

Thelonious monk essay sample



Thelonious Monk is known as one of the most unique, inimitable piano players of all time. Monk was both ahead of his time, and deeply rooted in tradition, and used his extraordinary gift of perfect pitch to learn songs and memorize them fast. Thelonious had a love for the piano from a young age, and grew up in Manhattan around lots of musicians. After failing academically as a young high school student he decided to drop out of school and pursue being a musician. He went on tour with an evangelic healer for 2 years, shortly after dropping out. When he came back home he was playing out as much as possible. His reputation grew as one of the best around as he began to grow. He was co-house pianist at a club called “Minton’s Playhouse” with Bud Powell. The after- hours jam sessions that went on there, along with a number of other jazz clubs, gave birth to what is now known as ‘be-bop.’ Musicians he played with were Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Mary Lou Williams, Kenny Clarke, Oscar Pettiford, Max Roach, Tadd Dameron, to name a few. The jam sessions that took place here were inspiring many musicians of the day. From the time Thelonious was on the scene this new thing called ‘modern jazz’ was emerging, and people either really liked it or didn’t understand it at all.

And Monk was the leader of modern-jazz. No one was playing the way Monk did, he was just purely original. When Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie had questions regarding music they went to Monk for the answer. Monk was annoyed when he heard people praising ‘Bird’ and ‘Dizzy’ saying that started the revolution to modern jazz. Monk said this in an interview with a French ‘Jazz magazine’: “I feel like I have contributed more to modern jazz than all of the other musicians combined. That’s why I don’t like to hear: ‘

Gillespie and Parker' brought the revolution to Jazz' When I know most of the ideas came from me. Dizzy and Bird did nothing for me musically, they didn't teach me anything." (' The Life and Times of Thelonious Monk', book p. 105 Robin D. G. Kelley). Monk was bitter about these guys because they'd get all the gigs meanwhile Monk for 6 years couldn't even play in the city he grew up in after getting his Cabaret Card taken from him after being falsely arrested for drug possession. The drugs were in fact his friend Bud Powell and Monk took the rap for him. But Monk found work in gigs during this time often in Brooklyn, or out of town. Jazz was spirit of the country, and Monk's music was perfect for the time, even though it wasn't being appreciated by all for what it was.

Thelonious Monk was born October 10th, 1917 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where he spent the first four years of his life. Both Thelonious' parents were son/daughter of slaves that grew up in North Carolina. Thelonious was Monk's fathers, grandfathers, and great- grandfathers' name. All witnessed the battles that took in their backyards and neighborhood. The struggle by Thelonious great-grandparents and grandparents caused Thelonious to feel more fortunate to be in his life and not that one of a slave. Monk's mother chose to leave the history of racism in North Carolina and join her cousin in New York City. She had to get out of North Carolina so she took her kids up to New York City, leaving behind Monk's father, because he was battling a sickness where he couldn't live with the city air. Monk was the middle brother of one older sister Marion and one younger brother Thomas. The four of them began a new life in Manhattan, in the " San Juan Hill" neighborhood, where racism and violence was happening every day.

Thelonious had to battle all the races to and from his walk to school. When he came back there was only one thing he wanted to do, piano. Inspired by Louie Armstrong he originally began with the trumpet. But when his trumpet instructor saw him noodling on the piano he said " You gotta take up piano."

So he did. He taught himself how to read music by eavesdropping on his sister's piano lessons and watching like a hawk over her shoulder as she practiced. When his love for the piano over matched Marion's she gave them up to him. His teacher then, Simon Wolf, a classical pianist was astonished by Monk's ability to read and memorize difficult pieces so fast. Lessons were an expensive . 75 cents per half hour, and Monk's mother scrubbed many floors to be able to afford it. After two years with Wolf, Monk moved on from him to pursue his love of jazz. It was clear to all who heard Thelonious that he was extremely gifted. Monk got in with the stride pianist like Art Tatum and Willie " The Lion" Smith and others. These guys got together to share ideas and jam, all of them being older than Monk Thelonious took it as a very important learning period. This type of music helped Thelonious develop a very strong left hand technique. He dropped out of high school to pursue the life of being a piano player. His mother was okay with it as long as he was working and not being a bum.

So, when he was 17 he took his first gig and traveled cross country with an evangelic healer and did not return home for two years. All that is really known is that it was a very eye opening experience, seeing miracles happen before his eyes. " We played and she healed." Monk was a man of very few words would answer questions with as few words possible. Monk didn't do drugs, although the media had look as if he was a junkie. He wasn't an idiot

savant like people claimed neither, he was shy around the media, but his close friends and family would classify him as a jokester, and a witty one at that. He was a family man and took his work seriously. Monk was quiet, and his few words were said in a deep tone and often mumbled a lot of people didn't get him. Monk went to the beat of his own drum. All he worried about was making sure his family had a place to eat and sleep and tried to make it as comfortable as possible; and making music. He would go out on stage with the big diamond on his finger, and wearing eccentric hats and fur coats.

To his fans, he was the hippest guy around; to the others they didn't get him and were more than likely just racist and wanted nothing to do with "That type" of music. Monk played everything different, never two things alike. In a time where all musicians wanted to play as many notes as possible, Monk loved to use space and silence in his solo's, sometimes dropping out completely just to see what would happen. He believed the loudest note was silence. Critics were displeased by Monk's unique style, and it took some getting used to him before he got to where he really broke through professionally. Musically he had been what he called "His way" since he was 15 years old. But in the 40's and 50's besides gigs here and there with bands led by Kenny Clarke, Lucky Millinder, Kermit Scott, and Skippy Williams, Monk didn't have anything long term. But it all changed after tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins hired him first to play for a lengthy amount of time and also to record an album in 1944. Suddenly there were a lot more people on the Monk bandwagon. In 1947, at age 30 Monk made his first album as a leader with Blue Note. Blue Note allowed Monk to choose his band members for the album.

Thelonious, who had already been on the jazz scene for half his life, chose musicians who weren't well known yet. Guys like Idrees Sulieman and George Taitt; Sahib Shihab and seventeen-year-old Danny Quebec West on alto saxophones; Billy Smith on tenor; and bassists Gene Ramey and John Simmons. On some recordings Monk employed Count Basie drummer Rossiere "Shadow" Wilson; and on others, the drums was Art Blakey. For his last Blue Note session as a leader in 1952, Monk was surrounded by an all-star band, including Kenny Dorham (trumpet), Lou Donaldson (alto), "Lucky" Thompson (tenor), Nelson Boyd (bass), and Max Roach (drums). In the end, although all of Monk's Blue Note sides are hailed today as some of his greatest recordings, at the time of their release in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they proved to be a commercial failure.

Monk went on to record albums with Prestige, Riverside, and Columbia. Monk was the second most recorded jazz pianist only to Duke Ellington. As Monk grew old he is classified with a "chemical imbalance" and diagnosed as bipolar. He continued to tour, doing world tours late in his career, but he slowly was losing that magic touch. He declined physically and mentally, he was mixing medications and getting sick a lot. In 1965 His bouts with bi-polar were getting worse and worse. Getting more and more disconnected from the world then he was to begin with, he decides to focus on his health and his family. Until 1977 Monk was playing only very occasional gigs and in 1977 he retired. Thelonious lived another 5 years before having a stroke and dying. Thelonious is remembered and respected as one of the few Jazz Giants. His musical genius is that unlike anyone else's. He contributed many great standards to be enjoyed for hopefully decades to come. It was a rough road,

but the music which was made by the man, Thelonious Monk, was pure genius.