

# Thelonious monk essay



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Thelonious Monk “ You know anybody can play a composition and use far-out chords and make it sound wrong. It’s making it sound right that’s not easy. ”

This quote spoke by Thelonious Monk himself represents his whole career into two sentences. He was widely considered one of the most influential jazz piano musicians. What is known about Monk’s early life is very little.

Thelonious Sphere Monk was born October 10, 1917 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Monk’s family was made up of his parents Thelonious and Barbara Monk and two siblings, Marian and Thomas. One of the first musical sounds Monk heard came from a player piano his parents owned. Then by the age of nine he began to pick up melodies on the piano and started teaching himself how to read music by watching over his sister’s piano lessons.

A year after moving to New York City from North Carolina Monk’s father became extremely ill, therefore leaving his mother to raise the three children by herself. Although the family’s budget was tight Monk’s mother was able to save up to buy a baby grand Steinway piano. By the age of eleven, Monk’s mother had saved enough money to pay for formal piano lessons for her son. At this young age it was clear that piano was Monk’s passion in life. By his early teen’s, Monk was playing rent parties, playing organ and piano at a local Baptist Church, and was said to have won several amateur hours competitions at the Apollo Theater. He was admitted into one of the city’s best high schools, Peter Stuyvesant High School.

By the end of his sophomore year, Monk dropped out of school to pursue his love of music. By 1935, Monk took a job as a pianist with a traveling evangelist preacher. Only two years later, he formed his own quartet and

played locally. Having formed a quartet opened the way for more opportunities.

Around 1941, Monk landed a job as the house pianist at the legendary Minton's Manhattan Club. Being able to work at Minton's brought Monk into close contact and collaboration with the bebop musicians including musicians like Miles Davis. In 1944 Monk made his first studio recording with the Coleman Hawkins Quartet which showcased his talent of improvisation. He was sometimes found to resemble Teddy Wilson.

Monk later married Nellie Smith the same year and had a son, T. S Monk who later became a jazz drummer. A daughter, Barbara was born a couple years later. A couple years later Monk was unfortunately restricted from playing in any New York venue where liquor was served because police confiscated his New York City Cabaret Card. So instead he spend most of the time composing, recording, and performing at theaters and out-of-town gigs.

In 1954, Monk visited Europe for the first time to record and perform. A couple of months after returning from Europe, Monk signed his first record to Riverside Records and even though he was regarded highly by many his records did not sell so well. His music was still too difficult to understand for the mass market. So to widen the broad spectrum of listeners he recorded an interpretation of Duke Ellington's music. After finally having his cabaret card restored, he lived at the Five Spot Cafe in New York and was the lead of a quartet that included John Coltrane.

This was able to bring his career back up. In 1958, because of possession of narcotics Monk was detained by police and was dropped from his record

deal. Although he was dropped from his record company he got signed onto a major label which was Columbia Records. Under this label he recorded many well-reviewed studio albums like Monk's Dream and Underground. Monk had disappeared from the scene by the mid 1970's and made an only a couple appearances during the last few years of his life. His last studio recordings were completed in November 1971.

Later in his life, Monk was known for the unusual manner in which he acted. He was extremely quiet said Bassists Al McKibbon who had known Monk for over twenty years. It is said that all of Monk's quirky attributes are due to mental illness. Monk's son reports that his father did not recognize him and was in fact hospitalized on several occasions due to unspecified mental illness.

Monk would often become excited for two or three days, pace for days after that and then he would withdraw and stop speaking. No diagnoses were ever publicized but physicians recommended electroconvulsive therapy as treatment option for his illness. His family would not allow it so instead he took lithium and antipsychotic. As his health declined, Monk's last six years were spent as a guest in the New Jersey home of his friend Baroness Nica de Koenigswarter. Monk died due to a stroke on February 17, 1982 and was buried in Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York. Since his death, his music has been rediscovered by a wider audience and he is now counted alongside the likes of Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

In 1993, he was awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award and in 2006 he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation. In the end, Thelonious

Monk did what he loved and was passionate about and changed it for no one. He created his own original music with his own rules and suffered the consequences. But ten years later, was looked upon as a genius even though he never changed his music in the interim. One of the most remarkable aspects of Monk's music was that he saw no need to alter his playing or compositional style and that is what defined his career.