



Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original

By Robin DG Kelley



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With his trademark goatee, dark glasses, and hat, Thelonious Monk is an image of coolness. Jazz fans revere Monk for his groundbreaking compositions and piano playing from the 1950s and 1960s, but to a wider audience he stands for something much bigger: the idea of native genius; a quirky, absent-minded, unalloyed originality that is the perfect symbol of the undefinable essence of jazz. The man behind the mystique is now more interesting and edifying, thanks to extraordinary, unprecedented access to Monk's closest friends and family, his private papers, and hours of audiotapes of Monk himself. Monk's musical and cultural education blended together the key strands of African-American music traditions: from church hymns, to ecstatic stomping and call-and-response, to the blues. When he put it together with the Kansas City and New York dancehall music of swing, he reached a cultural apex unlike anyone before or after him. A husband and father, Monk moved in with an aristocratic Dutch hipster known as 'the Jazz Baroness,' a key, strange patron of modern jazz. He continued to compose subtle, deceptively simple-sounding classics, while descending into depression and erratic behaviour. A once-energetic, joking, handsome young man grew into a tortured artist, and the Monk mystique took hold. Now Kelly reveals that this talented musician was in fact a much more complex and interesting figure than his image would suggest. A fascinating biography, not just for Monk and jazz fans, but for those interested in the fragile spirit of human nature.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Elusive, mysterious, strange, eccentric, weird, genius—the legend of jazz pianist Thelonious Monk began early in his career, propagated by supporters and detractors in equal measure. Kelley (*Race Rebels*) breaks down the mythology, taking great pains to establish, for example, that Monk, far from being an untutored savant, was intimately familiar with classical and popular music. Every step of Monk's musical journey is teased out in meticulous detail, from his childhood piano lessons to his groundbreaking half-year run headlining at New York's Five Spot, along with behind-the-scenes stories from the recording sessions for classic albums like *Brilliant Corners* and *Monk's Music*. Kelley also explains Monk's most notorious behaviors—stony silences when confronted in public, exuberant dancing during concerts—as the outward signs of a bipolar disorder that went unrecognized for much of his life, with immeasurable impact on his career. (He was often unable to even play in New York jazz clubs because his reputation precluded him from getting a work license from city authorities.) Sometimes, the sheer amount of information can be overwhelming, but whether he's charting the highs or lows of Monk's emotional swings, Kelley rarely strays from his central theme of an extraordinary talent pushing against the boundaries of his art. (*Oct.*)
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Review

Thoroughly researched, meticulously footnoted, and beautifully crafted, "Thelonious Monk" presents the most complete, most revealing portrait ever assembled of the man known as the high priest of bebop.
--Steve Greenlee, Boston Globe

I doubt there will be a biography anytime soon that is as textured, thorough and knowing. . . The "genius of modern music" has gotten the passionate, and compassionate, advocate he deserves. --August Kleinzahler, New York Times Book Review

If every icon deserves at least one definitive bio, it's official: Monk now has his. --K. Leander Williams, Time Out Magazine

This exhaustively researched work will undoubtedly now remain the definitive work on Monk, a rebel with a cause. --Steve Heilig, San Francisco Chronicle

This affectionate biography fills in the fascinating and heart-wrenching backstory of an artist the world has always longed to know better.
--John Kehe, Christian Science Monitor

About the Author

Robin D.G. Kelley is Professor of History and American Studies at the University of Southern California. He has written widely on American culture, politics, and African American history. His books include, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, *Yo' Mama's DisFunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*, and the forthcoming *Going Home: Jazz and the Making of Modern Africa*, to be published by Harvard University Press.

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