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**On Theloniousism**

*who allows essence possession/translation into sound/voice  
via mech-tech mastery/chrysalises it  
who allows the perceptive either entry or regurgitation and/or  
transmission/heightening or propulsion into another  
realm/space/form/void*

*beyond inspiration*

I

Everybody tells you that's not allowed/don't do that. Never mind history, it's against the rules (which change the moment *you* get them straight). You are a fraud.

Until Monk music had not gotten deeply into attitude—particularly Black attitudes. Music had not shown its ass. Monk persisted in succeeding at being who he was without compromise, providing listeners with the elementary components of a deep and never ending source of creativity. A kind of poetic sensibility yet to achieve recognition is one which does with language what Monk did with music—as if the two were successfully divorced. [See the headings of Music and Negro Poetry in the Princeton Encyclopedia of *Poetry & Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger, Princeton University Press.]

MONK, THELONIOUS SPHERE—b. New York City; Composer, piano; though technically a limited pianist, he evolved an extremely personal style and in his best moments produced some of the most provocatively heterodox Jazz on the 1940s.

—Leonard Feather, from *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*, Horizon Press, 1955



## A Working Definition

Theloniousism: (epistrophy). Accelerated spurts of sound upon the high side of linear or circumlunar thought and/or attitude; seeing with your ears and hearing with your eyes (who said what?). Its antonym is Marxisticism, a philosophy of art that disallows for genetic psycho-socio influences manifest as sensibility; gangsterism as art; a conscious attempt to level all creativity; ideally a socio-political constructiveness; but which, in current proponents, results in fashionistic cannibalization.

*you see, I play your game and my game  
and win at both  
when you play my game you automatically lose*

THE KEY/history + vision + craft = transcendence

it began as a mimic—a comment on racism  
a showing off  
and became a “thang” unto itself  
i.e., went legit

jack-ass music or jive-ass or j-ass or jass or

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I had a wild rave with this Poet Fellow and during it I had to stop and give him a history lesson on race music and assorted fusions. Black music/language is always taboo until embraced by young whites and through them infused into the Dominant Culture (D.C.). This was true of Jazz and Rock-and-Roll. Specifically we discussed the marriage of Calypso and Blues/R&B and the offspring, Reggae. “Oh, of course!” he said, a bit embarrassed. And while our talk was language centered, there was no effective way to discuss Black language without interjecting Black music. He was discounting The Blues as a viable art form and

downgrading the contribution to American language made by Black Americans, expressing his own preference for the “cleaner,” more “distanced” Caribbean approach.

I had to point out what C.W.E. Bigsby, in his opening essay from *The Black American Writer, Volume I: Fiction*, says so perfectly:

The native American feels little or no need to bolster up a self-image which for the most part is not threatened by an alien culture. In America that self-image has been eroded by slavery and the indignities of an unjust social system. In Sartre's words the black writer has his back up against the wall of authenticity. In his attempt to “reveal the black soul” he has frequently been drawn towards an African past which seems to have the virtue of conferring on him a distinctive identity, unaffected by the demeaning impact of his American experience. Yet, whatever the stance of the ardent black nationalist there remain only vestigial remnants of African culture. The slave owners were too successful in stamping out indigenous traditions for the contemporary writer to be able to draw on a genuine cultural heritage (outside of the world of music and, perhaps, religion). Thus the black writer intent on revising a sense of identity which has its roots in a distant African past is trapped into creating rather than discovering a usable heritage and into manufacturing usable myths.

I had to add that Black Americans are, in spite of well-meant rhetoric, a *minority* with a different sense of self than Africans and Blacks from the West Indies who see themselves as a clear majority. Not to mention Jamaica having freed its slaves 25 years before America.

Johnny Nash couldn't ignite the fad of this fusion called Reggae within the Dominant Culture, but his pioneering enabled Bob Marley to capitalize when Eric Clapton and other white profligates made “ska” fashionable and the film *The Harder They Come* put Rasta and its godhead Jah on the American cultural map. I pointed out the tendency of Whites to maniacally appropriate anything *different* (exotic) that smacks of being “in”/hip, citing the insulting extremes of dreadlocks being called a “Bo



Derek" (after the White blonde female star of *10*) and Elvis Presley's theft of Big Mama Thorton's *Hound Dog* from which he made millions he did not share with her.

Further, I made the case for the dilatory effect some early American legislation had on Black morality and Black music simultaneously—that is, at one time, a Black woman marrying out of her race to a White man escaped slavery and became a freed woman; whereas, a White woman marrying a Black man married into slavery. (Consult your desk copy of Peter M. Bergman's *The Chronological History of the Negro in America*, Harper & Row, 1969.)

The failure to communicate is not on the part of the Blacks, but on the part of the Whites who do not wish to understand and/or in understanding simply don't give the proverbial damn.

Now, skip one paragraph and go back to that sentence concerning slavery. Substitute artist/poet/musician for the word woman and put "economics" in front of slavery. The sense is chilling. To escape economic slavery the Black artist is forced to turn his/her back on Black heritage and adapt to White tastes/sensibilities in order to make money (in this case, money is synonymous with freedom but not power). George Benson and Al Jarreau are currently, if unfairly, cited as examples of this phenomenon—also known as "selling out." On the other extreme, a White artist steeped in Black culture without carrying the news back to his/her own cultural neighborhood oftentimes becomes trapped in obscurity, or is regarded as a freak/aberration (e.g. Teena Marie). Cross-culturalization is yet to be credited as a valid phenomenon (between Blacks and Whites, anyhow) as should be the case in our so-called Melting Pot of a nation. The tendency is to (want to) keep the race pure, be the "race" White American or Black American. The arguments on this point (ethnicity vs. race) are complex and unresolved so I'll keep it simple: That which identifies as African-American of slave origin is "Black" and that which identifies as "White" is White.

The Black poet/writer cannot make it in establishment literary circles merely on his excellence as a writer unless that excellence is sanctioned/patronized by the proper Whites. One may be as niggerish as one wants as long as one doesn't bite the hand that makes out the advance checks, distributes the books and pens the reviews. In this respect, the Halls of

Ivy are no different from the Alleys of Hollywood. Like the Black musician, the less *ethnic* a Black writer is, the less angry, the more attainable that elusive reward of recognition (if not cash).

Another twist in this cowing of the Black creative psyche is that one is allowed to be as much of a clown and/or racist as one wants because the Dominant Culture has, over recent decades, learned how to neutralize this sort of energy—which is why Black humor succeeds where Black drama fails. Even hatred is palatable as long as it is unreasoning hatred, empty of threat, and having no "army" or "intelligence" to back it up. It is no coincidence that the success of Black artists in America is, almost without exception, linked to rise and fall of social currents which kaleidoscopically bring "the race problem" into national focus. For the Black artist to succeed as an individual free of this bond is rare.

to notate is to fixate  
which is why The Word is a superior power

## II

An important somebody comes along and tells the world you're great—a genius, in fact. The world embraces you. It pretends to understand, but doesn't—really.

That we Black people still undergo holocaust makes the plight of our artists much more difficult, much more urgent and much more poignant. Once that artist renounces his/her birthright he/she may cease productivity because of being cut off from the very Blackness that spawns (one's certainties or confusions about it). This reality still plagues all Americans of *ethnicity* but is particularly exquisite pain for Black artists. The pain is articulated at length by Leroi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) in his prose, including the chatty *Blues People* (1965) and *Black Music* (1968), and in the life stories of some Black musicians. The autobiographies of Billie Holiday and June Jordan are good starting points for the female version.



. . . the Negro writer's social experience is, despite its bitterness, also an artistic boon. To live continually with prejudice based on the accident of skin color is no superficial experience, and neither is the reaction produced by such constant exposure superficial. There is a depth of intensity to the emotions of Negroes—as demonstrated in "Negro music"—which is largely lacking in white Americans . . . Thus the negro writer, if he does not make the tragic error of trying to imitate his white counterparts, has in his possession the priceless "gift" of thematic intuition . . . He will be able to convey suffering without romanticizing . . .

—William Gardner Smith, "The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations," from *The Black American Writer, Volume I: Fiction*

Without romanticizing? Maybe. The trouble with too many of us public Black folk is that we do not inform our work with our history. Perhaps we can't because that history is, for the most part, still made inaccessible to us. It is no coincidence that an unusually large portion of books available on Black themes of any kind (including reprints) have copyright dates, within two or three years, corresponding to the beginning and end of the Civil Rights Struggle.

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Compare these three stanzas from Nathaniel Mackey's "Ghede Poem" (Ghede, the Obean god of death) with two comparable stanzas from Ishmael Reed's "I Am A Cowboy in the Boat of Ra." Mackey's later poem (in this case the latter) appeared in *Alcatraz 2* (Santa Cruz), and Reed's earlier poem appeared in the Norton Anthology. Not only does Mackey "take off" on Reed's imagery, bringing it even closer to "home"/Blackness, but he also does an improvisation on Reed's poetic diction:

I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra,  
sidewinders in the saloons of fools  
bit my forehead like O  
the untrustworthiness of Egyptologists  
Who do not know their trips. Who was that  
dog-faced man? they asked, the day I rode  
from town.

School marms with halitosis cannot see the Nefertiti fake chipped on the run by slick germans, the hawk behind Sonny Rollins' head or the ritual beard of his axe, a longhorn winding its bells thru the Field of Reeds.

While different in form, Mackey, nevertheless, with or without intent, zaps us with an electrifying poem as fine as Reed's, with Reed's exact same rhythm, yet completely on its own without any clues *except* for rhythm:

They call me Ghede. The butts  
of “angels” brush my lips.

The soiled asses of “angels”  
touch my lips, I  
I kiss the gap of their having  
gone. They call me Ghede, I  
sit, my chair tilted, shin across  
thigh.

They call me Ghede  
of the Many-Colored Cap, the  
Rising Sun. I suck  
breath from this  
inner room's midearth's bad air  
make chair  
turn into chariot,  
swing.



Mackey's poem echoes Reed's, a wonderful happenstance which sets up poetic dialogue on several levels simultaneously. Reed's Cowboy is a minor deity plotting dubious overthrow, whereas Mackey's Ghede is a full-fledged God with the powers of life and death. In his play, Mackey effectively digs deeper to the root of Blackness—yet clearly echoes the assertion of “I am,” a quality Sonia Sanchez identifies as the male voice in Black poetry, but which can be equally accomplished by the female, as in my “take off” on Bob Kaufman's rhythms in “Heavy water blues” (*You Better Believe It*, Paul Bremin, Penguin 1973):

The radio is teaching my gold fish Jujitsu  
I am in love with a skindiver who sleeps underwater  
my neighbors are drunken linguists, and I speak butterfly,  
Consolidated Edison is threatening to cut off my brain,  
the postman keeps putting sex in my mailbox,  
My mirror died & can't tell if I still reflect,  
I put my eyes on a diet, my tears are gaining too much weight

I turn Kaufman's poem inside out, take his horn and blow my own tune, making my “Heavy Daughter Blues” (*Heavy Daughter Blues*, Black Sparrow Press, 1987):

the t.v. is teaching my children hibakusha  
I am in love with a dopefiend who sleeps under freeways  
my neighbors are refugees from S.A.  
and I speak negrese

the source is promising to terminate my train  
of thought. the postman has put a hex on my P.O.Box  
when my mirror cries do my pupils dilate?  
I put my dial on quiet, my ears are gaining too much hate

Reed expresses Blackness representationally, relying on cultural reference points and stringing them together with the rhetorical posturing that goes with being a cowboy at showdown. Mackey puts forth Blackness organically and is free of the necessity of embracing rhetoric or posture.

He simply is God, no questions asked. Perhaps Reed's ultimate artistic sacrifice liberates Mackey. I certainly feel liberated from the need to perform the kind of awkward intellectualizing apparent in Kaufman's wild sojourn into Beat surrealism—the loss of Self not only in the confusions of ethnic Blackness, but a more Western existential blackness. Yet Reed and Kaufman serve to take me “home” in much the same way as Monk's “Round Midnight” or Ray Charles' androgynous rendering of “I Didn't Know What Time It Was.” Originality of thought? Cool. Originality of execution? Most cool. [It enrages me that a society that places such a pathological premium on what is first and new continuously fails to give Black artists proper due/support. Of course, Dominant Culture artists continue to argue, but not effectively enough, the ascendance of the mediocre over excellence.]

The potential fun in the above game is obvious and obviously unlimited; and, the apparent elitism/specialization more or less goes with the turf. Thus one may eat one's poetic cake and have it too. What is central here is that rhythm refreshed, beyond style and lyricism, ascends once more to its rightful throne along with content and form and copulates with both. That which starts with homage and/or satire, takes on its own independence.

There have been such moments/movements in the Dominant Culture, such as Dada, Beatitude and Pop/Popism/Op. But in terms of sheer bankability, no Black millionaire artists (or widows thereof) emerged from those movements because they are not *ethnically* Black movements. We Afro-American artists are allowed to play the game but we are not allowed to become dealers. To deal is to have power—*control* beyond meager influence. In this respect the Black musician/composer/singer is way out ahead of the Black writer/poet. [Say what one will about Michael Jackson and Prince.] By denying linkage between music and language, and music as language; by effectively denying the Black holocaust, the Black writer/artist is successfully frustrated by the scions of the D.C. By relegating Jazz (and the Jazz principle) to obscurity, the people who give birth to it are kept in a position of economic and cultural inferiority. And the *quality* of one's work has *nuthin'* to do with it.

To recognize is to empower.



## III

Now you are somebody. Relax. Recognition at long last sits on your doorstep. You don't have to break your ass anymore, or kiss ass. You are over—you think.

(what a stalk of maize looks like  
musically)

The backside becomes an affront, a refusal to reveal or share one's agony/lust (mooning). Turning away in/into aloneness. And so what if you're alone? The unforgiven sin is choosing to be alone by one's self . . . as semiotic perversion is one derived from licking backsides.

dat fulminous note soars no mo

dead beat  
a frozen note of attitudinal bliss  
entombed  
in the catacombs of poet-soul  
name inscribed  
upon the sacred stellae of ancient tribal worshippers  
of diddlypoot

will we hear the sanctimonious snort  
from your nostrils no more?  
will our eyes never again travel  
the mystic mythic tracks of your ectodermic addiction?  
will our hearts never again thrill  
to the resonant wise-ass of your  
existential jonesism?

yes  
we have been deprived—jealously  
deprived/years gone/no opportunity to  
commune with the grand wizard of  
woogiedom

yes  
we have been cheated (in premeditation)  
only to witness America deconstructed  
by venereal disease

yes as we sink into the homogenous audio-visual  
potato salad

catered by a deaf tongue

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Monk had made the journey from the obscurity of the Jazz underground to the cover of *Time* by remaining tenaciously true to his own musical vision. He kept playing things the way he heard them, and people eventually discovered his way of “using notes differently” made beautiful sense. In the process, he helped change the way people thought about music; he contributed a stunning body of compositions to the Jazz repertoire; and he influenced a generation of musicians—not just the pianists and not just the young players like John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins who had worked in his bands, but everyone who heard what he was doing and absorbed his message of freedom and individuality. And yet a strange thing began happening around the time of these Jazz Workshop performances. Some people began to put Monk down, not because he was too different but because he wasn't different enough. Specifically, a few impatient souls began to complain that when they went to see Monk perform, they heard the same old stuff . . . He wasn't writing new tunes. He wasn't growing.

—Peter Keepnews' liner notes, *Monk*:

*Thelonious Monk—Live at the Jazz Workshop*  
(Columbia C2 83269, Reissue)



Classical music infused with the Drum (a music which also functions as a language) and violated by the Holler (religion—particularly Obeah) cum Jazz in all its probable and improbable variations. Tightness and rhythmic stricture plus stimulation to an erogenous zone equals release equals expression. Whereas over-stimulation results in: 1) Numbness 2) Irritation 3) Infection 4) Sepsis 5) Necrosis 6) Hello, Death (see Ted Joans' "The .38").

When the Jazz principle is applied, growth becomes irrelevant after one obtains mastery. When applied to performance, growth ceases only when the improvisations themselves become fixed, ceasing to be actual improvisations but instead become mere arrangements and/or interpretations/comments upon. The nature of improvisation is spontaneous infusion/renewal—not *repetition* or geometric progression/ascension. Max Swartz of San Francisco's Mission district dares to apply the Jazz principle with great success and great failure all in the space of a performance, usually accompanied by bass or saxophone. He's published little, expressing disdain for fixation on paper. Kamau Daaoud is the foremost L.A. proponent of this, although he periodically self-publishes small books of "jazzualizations." Thus one could, as Monk did, play the same song (or write the same poem) repeatedly throughout a set and yet continually renew it/rebirth it/present different aspects without (if you are lucky) boring listeners who see with their ears. Blindness is, in this respect, deafness (aka double trouble). And, needless to say, the tone deaf will, of course, be bored.

In relation to what I do as a Black/Afro-American *po-et woman* who believes her people are a first, a unique if tortured cultural/world event, I could and do swear that the Dominant Culture flagrantly denies my people-language (again, the Holler and the Drum) and refuses to recognize the nature of African-American duality established by W.E.B. Dubois in his writings as far back as 1903. There is a deliberate and on-going failure on the part of the government to officially recognize that a holocaust continues for Black Americans. The passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to *their* Constitution and our glorious struggle for Civil Rights did not resolve our problem.

As has been pointed out previously the D.C. craves its Black underclass upon which it vampirishly feeds, though it is careful to never quite

kill off its victim; rather, keeps it minimally alive, enough to provide sufficient and periodic infusions of blood/excitement/challenge/richness/deviance. Which is why Blacks and Amerindians will never be allowed the same privileges as, say, first generation emigres (certainly not without substantial and bloody social revolution). Our businesses are not patronized unless they are deemed safe/nonthreatening or "in." The Communications Media continue to present an America in which slavery never happened or has been adequately and officially atoned for. [For example, the video travesty of Alex Haley's *Roots* lay in the rumor that two of the "White" stars were paid salaries equal to what the *entire* Black cast was paid, and the fact that only two Black writers were hired to work on and "blacken" scripts written by Whites.]

We live in a nation without proper context.

#### IV

Everybody complains. They are tired of you doin' your same old moldy thang (neva mind dat thing made yo' famous, Shamus) when are you gonna do something new? Even dyin', particularly of a drug overdose, is unoriginal.

It is possible for an impoverished writer to escape poverty through making use of that poverty in his work. For a white woman to escape the economic confines of an oppressive sexism by making use of her sexuality is possible. But for a Black American writer to escape Blackness through the use of that Blackness in his/her work is not possible. To escape, one must be able to, in effect, *write white*.

—conversational music—

During her career, Billie Holiday never won a *Down Beat* poll for best singer/vocalist.



##

Speaking of furnished rooms, suppose Classical/traditional writing and/or music were compared to an apartment (compartmentalization). The Classical apartment is very lovely. You can paint it. You can move things around in it. You can buy new furniture and lay down new floors. It is still the same apartment.

A Jazz apartment has modular/movable walls, it is an environment allowing for the predictable to coexist with the unpredictable; ape the Classical then suddenly break loose into variation to the point of unrecognizability; i.e., new, alien, and always as renewable as the occupant (artist/creator) desires—limited only by the occupant's pocketbook/imagination.

Hahaha.

The act of recording creativity in progress fixates it, depriving it, inevitably, of maximum emotional immediacy—yet, simultaneously freezing/encapsulating unspeakable fertility awaiting the thaw of proper receptivity and rebirth/recreation, etcetera.

If one defines art as memory, then Black music (or music infused with/infected by blackness) gives me *my* memory. And as much as I might enjoy/appreciate other musics, they cannot open the treasure box of my memory; they do not stimulate my “muse” nor do they provide me vision.

Not that the classics/Classical music is not beautiful; I would no more deny Bach's greatness than I would deny James Brown's—I shouldn't have to. But Bach does not give me back myself. He does not take me home. My home is no more Europe than Africa, though book figure in my heritage. Home is not the libraries, museums, offices or concert halls where I most often encountered this kind of music (cold stony environments). Classical music doesn't take me to any one of the dozens of funky little flesh-teeming joints where I struggled to escape poverty during my young womanhood. It cannot take me to the emotional peaks and valleys of Los Angeles' Black community from which I spring.

It does, however, evoke the superior attitudes of “across town”; of white school teachers, of librarians shushing me viciously with their index fingers, of stiffly stuffed gowns and tuxedos applauding politely,

of the blond blue-eyed Christ staring dazedly over his flock from the backs of pastel Sunday School cards. No matter how accomplished, how beautiful and true this music is, it evokes the *ugly lying* spectre of racism.

Thus the social consciousness of music becomes social memory. Poetry, too, is equally social memory/consciousness. Rhythms are the conduits of memory/linkages to time and place in the very real sense that they allow me, as a writer, to recreate the past in excruciating detail and clarity. To tap into and summon up that which might, otherwise, be lost forever.

Instantaneous dialog occurs between those who recognize the same or similar rhythmic history; as much as those who live through a particularly stormy or horrific historical event.

The poet hears the saxophonist. The poet may imitate the sax—the actual sounds made with words, may imitate the moves and sways of a particular saxophonist; may record the evocations made by that saxophonist at that moment; may describe the images and/or feelings/associations which arise. In the oral presentation of the poem, the poet may become/reveal all or any of the above thus bringing the communication to one sort of conclusion—adding or subtracting from the total experience given the mastery of his/her gift. Thus music becomes text.

When the poem itself is set to an actual music, as a lyric, or read to the accompaniment (improvised or rehearsed) of a sax before an audience, the process is brought full cycle to begin again.

The medium of music chrysalises the present allowing future access. The poet/writer may draw on it to release information, shape it creatively, rebirth/make it live and breathe with immediacy of just having happened (the poem) or reshape it as a social nourishment, a vital aspect of life as experience (the story). In this way *my* music gives me back *myself*.



My most private moment of musical love manifests itself as an orgasm.

### Conclusions

Fixation is death temporarily.

At a recent poetry reading featuring Black poets from the community of Watts, I listened rapt to their voices, which included my own. We were diverse in every respect, including economics. But after two solid hours our voices seemed to converge as though we were all writing/reading fragments of the same long poem/history.

Simply put, Theloniousism is the Jazz Principle applied to verse.

The perverse pursuit of THE NEW in the Dominant Culture (biological aspects aside) without full recognition of the ravages of racism/xenophobia upon its infrastructure, leads to creative bankruptcy; a circumstance/environment which allows THE BOGUS to seize power on all levels.

Literature is not only political, it is politics supremely—at its most vicious and most vigorous, and is, therefore, to be prized—utterly.

A Dominant Culture writer/poet can afford to play literary games, because, in doing so, the stakes, while extremely high, can be written off. Sooner or later there will be another game in which to indulge. But the Afro-American poet/writer gambles everything when he splits his psyche in order to win at this game. Should he/she achieve success, it is inevitably devalued by tokenism on the one hand, and a demand that the artist provide a solution to the burdens of racism on the other. To obtain (not to mention maintain) said success, the price is either death or relentless war. Death may take any form, the economic or the creative, the literal or the figurative. And if it is to be war, bittersweetly, it will be a war that even when won is automatically lost.