

The Thelonious Monk Reader. Edited by Rob van der Blik. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 286 p. ISBN: 0-19-512166-X \$44.95

In compiling and annotating an impressive retrospective of 52 years of jazz critics' efforts to explain, describe, and evaluate the music, personality, and wardrobe of Thelonious Monk, ethnomusicologist and music librarian Rob van der Blik presents a mostly chronological collection of reviews, essays, and interviews in which jazz writers wrestle with their elusive subject and each other. While the result is partly a composite portrait of the jazz pianist and composer, it is moreso a fascinating compendium of evidence that both supports and overturns the case once made by producer Orrin Keepnews that jazz criticism "is a bad idea, poorly executed." The reader itself is a very good idea, though better executed in some respects than in others.

The strength of this collection is its presentation of the Monk literature in conversation with itself. One can at last read hard-to-find, yet often cited, early reviews and profiles alongside more current scholarly treatments, and trace the concerns and debates of jazz critics in respect to this influential and singular artist. Van der Blik's editorial notes are extremely helpful in cross-referencing this body of critical work, and in reminding us that the goal of the reader is to present a "representative picture of the literature on Monk" (p. xv), not a picture of Monk himself. Van der Blik's copious notes are also helpful in guiding us to recordings that illustrate the challenges Monk's music presented to jazz critics and historians, especially those who loved him. As many of the writers (including van der Blik) note, Monk disliked interviews and did not consider verbal explanation part of his responsibility as an artist. The jazz world could know what Monk's acolytes and detractors thought he was doing with melody, composition, flat-finger pianistics, harmonics, etc., but it could only guess at what Monk himself thought. Although much of the desire not just to hear, but to "hear from" Monk stemmed from the public's prurient interest in off-beat characters,

explanations were also sought by jazz enthusiasts who wished to understand Monk's musical concepts in relation to contemporaries to whom he bore little resemblance. Musically, Monk did not sound like the beboppers with whom he is associated, nor did he sound like, or even necessarily relate to, the musicians who named him as their influence. It is little wonder that jazz critics struggled in their attempts to represent Monk and his importance to the music. The musicological pieces in this collection are especially helpful in explicating critical impulses to write about Monk that do not simply exploit the modern artist and black man as colorful displays of eccentric behavior.

It is in regard to this latter category of Monk the colorful character, heftily represented in the volume, that the editorial presentation falls short. Those who would describe Monk as iconoclast, naif, and mad hatter, were, after all, engaged in a broader history of jazz criticism in love with its iconoclasts, naifs, and mad hatters. Jazz criticism, in turn, is not, of course, alone in its concept of itself as a tradition of rational men (and I do mean men!) demonstrating mastery over expressive forms created by "Other" men (and women singers) celebrated as irrational and excessive. This take is, of course, embedded in histories of colonialist discourse, primitivism, racial science, and the stereotypes and power imbalances they justified. The language of conquest permeates many of the anthologized pieces. Raymond Horrick even refers to the jazz pianist and composer as his "quarry" (p. 68) in a particularly primitivist essay entitled, "Thelonious Monk: Portrait of the Artist as an Enigma," in which Monk's fingers are likened to "bananas" and his utterances described repeatedly as "grunts." This is typical of jazz writing of a particular ilk, and many jazz scholars would argue that the legacy remains. Excluding such pieces is not the answer, but it is also no solution to simply add editorial notes directing readers to appreciate the

“insightful comments” tucked away in problematic essays (p. 65).

Van der Blik does include many essays that treat Monk’s music seriously and his desire for privacy with respect, which, along with editorial annotation regarding writers’ roles in the construction of Monk as a “character,” helps somewhat to present this body of writing as a conversation among critics within dominant jazz discourse. Yet, while the anthology is careful to balance constructions of Monk as musically naive and lacking in technique with portrayals of Monk as musically sophisticated and naive like a fox, the ubiquitous terms of this debate in jazz critical discourse are surprisingly not catalogued or cross-referenced with criticism that explores similar constructions by critics of “difficult” jazz figures (for example, Farah Griffin on Billie Holiday, Nichole Rustin on Charles Mingus, or, indeed, Robin D.G. Kelley and Ingrid Monson on Thelonious Monk). Mapping conversations about Monk within jazz criticism historically in relation

to issues of race, gender, sexuality, modernism, and representation would not have been a difficult step, given the excellent critical works that have recently begun to appear about jazz criticism itself. These explore such issues as the fascination of its primarily white, male writers, with particular modes of black masculinity, its penchant for primitivist constructions of the modernist hero (isolated, lonely, misunderstood), and its role in defining the boundaries of “authentic” jazz and jazz figures in the framework dubbed by Scott DeVeaux as “the jazz tradition.” (See also Gennari, Gendron, and Monson 1995.) Monk literature abounds with examples of these preoccupations, but it is not alone. This collection could have greatly benefitted through additional bibliographic notes that provide a map to the discourse which over-determined critical reception and portraiture of Monk and his music.

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