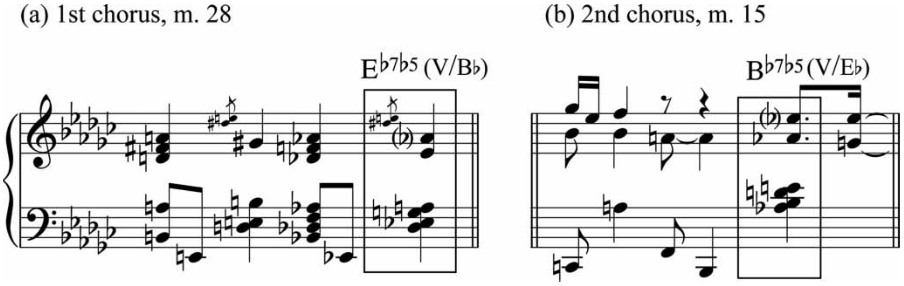
[86] Monk plays this substitution not just here but throughout the recording, so it is no longer a real surprise. (On most other recordings, he plays the expected E-flat minor chord.) Interestingly, according to Dizzy Gillespie, Monk regarded the half-diminished seventh chord as a minor triad with added sixth in the *bass*; so to his thinking a Cm$^{7\flat5}$ was a sort of E-flat minor chord anyway (see Gillespie and Fraser, *To Be Or Not … To Bop*, 135).

[87] See Lawrence O. Koch “Thelonious Monk: Compositional Techniques,” *Annual Review of Jazz Studies*, 2 (1983): 70, and Kurzdorfer, “Outrageous Clusters: Dissonant Semitonal Cells in the Music of Thelonious Monk.”



Example 11 2nd chorus, mm. 27–28: intermittent pedal.

Another pungent Monkian dissonance derives from the presence of a tonic over the dominant chord, whether as a pedal or an anticipation, as shown in example 12. While this species of dissonance is common as far back as the Baroque, several factors combine to make it sound modernistically harsh in Monk's hands. The tonic pitches (i.e. the tonicized A-flat in example 12a, the E-flat in example 12b) occupy a full beat, and are attacked simultaneously with their dominants (E♭7 and B♭7, respectively). Additionally, Monk voices the dominant chords with a flatted fifth (spelled as a raised fourth in my transcription), so that the anticipatory tonic is flanked by semitonal dissonance on not just one, but both sides (e.g. in example 12a, A-natural and G-natural).



Example 12 Tonic over dominant.

As with all the clashes and displacements noted above, everything here is rooted in traditionally sanctioned techniques; but Monk seems to delight in pushing the limits of "legitimate" practice until the results *sound* wrong.

The "old question of Monk's chops" cannot be satisfactorily answered without confronting such putative mistakes, which are among the most distinctively Monkish features of Monk's playing. This will do more than elucidate what may sound to some like incompetence; it will get to the crux of what is truly characteristic of his music. Analysis not only of Monk, but of much other jazz as well, needs to find ways of interpreting discontinuities and disturbances, all the deliberate (or plausibly deliberate) disruptions of the listener's perceptual norms—the *right* mistakes.

Postscript: Si non è vero, è ben trovato

Alas, I must here report that the germinal quote of my title and of my thesis—"I made the wrong mistakes"—is itself almost certainly a misquotation, though of an authentic Monk remark. To my knowledge, the phrase first appears in this form in a 1981 interview of composer Luciano Berio; Berio was not an authority on Monk, and his reference is casual, part of a general discussion of improvisation.[88] Yves Buin alludes to it in his 1988 biography of Monk ("This 'wrong mistake,' as Monk calls it…") likewise without citation; his source is likely the Berio interview.[89]

The expression is suspiciously similar to a comment reported by Monk's Riverside producer, Orrin Keepnews. (Rob van der Bliek, writing before the publication of Kelley's biography, notes that the literature on Monk consists largely of "a meager set of facts and stories that are perpetually recycled and restated."[90]) According to Keepnews, during a 1957 recording session Monk expressed his dissatisfaction with a take by saying "there are two kinds of mistakes—regular mistakes, and those that don't sound so good."[91] An almost identical anecdote was published in 1959 with a slight variation in wording: "I made a mistake—a mistake that didn't sound right."[92] When I asked him about the "wrong mistakes" quip, Keepnews surmised that this and other similar attributions were all paraphrases of the one 1957 recording studio exchange.[93]

Despite its dubious provenance, Berio's koan-like formulation, laying bare the wonderful paradox at the heart of an everyday experience, rendered it irresistible.[94] In a more perfect world, Monk *would* have said it. If the quote is mistaken, it's a right mistake.

Abstract

Though once considered an incompetent pianist, Thelonious Monk has long been celebrated for his playing as much as for his compositions. Yet his pianism continues to occasion critical unease; a defensiveness is detectable in discussions of Monk's technique even today. This may be because considerations of Monk's playing tend to

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[88] Berio, *Two Interviews*, 84.

[89] "Cette 'wrong mistake,' telle que la désigne Monk …" (translation mine); Yves Buin, *Thelonious Monk* (Paris: P.O.L., 1988), 162.

[90] van der Bliek, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, xiv.

[91] Keepnews, liner notes to *Panorama: Thelonious Monk* (Riverside RS 3074, 1969).

[92] Horricks, *These Jazzmen of Our Time*, 25.

[93] Orrin Keepnews, telephone conversation with author, July 6, 1995. At a remove of several decades, Keepnews would not attest to Monk's precise language, but offered that his meaning had seemed basically clear at the time: roughly, that there are accidents that occur in the normal course of improvisation, which are acceptable and may become the basis for interesting, unexpected developments; then there are *wrong mistakes*, klinkers beyond salvaging.

[94] As Yogi Berra, master of the modern koan, is reported to have said: "I didn't say all the things I said." Joe Garagiola, *Just Play Ball* (Flagstaff, AZ: Northland, 2007), x. Interestingly, Berra has also written: "I like to say there's mistakes—and there's wrong mistakes." Yogi Berra and Dave Kaplan, *When You Come to a Fork in the Road, Take It! Inspiration and Wisdom From One of Baseball's Greatest Heroes* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 74.

avoid or finesse peculiarities that raised questions about his ability in the first place. These include the jarring dissonances which strike some listeners as mistakes.

Examination of Monk's dissonance usage suggests two analytic categories. "Timbral dissonance" is an aspect of tone, idiomatic to the Black music tradition. The more idiosyncratic "syntactic dissonance" serves, rather, to challenge or subvert musical conventions.

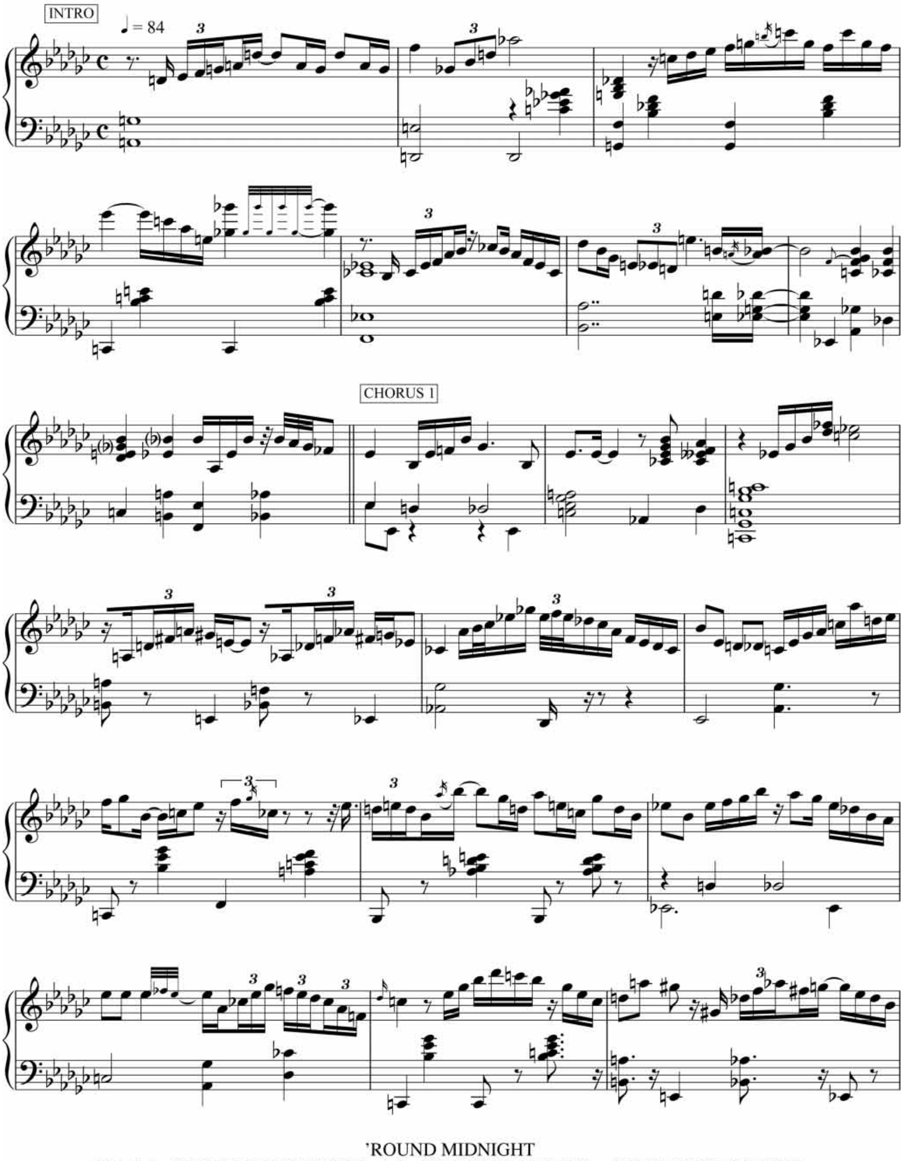
An analysis of Monk's 1968 solo recording of "Round Midnight" focuses on syntactic "wrong-note" dissonances. Neither errors nor merely facets of Monk's tone, their significance is bound up with their "wrongness": they make sense *because* they sound wrong in a meaningful way, as significations on musical norms. Considered in pertinent contexts—the chord changes, the jazz piano tradition, and the improvisational process—Monk's "mistakes" evince a trickster logic, wry humor, and a precision that speaks directly to lingering uncertainty regarding his technical accuracy.

APPENDIX

Thelonious Monk, "Round Midnight"

(recorded 11/19/68)

transcr. Feurzeig



'ROUND MIDNIGHT
Words by BERNIE HANIGHEN Music by COOTIE WILLIAMS and THELONIOUS MONK
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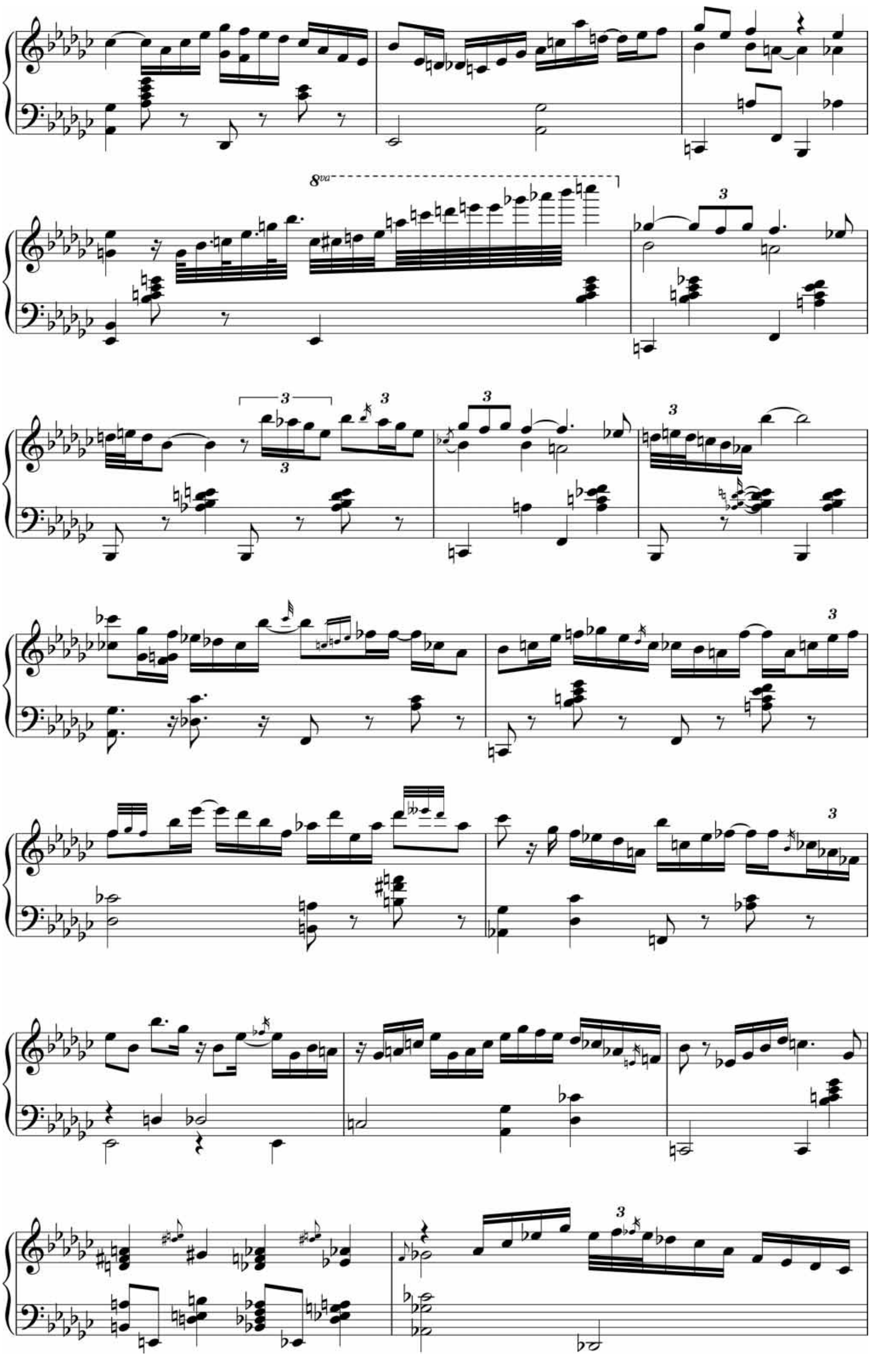

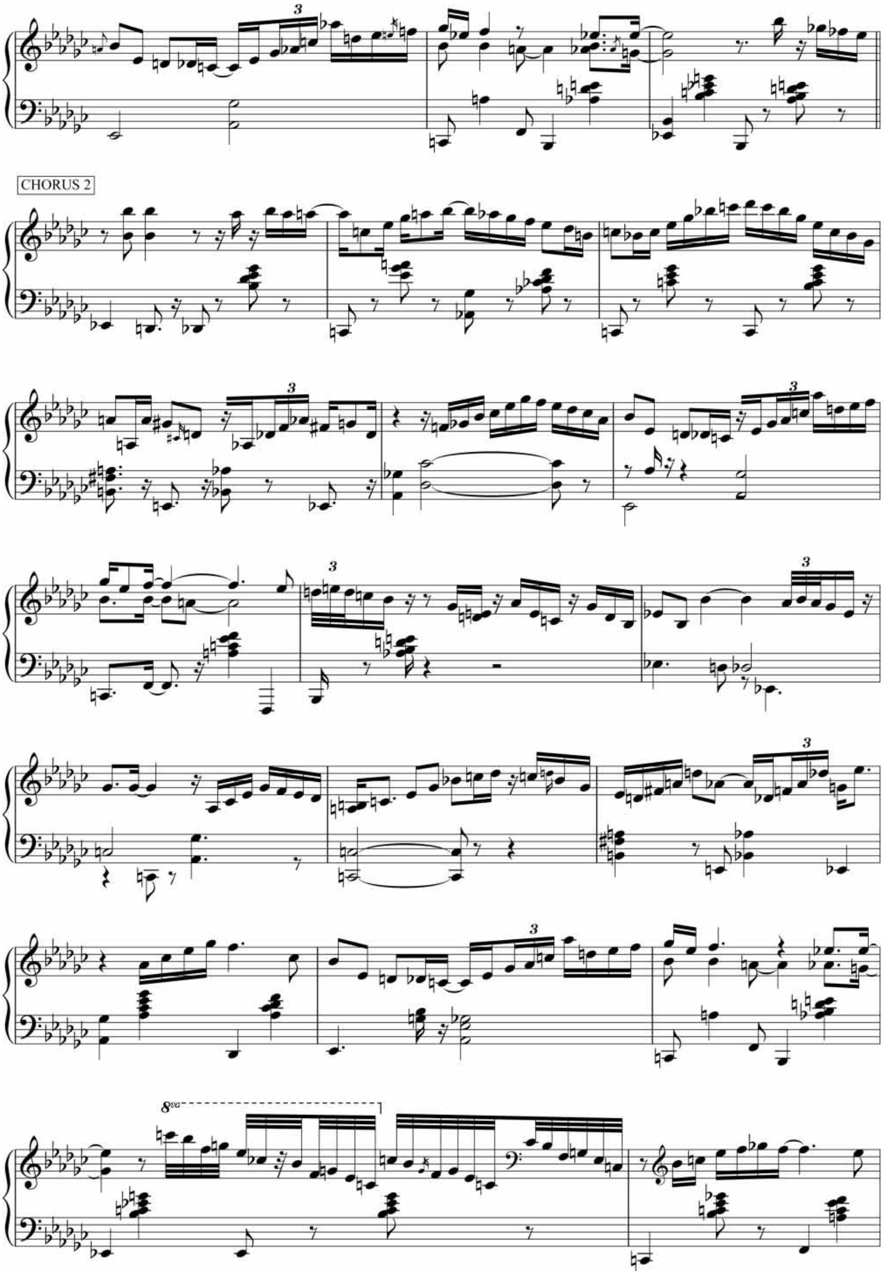
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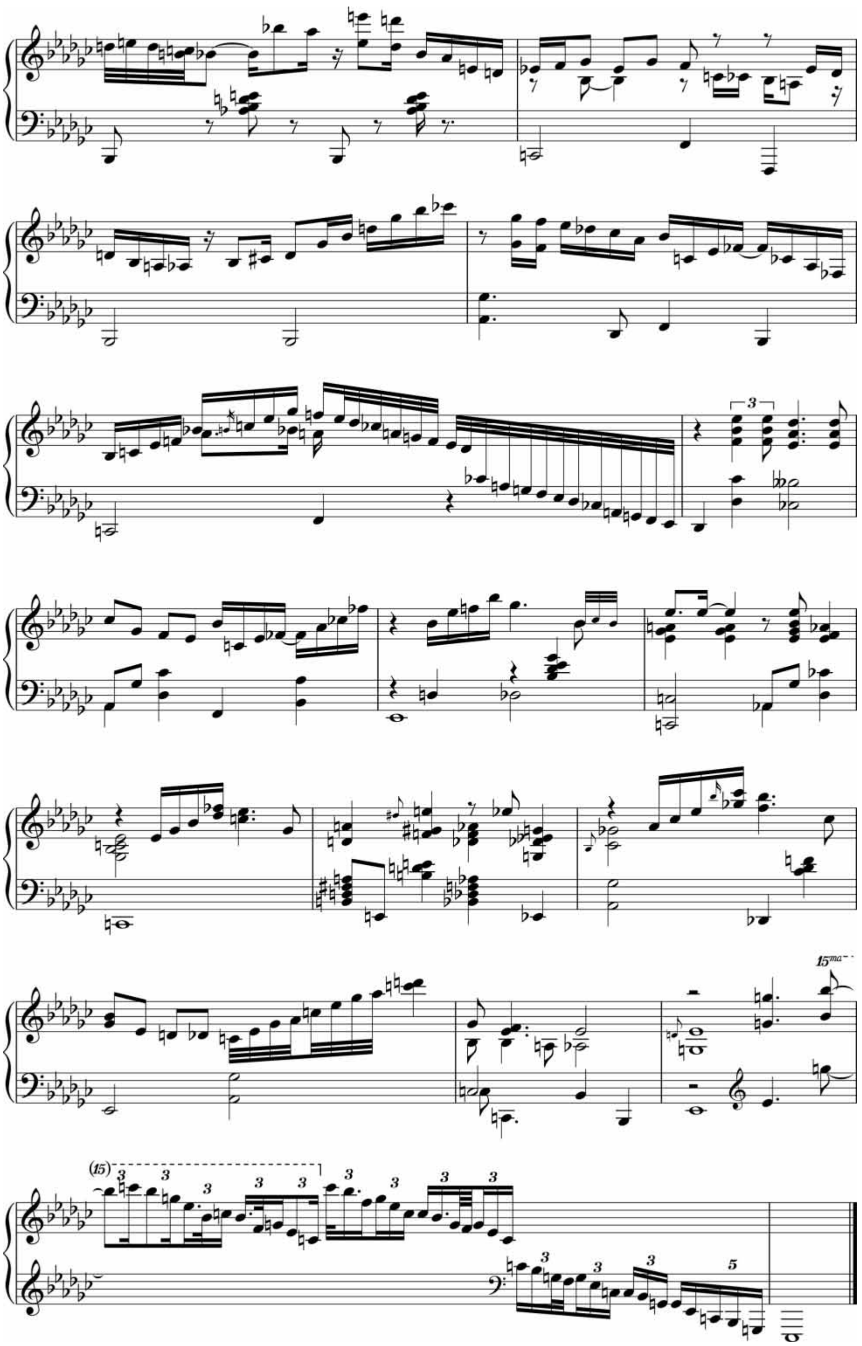

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