

## Robin D. G. Kelley **Monk's Dance**

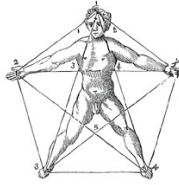
Lecture Performance  
Robin Kelley (Anthropologie) &  
Patrick Pulsinger, Werner Dafeldecker, Flip Phillip (Musik)  
Titel: **Monk's Dance**

**Philosophy On Stage #1**  
10. November 2005  
Museumsquartier Wien, Ovalhalle

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Whenever anyone with even a passing knowledge of Thelonious Monk speaks of the pianist/composer, invariably the topic turns to his performance, his physical presence, his body in space. The older generation who saw Monk remembers how he never stood still, either on the piano bench or off. Or they trade stories about a night when Monk walked to the piano, played one note and walked off the bandstand, sometimes mumbling under his breath. Even those who know him only from videos speak fondly of the huge, clunky oversized ring he wore on his right pinkie, adjusting it about every twelve bars or so; or the way he would attack the keyboard with his elbow pointing toward the sky. The adjectives never seem to change: weird, eccentric, strange, bizarre. Critics and fans called him ‘difficult’ and ‘taciturn’, yet they could not take their eyes off of him. He was a consummate performer, a fascinating spectacle known for his endless collection of headgear, his tailored silk suits drenched in sweat by the night’s end, his tendency to sit at the piano bench without removing his coat.

But the most unforgettable spectacle was his dance. When the band was really swinging, he’d frequently get up from the piano while his sidemen soloed and did a peculiar little spinning dance, elbow pumping up and down on each turn, with an occasional stutter step allowing him to glide left and right. Fans came to see Monk not only for the music but for a complete show. They loved the dance, what was perceived as odd behavior. Each night promised a new surprise. Of course, the “dance” was a very deliberate performance of embodiment of the rhythm. Notice how Monk’s body accents certain off-beat phrases—phrases he would play on the piano. And notice his exuberant stomping of his right foot to establish the tempo and rhythm. Every drummer I spoke to who played with Monk said that he liked to get up



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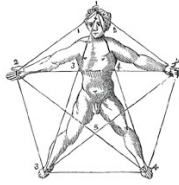
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to dance in order to set the rhythm, it was a kind of conducting that required complete attention from the drummer.

Tonight, we shall delve into the many aspects of Monk's performance and the way audiences and critics have come to read his body. His performance, I argue, was interpreted through a larger discursive field in which writers and critics pronounced his music as inaccessible and his behavior as eccentric. As a result, his performance practices (on and off the bandstand) have been attributed to madness, alcoholism and drug use, or a kind of performance art derived from the surreality of his life. What is missing, however, is how deeply his performances are rooted in a longer African American tradition of embodied performance, one in which music, dance, performance (comedic and tragic), and a public sense of style are inextricably linked to music making. As musician/critic Vijay Iyer explains, West African and African-American music, feature a body-based approach to music-making. By this I mean that they do not regard the body as an impediment to ideal musical activity, and that instead, many musical concepts develop as extensions of physical activities such as walking or repetitive tasks."

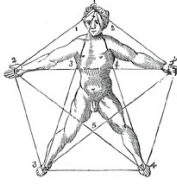
I will demonstrate how Monk's performance/dance lay at the heart of his music making philosophy—one that can be dated back to the antebellum days when enslaved Africans danced the 'ring shout.' I will do so by drawing on visual and musical examples. Finally, I will suggest that "constructing" Monk as the eccentric or mad artist has a lot to do with the various myths surrounding his life and performance--myths that have taken on folkloric proportions. When critics dubbed him the "High Priest of Bop" in the late 1940s, they were presenting him to jazz audiences as a kind of mystic--a dark, mysterious diviner whose musical ideas are unknowable. It is through this thick field of unknowability that we hear his music and further separate him from the cultural traditions that created him.

Born on October 10, 1917, in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, Thelonious Monk was only two generations removed from slavery. Consequently, he absorbed some of the community's collective memory of the horrors of the Southern plantation system.



The vestiges of slavery were everywhere in the Jim Crow South. More important than the memory of slavery, however, was the memory of freedom. The two generations that preceded Thelonious's birth lived through one of the greatest revolutions and counterrevolutions in the history of the modern world. Thelonious, his sister Marian and brother Thomas were raised by a generation for whom freedom had real tangible meaning. They knew first-hand stories of emancipation, of black men going to the polls and running for office, of former slaves founding churches and schools under a democracy they themselves built from the ground up. For any Southern black person living between 1865 and 1900, freedom wasn't one of those words you took for granted or treated in abstract terms. For Thelonious, freedom meant more than breaking the strictures of functional harmony and standard time. His grandparents were freedom's first generation and they did everything they could to make a good life for themselves under a hopeful democracy. His parents watched that democracy, and hence their freedom, go down in flames under the banner of white supremacy, though they never lost their memory of it or their determination to possess it once again.

Dance in African American culture was an expression of freedom—both sacred and secular. Historian Sterling Stuckey identified Monk's "dance" as an extension of the ring shout, an African-derived dance in which men and women moved in a circle counterclockwise, shuffling their feet and gesticulating with their arms. It was a group dance that demanded individual improvisation, and it was deeply sacred. If one were to watch ethnographic films of black people performing the ring shout early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the parallels to Monk are striking. Religions scholar Hugh Roberts goes even further, suggesting that we look at Monk's own dance as a sacred expression, an act of worship. Like pianist/composer Randy Weston, who regarded Monk as a Sufi priest, Roberts described Monk as a spiritual leader. He wrote: "even the improvisatory dance with shuffling feet and churning elbows that became one of Monk's trademarks . . . was part of his individuation and individual religious expression. Though he apparently used it to check out the rhythm of the music that



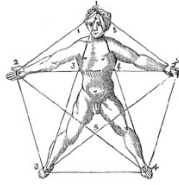
was playing either audibly or in his inner ear, it was a holy dance---a dance to his individual, musical objectification of God's will."<sup>1</sup>

While I'm not convinced this was a holy dance, Monk did have profound experiences with black sacred traditions. He grew up playing in a Baptist church and his devoutly religious mother taught him hymns—ones he'd later record like "Blessed Assurance" and "We'll Understand it Better, By and By." And when he was a teenager, he went on the road with a female evangelist playing for tent shows while she healed the crippled and infirm.

Monk's mother Barbara took him and his two siblings out of North Carolina when Thelonious was just shy of his fifth birthday. Settling in the San Juan Hill neighborhood of New York City—a huge, multiethnic black community located in West Manhattan. It was here that he learned to play piano as a kid, and here that he was introduced a broad range of musics, from Western classical traditions to Caribbean rhythms. Through the radio and old victrola's pouring out of his neighbors' apartments, he heard the likes of Atilla the Hun, Lord Invader, the Roaring Lion, and other prominent calypsonians of that era, and he probably heard music from the Spanish Caribbean—rumba, son, habanera, tango. Monk was also familiar with many of the neighborhood musicians, some of whom played in local calypso or salsa bands. One can certainly hear explicit Caribbean rhythms in some of Monk's music, most notably "Bye-ya" and "Bemsha Swing," which he wrote with his good friend, Barbadian-born drummer Denzil Best.<sup>2</sup> So Monk had more than a passing familiarity with the music and dance of the Caribbean.

Finally, few people know that Monk was a bit of a "hooper," what's known in the U.S. as a tap dancer. He probably picked up some moves from dancers in the neighborhood because as a teenager he often backed them when they performed at a neighborhood community center. Clearly, there are moments in Monk's "dance" when his "hoofing" expertise is evident. . . .

To understand Monk's performance practice, we have to recognize that his approach to the keyboard is itself a kind of dance. As we watch this wonderful clip of him

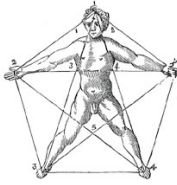


playing “Round Midnight” at the Village Vanguard, notice how he is operating as a kind of tight-rope walker—handling his cigarette, handkerchief, and the music, and he never loses his place or the beat. Watch, too, how Monk focuses on the keyboard, sometimes turns his elbow out to get the right angle. Nothing seems planned, yet every note is deliberate.

Here is another example—Monk playing “Just a Gigolo” live in Japan. Notice the physical employment of his entire body—flat fingers, the hunching of his shoulders on certain chords, the way he jumps back from the piano when he plays something overwhelming or right or downright startling. He jumps back and allows the piano to ring,

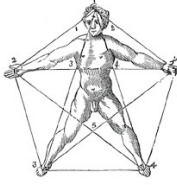
Avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor drew from Monk in developing a kinetic philosophy of performance. Playing was a physical activity that required the whole body. It was dance, as we’ve seen from these clips. Dance was inseparable from music, Taylor insisted, and he understood dance as “a visible physical conversation between all body’s limbs: Rhythm is the space of time danced thru.” He maintained a long-standing interest in dance and even studied dance and wrote for ballet. He regarded Monk’s dance as part of a long tradition of musicians dancing around their instrument going back before Delta blues musician Charley Patton to the present, with avant-garde drummer Milford Graves doing the same thing. Buell Neidlinger, recognized the critical importance of dance in black musics and the impact Monk’s dancing had on his generation of artists. Echoing his former collaborator and mentor, Neidlinger remarked, “Dance is the core of all great musics, whether it’s Monk, Ellington, or Stravinsky.”

For many artists of the postwar period, from Black Bohemians like Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal, to the Beat generation writers, the range of Monk’s physical gestures—his “dance”—rendered him a modern performance artist.<sup>3</sup> The Beat poets and writers (and other white male hangers-on, like painter/musician Larry Rivers and writer/producer Ross Russell, to name a couple), were drawn to Monk for many reasons. First, there was Monk’s image as a mystic or diviner. With the death of their “guru,” Charlie Parker, just two years before Monk’s “return” to the New



York club scene, many of these writers regarded Monk as a spiritual leader and towering figure in jazz. Second, the Beats reverence for Monk and black jazz musicians more generally is partly reflective of a larger crisis in masculinity during the 1950s. As Norman Mailer reveals in his controversial essay, “The White Negro” (published in Dissent the same year Monk opened at the Five Spot), black men—particularly the hipster and the jazz musician—offered an alternative model of masculinity in the age of the gray flannel suit, suburbia, and other so-called emasculating forces. Beat artists often characterized jazz musicians as emotionally-driven, uninhibited, strong black men capable of reaching into their soul to create a pure Negro sound—and with that came unbridled movement, physical freedom and prowess.<sup>4</sup> To their ears and eyes, Monk had the perfect combination of abstract qualities and authentic Negro sound (and an extremely stylish wardrobe to boot). Moreover, even musicians and critics at the time interpreted his dissonant harmonies, startling rhythmic displacements, and swinging tempos as distinctively “masculine.” Steve Lacy, for example, described Monk’s music in the pages of Jazz Review, as possessing, among other things, a “balanced virility.” In the liner notes to his first all-Monk album Reflections (1958), penned by critic Ira Gitler, Lacy also characterized Monk’s music as “masculine.” Gitler concurred, calling Lacy’s remark “an interesting and pointed observation in the light of the numerous effeminate jazz offerings we have heard in the past five years. The inner strength of songs like Ask Me Now and Reflections demonstrates that it is not slow tempos and lower decibels which necessarily indicate an effeminate performance.”<sup>5</sup>

But then again, what does? Gitler links effeminate performance with consonance, steady, often slow tempos, major keys, and a romanticism one associates with the balladeer. While most of Monk’s compositions as well as the old standards he was drawn to were written in major keys, he virtually unhinged the major tonalities upon which the tunes were built by adding a minor seconds to melodic lines and emphasizing tritone, dominant, and minor ninth intervals in his improvisations and melodies. Critics have used words like “assault,” “pulverize,” “savage,” or playing “havoc” to describe what Monk does to a pop tune; they tend to see his interpretations

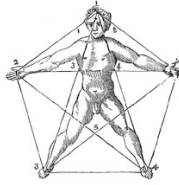


as a delightfully iconoclastic or deliberately terroristic act of disfiguring the romanticism of standards like “Just a Gigolo” and “Darn that Dream.”<sup>6</sup>

Monk's masculinity was only a small part of his attractiveness. The cultural avant-garde more broadly defined was drawn to Monk's image as a visionary, a seer, the mad artist, the recluse, the non-conformist--in part a construction of the popular press going back to the 1950s. By the early 1960s, when the Beat poet and hipster were fused together in the popular media and turned into a parody, and a new counter culture sought spiritual, cultural, and intellectual alternatives to suburbia, it walked Monk. Writer Barry Farrell, author of the famous Time cover story, said of Monk, “his name and his mystic utterances . . . made him seem the ideal Dharma Bum to an audience of hipsters.” Construction or not, the new wave of musicians and many artists did find vision and insight in Monk's music. Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, pianists Randy Weston and Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), to name a few, echoed Steve Lacy's assessment of Monk as “a teacher, a prophet, a visionary.”<sup>7</sup> And he held a significant place in the works and imaginations of several postwar visual artists such as Victor Brauner, Larry Rivers, Peter Richter, Jacques Lacomblez, and Romare Bearden. Thus it is not surprising that when Monk opened at the Five Spot in 1957, the audience included some of the major abstract expressionist painters such as Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, and Wilhelm de Kooning, not to mention a good number of major Beat writers residing in New York at the time. Monk's angular phrasing and employment of dissonance inspired quite a few postwar poets. For some of these writers, Monk was a metaphor for the entire history of black culture, for others he embodied existentialism in its totality, and for some his music represented an updated surrealist manifesto.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the Surrealists were among Monk's biggest fans. Monk's admirers included many Surrealist figures, from Gerard Legrand (who wrote the first Surrealist book on jazz, Puissance du Jazz [“The Power of Jazz”] in 1953) to Rumanian Surrealist writer Gellu Naum. In the early 1950s, critic Georges Goldfayn suggested that painters and poets have much to learn from Monk by listening to how he interprets a song. Claude Tarnaud wrote a poem for Monk in 1964, in which he compared him with Rimbaud,

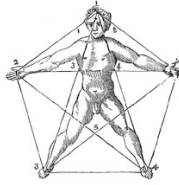




Victor Brauner, and Giorgio de Chirico.<sup>9</sup> The Surrealists attraction to Monk and jazz in general has much to do with the movement's search for poetic forms that break boundaries and, as A.B. Spellman put it, "cultivate the Marvelous." Most importantly, jazz in their view is all about Freedom. Monk's music, like that of the avant-garde more broadly, appealed especially to the Surrealists struggle to achieve freedom in every respect and to overthrow bourgeois concepts of beauty and art. He made music that destroyed Western ideas about music-making, turned conventional rules of composition, harmony, and rhythm on its head; he stripped romantic ballads of their romanticism and took his listeners on a wild harmonic ride filled with surprising dissonances and wobbly tempos. Yet, it wasn't just the music that appealed to the surrealists. Ted Joans, one of the foremost black surrealist poets who studied painting and music, said of Monk: "The surreality of his life, to me reflects his music." And Cuban Surrealist painter Jorge Camacho recently said of Monk, that the presence of humor and revolt in his compositions, his improvisations, and his life renders Monk "in my eyes authentically surrealist." In other words, Monk lived his surrealism: it was his performance, his dance, his apparent ability to disengage from reality, actions biographers and observers are quick to attribute to drugs, alcohol, or mental illness. And it was in his words. For someone who spoke so infrequently this might sound absurd, but when Monk did speak what he said resonated powerfully with surrealism. It was Monk, after all, who once mused "Jazz and freedom go hand and hand. That explains it. There isn't any more to add to it. If I do add to it gets complicated. That's something for you to think about. You think about it and dig it. You dig it!"<sup>10</sup>

I'd like to conclude by pointing to moments in Monk's performance in which the dance is absent. The dance was so crucial to the way audiences and critics constructed Monk, that its absence often signaled a 'failure' or a kind of distress in Monk's performance. However, there were many moments when Monk deliberately removed his body from the flow of the rhythm, whether he's at the piano or dancing in circles. When he is in rehearsal or in the recording studio working out a new song





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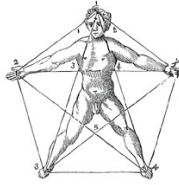
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or arrangement, he is usually completely focused on getting it right. The work it takes to create what is essentially a seamless performance, even if it contains occasional missteps and mistakes, is something we often take for granted with Monk. As long as we continue to invest in the myth of Monk as intuitive, spontaneous, and even undisciplined, we are unable to see how focused he is, even during his dance. His performance, in other words, is not a trance, it is not out-of-body, but a complete engagement with the music. When it drifts in the wrong direction, Monk was always alert to set it straight. Witness the following moment during a performance of his song, “We See” in Europe. Here the band is not doing what he wants them to do, and he is visibly frustrated with trumpeter Ray Copeland so he is compelled to stop the band. I like to show this clip because it chafes against the myth that Monk is “in his own little world,” when in fact he is a genuine band LEADER.

This is as much a part of the performance as anything else. Monk often rehearsed on the bandstand, and for the musicians who played with him it was sink or swim. He could care less about the audience reaction—at least that’s what we are lead to believe. He was also a dramatist and clearly these episodes of bandstand tension were part of the drama that attracted him.

**CODA**

Unlike most jazz musicians, Monk did not die young, nor did he die on the bandstand. He faded out in the early 1970s and retired in 1976, never to play again until his death in 1982. Mental and physical health compelled him to leave music altogether, and the early signs of his withdrawl begin with the disappearance of Monk’s dance. If you watch clips of his final performances, whether he was with the Giants of Jazz touring Europe in 1971, or performing at Carnegie Hall in 1976, Monk’s stiffness is striking. He no longer moved to the music, his body still and sometimes wincing in pain. He suffered from an enlarged prostate so sitting became increasingly uncomfortable for him. And my theory is that, for Monk, dance and music are inseparable, they go hand



in hand. That explains it. There isn't any more to add to it. . . . That's something for you to think about. You think about it and dig it. You dig it!"<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hugh J. Roberts, "Improvisation, Individuation, and Immanence: Thelonius [sic] Monk," *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1989), 50-56

<sup>2</sup> Copyright registration, Thelonious Monk and Denzil Best, "Bimsha Swing (sometimes listed as "Bemsha Swing" or "Bemesha Swing"), Bayes Music, Registration Number: EU 297366, dated December 15, 1952, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Monk knew the meaning of Bimsha or Bemsha when he co-wrote the tune. As he said in an interview with the French journal *????*, the word comes "from the Antilles." [CITATION]

<sup>3</sup> I discuss Monk and dance below, but let me simply point out that Andrew W. Bartlett, in his remarkable essay "Cecil Taylor, Identity Energy, and the Avant-Garde African American Body," *Perspectives of New Music* 33 (winter-summer, 1995), 274-293, he reminds us of the importance of the body in public performance in late 50s, early 60s bohemian cultural politics. Citing Sally Banes's *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), Bartlett points to the extraordinary political importance the white avant-garde invested in the body, particularly in its performance of pleasure and excess. In this context, it is easy to see how Monk's spontaneous dance, combined with his drinking during and between sets might be attractive to the generation Banes writes about.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent*, (November 1957); Panish, *The Color of Jazz*, 56-66; and on the crisis of masculinity in the 1950s, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (London: Routledge, 1983); Andrew Ross's chapter, "Hip and the Long Front of Color," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

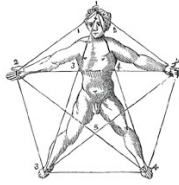
<sup>5</sup> "Introducing Steve Lacy," in Martin Williams, ed., *Jazz Panorama* (New York: Collier Books, 1964), 269, 271; Gitler liner notes on *Reflections: Steve Lacy Plays Thelonious Monk* (Prestige 8206).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Hodeir, *Toward Jazz*, 166-67, and John Mehegan, "Crepescul with Monk," 4.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Ferrell, "Loneliest Monk," *Time* 83 (February 28, 1964): 84-88; Steve Lacy interview with author, Paris, May 12, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> More recently, poets ranging from Dave Etter, John Sinclair, Wanda Coleman, Michael Horovitz, Lawson Inada, and many others have written for and about Monk in a style evocative of his playing. Indeed, Harry Smallenburg of Caliban suggested that Monk's music can lay the foundation for a new poetics, one built on "chordal writing," dissonance, and displacement. "A Forum on the Prosody of Thelonious Monk," *Caliban* 4 (1988), 35-79; Stephen Richter, "The Beauty of Building, Dwelling, and Monk: Aesthetics, Religion, and the Architectural Qualities of Jazz," *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (1995), 259-268.

<sup>9</sup> Gerard LeGrand, *Puissance du Jazz* (Paris: Arcanes, 1953), esp. 182-84; Gellu Naum, *L'Autre Cote: Poemes* [translated from Rumanian to French by Annie Benteoiu and Andree Fleury] (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1991), 366-67; Virgil Mihaiu, *Cutia de Rezonanta: Eseuri Despre Jazz Din Perspectiva Culturii Actuale* (Editura Albatros Bucuresti, 1985), 114-115; Robert Benayoun, *Le Rire des Surrealistes* (Paris: La Bougie du Sapeur, 1988), 104; Claude Tarnaud, *La Forme Reflexie: Carnet de Voyage et Commentaires* (Paris: Le Soleil Noir, 1954), 75-78; Tarnaud, "Brin de Conduite," in *Jacques Lacomblez: 30 Ans d'Activite* (Paris: Musee d'Ixelles, 1983); [TARNAUD POEM, ONERIC?]; Ted Joans interview, Dec. 15, 1995; and see Rosemont's "Black Music and the Surrealist Revolution,"



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Arsenal/Surrealist Subversion, no. 3 (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1976), 17-27; Artur do Cruzeiro-Seixas, "My Escape to Africa," Race Traitor 9 (Summer 1998), 95.

<sup>10</sup> Franklin Rosemont, "The New Argonautica," in Lawrence Ferlinghetti, ed., City Lights Anthology (San Francisco: Black Swan Press, 1974), 220; Jorge Camacho, "Monk Atmosphere," Le Cerceau 5 (Summer 1995), 6; "Jazz et Surrealisme: Une Possible Alliance," Dies and Das (This and That): A Magazine of Contemporary Surrealist Interest, 1 (1984). Dies and Das, edited by Ted Joans and Richard Anders, only produced once issue. The Monk quote cited here prefaced a section of the magazine in which they surveyed several surrealist writers about jazz. Virtually every writer who responded to the survey identified Monk as one of their "preferred jazz musicians."

<sup>11</sup> Franklin Rosemont, "The New Argonautica," in Lawrence Ferlinghetti, ed., City Lights Anthology (San Francisco: Black Swan Press, 1974), 220; Jorge Camacho, "Monk Atmosphere," Le Cerceau 5 (Summer 1995), 6; "Jazz et Surrealisme: Une Possible Alliance," Dies and Das (This and That): A Magazine of Contemporary Surrealist Interest, 1 (1984). Dies and Das, edited by Ted Joans and Richard Anders, only produced once issue. The Monk quote cited here prefaced a section of the magazine in which they surveyed several surrealist writers about jazz. Virtually every writer who responded to the survey identified Monk as one of their "preferred jazz musicians."