

Monk Trio: A Sequence of Sonnets

Mark Haywood

Monk conducts the traffic¹

Illuminated in the traffic's swirling beams
He poises like a floodlit matador
Whose every skilful, well-timed flourish seems
To goad and taunt the rush hour's rush and roar.
Or is he like a child on Christmas morning,
Whose simple joy, like virgin snow, shines bright,
Who's up at dawn, while grown-ups still are yawning,
To play with all the colour and the light?
Or is this Monk's new boogie-woogie chart,
Where cars are instrumental and the ne-
on's flash the music's syncopated heart—
The parts combined in streetwise harmony?²
Three views—perhaps there's truth in every one;
But Monk is Monk is Monk: perhaps there's none.

¹ Steve Lacy recalls that Monk “used to stand in front of the club and play with the cars as they were approaching and the traffic lights...and just be sort of dancing in the street...treating the traffic as a music” (part seven of Ian Carr's radio series, *Misterioso*. Ian Carr was the presenter of this eight-part radio series about the life and music of Monk, broadcast on Radio 3 in the UK and produced by Derek Drescher. In the bit that I refer to, Steve Lacy was being interviewed by Charles Fox). Elsewhere Lacy tells how “T. would be playing with the passing cars and traffic lights, like a matador with the bulls” (Thomas Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk: His Life and Music* (Berkeley Hills Books, 1997), 15).

² Monk has reminded me of the painter Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* of 1942–1943, a visual depiction of the rhythms of the street.

Crepuscule with Nellie

“The tune is always played just on its own—
Don’t ask me why.” “Perhaps this *Crepuscule*
Reflects his love, which, standing all alone,
Needs nothing more, a ‘self-substantial fuel’,
Though not the one deplored by Shakespeare,³ which
With narcissistic self-obsession burned,
Devoid of hope, in adulation rich,
But only adulation inward-turned.
No, no—Monk’s fuel and Nellie’s were as one,
A mutually kindled fire which brightly shone
And warmed them with its flame which, like the sun,
Empowered by its very self burned on.
And, like the sun, will evermore do so,
Though life departs and twilights come and go.”

³ “But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / Feeds’t thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel, / Making a famine where abundance lies, / Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel” (Shakespeare sonnet no.1 lines 5-8).

Let's capture Monk

Let's capture Monk: let's plumb the depths that lie
Beneath those sonic vessels which his mind
Once set afloat, against the wind to ply
Their course. Let's capture Monk: let's seek and find
A light that may illuminate the map
Of those in mystery oh so shrouded lands—
Those unknown landscapes of his thought. Let's cap-
ture Monk: let's try to open up his hands,
Wherein lie Nellie, *Bolivar* and stride,
Descending whole-tone runs, the blues, those notes
That sound so wrongly right, his children's pride,⁴
Pannonica and *Down Beat* readers' votes.⁵
Let's capture...No—his life and work has taught
That what he did and was cannot be caught.

⁴ Thelonious Monk Jr. creates a particularly poignant picture of family life with his father in the film *Thelonious Monk—American Composer* (East Stinson Inc., 1991).

⁵ Monk won the *Down Beat* magazine readers' poll in 1963.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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