

THELONIOUS MONK QUARTET

with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall

GABRIEL SOLIS



thelonious monk quartet
with **john coltrane** at carnegie hall



THELONIOUS MONK QUARTET FEATURING
JOHN COLTRANE AT CARNEGIE HALL

OXFORD STUDIES IN RECORDED JAZZ

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**FOR MEL WILLIAMS, MY JAZZ GURU—DJ, ACTIVIST,
AND TENOR SAXOPHONIST EXTRAORDINAIRE,
WHO TAUGHT ME TO LOVE MONK
AND TRANE WHEN I WAS A KID**

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SERIES PREFACE

THE OXFORD STUDIES in Recorded Jazz series offers detailed historical, cultural, and technical analysis of jazz recordings across a broad spectrum of styles, periods, performing media, and nationalities. Each volume, authored by a leading scholar in the field, addresses either a single jazz album or a set of related recordings by one artist/group, placing the recordings fully in their historical and musical context, and thereby enriching our understanding of their cultural and creative significance.

With access to the latest scholarship and with an innovative and balanced approach to its subject matter, the series offers fresh perspectives on both well-known and neglected jazz repertoire. It sets out to renew musical debate in jazz scholarship, and to develop the subtle critical languages and vocabularies necessary to do full justice to the complex expressive, structural, and cultural dimensions of recorded jazz performance.

JEREMY BARHAM
UNIVERSITY OF SURREY
SERIES EDITOR

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THELONIOUS MONK QUARTET FEATURING
JOHN COLTRANE AT CARNEGIE HALL

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INTRODUCTION

FOR A SCANT six months in 1957, John Coltrane played in Thelonious Monk's band. Filling the tenor spot previously held by Sonny Rollins, he added a searing, sprinting foil to Monk's understated, ambling piano. Coltrane was a young player, his most enduring work still to come, but he brought with him impressive technique and a considerable playing history, most recently with Miles Davis. Monk was from an older generation, but only finally coming into his own as a recording artist and bandleader at the time. In the 1950s, Monk's decision to hire Coltrane was barely noted, but in retrospect it has come to be seen as one of the most important partnerships in the history of modern jazz. The quartet, including Monk, Coltrane, bassists Wilbur Ware and Ahmed Abdul-Malik, and drummer Shadow Wilson, appeared regularly at the Five Spot Café in the Bowery, just on the edge of Greenwich Village, but was documented in only a limited way at the time. They made a handfull of studio recordings, some of which were not released until a number of

years later, due to contractual problems, and Blue Note issued a scratchy live bootleg in 1993, recorded during a one-night engagement Coltrane had with Monk's band in 1958. The recording, captured by Coltrane's wife, Naima, on a portable tape recorder, is the essence of lo-fi; as much bar noise as music, the balance obscures some of Coltrane's playing and the band sounds tinny and far away (Sheridan 2001, 88–89). Even after remastering for release as part of the complete Thelonious Monk on Blue Note box set, the Five Spot recording has remained largely a collector's piece.

Early in 2005 Larry Appelbaum, a sound archivist at the Library of Congress, made what has to be one of the biggest finds in the history of jazz recordings. Unnoticed for decades in the library's archives, in a plain folder with little to identify it, Appelbaum unearthed reel-to-reel tapes containing a November 29, 1957, Morningside Community Center benefit concert, which the Voice of America recorded in Carnegie Hall but never broadcast. The tapes caught Monk and Coltrane at creative peaks, clearly digging one another's playing, working with a representative set list and best of all, recorded with a state-of-the-art system. The recording sounded good: Monk and Coltrane's playing came through clearly, and the rhythm players, Ahmed Abdul-Malik and Shadow Wilson, were clearly audible—more than can be said even for many studio recordings of the time.

From these tapes, which included nearly all of the night's multi-artist lineup, the sets featuring the Monk/Coltrane quartet were released as the album *Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall* in 2005 on Blue Note records. The album's release was a major event, undoubtedly one of the most widely covered jazz releases of the recent past in the American and European press. Malcolm Jones, writing breathlessly in *Newsweek*, called it "The musical equivalent of discovering a new Mount Everest," and the *Washington Post* said, "for jazz fans, this discovery is almost like coming across the Holy Grail" (Jones 2005, 58; Schudel 2005, N01). In addition to critical success, the album has sold well, handily overshadowing any other jazz release at the time.

The story of this recording is of fundamental interest to jazz history, for a number of reasons. First, the concert is interesting because of the fact that as an event it was somewhere between an everyday club date and a monumental undertaking. The grouping of performers was quite good, and the night was remarked upon in the *Times*, but it was not a one-of-a-kind event. There was no "conceptual" program, no special compositions or arrangements on the bill, and it was not initiated as an opportunity to record a live album. Still, it was at Carnegie Hall and was intended for

broadcast. What we now hear on the tapes is something common for its time, but absolutely, remarkably, special. It is a window onto a moment, a working musical partnership that is otherwise gone. Moreover, in addition to this distinction at the time, it is also unusual because it has such a thin subsequent history. Unlike Monk's live recordings from Europe through the late-1950s and early-1960s, or Coltrane's recordings at the Village Vanguard or Birdland, which have become familiar, well worn, carefully listened to, and closely studied by generations of fans and jazz musicians, *Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall* quite simply did not exist in the jazz world between the night it was recorded and 2005.¹

This book, in line with the rest of the volumes in the series, focuses extensively on analytical close readings of the pieces on the album *Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall*. However, those close readings serve also to motivate historical questions about changes in jazz over the course of the twentieth century, and critical questions about the place of jazz in American culture. Beyond this, by focusing on the recording as a cultural object with significance in itself, rather than simply as a document of music making, this book raises issues that place contemporary jazz in relation to the field of media studies.

The late 1950s, when the recording was made, were a period of legendary intensity in jazz history. Miles Davis seemed to reach a new peak every year, with the albums *Cookin'*, *Steamin'*, *Relaxin'*, and *Workin'*—guidebooks to classic hard bop style—all recorded within a few months in 1956 and released in 1957, following up on *'Round About Midnight*, and followed by a series of fine albums culminating in 1959's landmark *Kind of Blue*. Sonny Rollins recorded something, as a leader or sideman, virtually every month between 1956 and 1959, producing the grand eponymous albums for Blue Note and the irreverent and ultimately hard-swinging *Way Out West* for Contemporary. Sonny Stitt and Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Golson and Hank Mobley, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Max Roach, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Milt Jackson, Hank Jones, Horace Silver, Lennie Tristano, and Gerry Mulligan all wrote and played and recorded songs and albums that would challenge their contemporaries and become standards in time. A language that had been worked out in rehearsal, on stage, and in countless jam sessions in large and small venues throughout the country in the previous decade was well and truly in flower on the recordings these musicians and many others made at the time.

Beyond this, as David Rosenthal notes in his book *Hard Bop*, the period has been seen as a final golden age, a resurgence, a time when jazz

thrived in dialogue with a large, appreciative audience. Not just an elite music for a relatively small cadre of aficionados—America's Classical Music, as it would come to be dubbed, for better and for worse—jazz in the late 1950s was a cutting-edge popular music. The hard bop years were, as Rosenthal sees it, quoting Andrew Hill, the time “before the music got separated”—separated from its audience, fully separated from pop, separated at least in jazz criticism into the myriad warring camps of the 1960s (1992, 69).

Finally, the 1950s were an exceptional moment for live jazz recordings. There had, of course, been live recordings stretching back for decades, thanks in large measure to the broadcast wires that were built into many concert halls to produce the syndicated shows that were the staple of radio in the 1930s (McDonough 2006, 36). However, postwar innovations in recording technology—the drive to create ever smaller devices capable of capturing sound with ever greater fidelity—meant that by the late 1950s any record company could (and many did) produce high-quality recordings in situ at essentially any major jazz venue, most importantly the small nightclubs that had risen to prominence in the late 1930s and 1940s as the best spaces for modern jazz.

Given the wealth of documentation of jazz—live and in the studio—from this seminal moment in the music's history, it may seem odd to focus an entire volume on an obscure live recording that was never intended for release, and was in fact not released until nearly fifty years after the fact. This recording of Monk and Coltrane is, however, singular and rewards extended consideration. In a way, the recording should not be particularly interesting: the repertoire for the two sets is entirely made up of work the band played night after night, and there are relatively few moments that break out of the well-established modern jazz formal frame. The group plays the heads in unison, followed by a series of solos that maintain the form of the heads in relatively straightforward ways, and finally end in closing choruses in which the band restates the head, again in unison. Within this framework, the performances are remarkable. Most importantly, the recording is a document of truly brilliant musicians creating something—hammering, forging, molding, willing something new into being—something that is both a compendium of what was possible within jazz conventions of the day and a glimpse of how those conventions could be pushed forward.

Beyond the music itself, the recording is an unparalleled document of a micro-moment in jazz history, or perhaps a moment in jazz's micro-history. Monk's decision to hire Coltrane for his quartet was a small thing in each of the musicians' lives, at least at the moment, yet it came to have

remarkably far-reaching consequences for the shape of jazz to come, so to speak. Coltrane's work, even more than Monk's, was profoundly changed by the experience of playing in the group—more, perhaps, than any of the many other tenor players who played with him over the years. Some, like Johnny Griffin, served as foils to Monk's style but were relatively unchanged by it; others, like Charlie Rouse, were deeply committed to Monk's demands as a bandleader but seem already to have absorbed Monk's language by the time they worked with him. Coltrane came to Monk's band at a fortuitous time in his career, as though looking for the key to new directions he was seeking, and was attuned to the possibilities suggested by Monk's music.

Finally, this recording's peculiar history, from the initial conditions of its production to its ultimate, belated release, offers a unique lens through which to understand postwar jazz recordings as things in themselves. With care, it can be heard to speak to the political economy of jazz in the 1950s, the meaning of style and genre, the place of performance and recording and the contexts of jazz as a business and a job, as well as, of course, an art, and it can be heard to speak eloquently to the same questions and issues in jazz at the start of the twenty-first century. Because of the long gap between recording and release, it was unusual and special in 2005 and could be invested with all the fantasies and frustrations of the jazz community in a time of extensive nostalgia.

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF IMPROVISATION, INTERACTION, MUSICAL WORKS, AND THE JAZZ RECORDING

The questions within jazz scholarship this book most directly asks revolve around how to understand musical repetition of many sorts as it relates to conceptualizations of improvisation, composition, and the making of musical works. This constellation of theoretical concerns will be present in shifting patterns throughout the rest of this book, though not always explicitly. It will be useful, then, before moving forward with the details of the recording, to unpack the remarkable complexity that improvisation, composition, and repetition represent in jazz performances and on jazz recordings, as can be heard in these tracks. Starting with improvisation, composition, and repetition in the music itself—the details, “on the ground,” of jazz—these concerns move analysis to larger and larger frames of reference, including questions about aesthetics, the circulation of ideas in social networks, the cultural life of music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the political economy of jazz and the American recording industry.