This course explores 20th century cultural history through the music, ideas, and image of pianist/composer Thelonious Monk. We are particularly interested in how Monk has been “constructed” by critics, fans, writers, visual artists, the music industry, the media, etc., and how Monk himself helped shape his public image. After all, Monk became a major icon for Beat generation poets, surrealist artists, and emerging avant garde jazz musicians, despite the fact that he neither identified nor engaged these creative artists directly. He was constantly reinvented by critics and fans, and many read deeply into his actions—from his “dancing” to the hats he wore. It is not enough to demythologize the man; we must also understand why the myths have been and remain so prevalent and what impact they have had on the postwar art scene.

We are equally interested in studying and understanding his musical ideas. His musical vision was both ahead of its time and deeply rooted in tradition, spanning the entire history of the music from sacred music of the black church to the “stride” masters of James P. Johnson and Willie “the Lion” Smith to the tonal freedom and kinetics of the “avant garde.” And he shares with Edward “Duke” Ellington the distinction of being considered one of the century’s greatest American composers. He helped usher in the bebop revolution, for example, and yet he also charted a new course for modern music few were willing to follow. In an era when fast, dense, virtuosic solos were the order of the day, Monk was famous for his use of space and silence. In addition to his unique phrasing and economy of notes, Monk would “lay out” pretty regularly, enabling his sidemen to experiment free of the piano’s fixed pitches. As a composer, Monk was less interested in writing new melodic lines over popular chord progressions than in creating a whole new architecture for his music, one in which harmony and rhythm melded seamlessly with the melody. “Everything I play is different,” Monk once explained, “different melody, different harmony, different structure. Each piece is different from the other. . . . [W]hen the song tells a story, when it gets a certain sound, then it’s through . . . completed.” Thus we will pay attention to his approach to composition, harmony, time and space (rhythm), ensemble work, and examine the whole question of piano “technique.” Although background in music is not required, some of you might want to read John F. Szwed, Jazz 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Jazz (New York: Hyperion, 2000) and perhaps basic music theory texts.

Sifting through a broad range of cultural materials, we examine how Monk has been “read” through his music, his body, his sartorial style, representations of black masculinity, and the prism of modernism. These “readings” of Monk mirror some of the social, cultural, and political upheavals of the postwar period. We will also examine the critical responses to Monk’s work and how it changes over time, asking whether or not the shifts in criticism to his
music had more to do with a changing political climate than with changes in his work. By paying attention to the music, we hope to reveal something of how Monk's presence affected the formation of jazz as a genre/tradition, just as his persona contributed greatly to the phenomenology of jazz experience as a whole.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to:

- Complete all the core readings.
- Lead at least one class discussion (this assignment will be determined by how many students enroll in the class).
- Maintain a weekly journal of your thoughts, reactions to the readings and the music we are listening to in and outside of class.
- A 10-15 page analysis/history of either: 1) a particular Monk composition you find deserving of analysis; 2) a literary, visual, or musical work by another artist about/for Monk, or that reflects a creative effort to incorporate Monk’s ideas into a work of art. The purpose of this assignment is to engage Monk’s work and/or influence in greater depth. Obviously, there is a lot of leeway here and if you come up with a project that doesn’t easily fall within these two broad categories, we can talk about it. However, whatever you choose to do you must 1) get approval from me; 2) focus on Thelonious Monk.

I assume you will attend every class meeting. If it is absolutely impossible to attend class one day, I expect a 3-5 page discussion paper of the week's core readings handed in to me the week following your absence.

Your contribution to class discussion as well as your papers should be constructive, substantive, and engaging. I am less impressed with scathing, vicious attacks than I am with thoughtful essays that pay more attention to the historical subjects than the author, and attempt to place a particular work in context.

REQUIRED READING/HEARING/VIEWING

Books


**Course Packet**

1. “Thelonious Assault” from Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones*


10. Valerie Wilmer, “Monk on Monk,” from Wilmer, *Jazz people*

11. Collection of Poetry for/about Monk


17. Chan Parker, *MyLife in E Flat* [excerpt], 20-57

18. Valerie Wilmer, “It Takes Two People to Confirm the Truth,” in *As Serious as Your Life* [excerpt], 191-204.


**Recordings**

*Thelonious Monk: Genius of Modern Music: Volume 1* (Blue Note CDP 7 81510 2)

*Thelonious Monk plays Duke Ellington* (Riverside OJCCD 2531-24-4)

*Brilliant Corners* (Riverside OJCCD -026-2)

*Monk’s Music* (Riverside OJCCD-084-2)

*Underground* (Columbia/CBS CK 40785)

**Video/Films**


Jazz Video Collection, *Thelonious Monk* [misc. concert performances, 1957-1970]


Bert Stern, *Jazz on a Summer’s Day* (1959)

WEEKLY TOPICS

Week 1: Introducing Monk . . .

“Thelonious Assault” from Art Taylor, Notes and Tones [course pack]

de Wilde, Monk, 1-13

Fitterling, Thelonious Monk, Preface, Foreword and Beginnings.


VIDEO: Performance from Jazz Video Collection, Thelonious Monk [1957 trio]

Week 2: Inventing Monk/Inventing Bop

de Wilde, Monk, 14-30.

Fitterling, Thelonious Monk, 30-47.

van der Bliek, Thelonious Monk Reader, 11-62

O’Meally, ed., The Jazz Cadence of American Culture, chapter 25, 26 and 28.

MUSIC: Minton’s recordings and various Blue Note recordings [study Genius of Modern Music: vol. I]

Week 3: Hearing Monk I: Time and Space


Fitterling, Thelonious Monk, 168-188.

de Wilde, Monk, 31-45, 117-70.


O’Meally, ed., The Jazz Cadence of American Culture, chapters 2, 3, 5, 6 and 17.

VIDEO: Performances from Jazz Video Collection, Thelonious Monk; excerpts from Straight, No Chaser and Thelonious Monk: American Composer
MUSIC: Monk’s Music and misc. examples

**Week 4: Hearing Monk II: Composition and Sound/Ellington and the Blues**


de Wilde, *Monk*, 85-100


van derBlick, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 203-223, 246-278.


**MUSIC: Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington and Brilliant Corners.**

**Week 5: Digging Monk: On Beats, Bohemia and the Five Spot [FIRST HOUR]**

Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, [coursepack]


Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness,” [coursepack]

Jack Kerouac, “The Beginning of Bop,” *Escapade* [coursepack]


van derBlick, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 111-112

**MUSIC: Will bring examples of Monk/Coltrane at the Five Spot**

**Writing Monk I: Poets and Novelists at the Altar [SECOND HOUR]**

Misc. Poems [course packet]


**MUSIC:** Amiri Baraka and Jayne Cortez recorded performances [to be determined]

**Week 6: E-Raceing Monk: Thelonious Plays the Politics of the 1960s**


Valerie Wilmer, “Monk on Monk,” from Wilmer, *Jazz people* [excerpt]


**VIDEO:** *Lift the Bandstand: Steve Lacy*

**MUSIC:** *Underground* and will bring examples of Lacy/Rudd/Archie Shepp/Dolphy and others interpreting Monk’s music

**Week 7: Writing Monk II: The Politics of Jazz Criticism**

van der Biek, *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, 63-70, 84-109, 113-181


George Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950”

**SPECIAL GUEST:** Nat Hentoff

**Week 8: NO CLASS [Will have screening of Monk films this week, TBA]**

**Week 9: Seeing Monk/Seeing Jazz**


**VIDEO**: *Straight, No Chaser; Thelonious Monk: American Composer; Jazz on Summer’s Day* [excerpt] All of these will be shown on a separate day TBA.

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**Week 10: Monk in Motion: Exploring Dance in Jazz**


**VIDEO**: Segments from Thomas DeFrantz, *Monk’s Mood: A Performance/Meditation on the Life and Music of Thelonious Monk; Thelonious Monk: American Composer and Straight, No Chaser*.

**SPECIAL GUEST**: TBA

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**Week 11: Reproducing Monk: Musical Labor, Patronage and Women’s Unwaged Work**

de Wilde, *Monk*, 46-62

Chan Parker, *MyLife in E Flat*, [excerpt], 20-57

Gourse, *Straight No Chaser*, 70-82.


Valerie Wilmer, “It Takes Two People to Confirm the Truth,” in *As Serious as Your Life* [excerpt], 191-204.


**VIDEO**: Segments from *Straight, No Chaser*

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**Week 12: Selling Monk: Race and the Political Economy of Jazz**


O’Meally, ed., The Jazz Cadence of American Culture, chapter 23

**Week 13: Coda: Monk after Death**

de Wilde, Monk, 196-214

Fitterling, Thelonious Monk, 89-95, 213-223.

**MUSIC:** Monk and the Giants of Jazz tour; Various examples of tribute albums. . . .

**SPECIAL GUEST:** T. S. Monk, Jr.