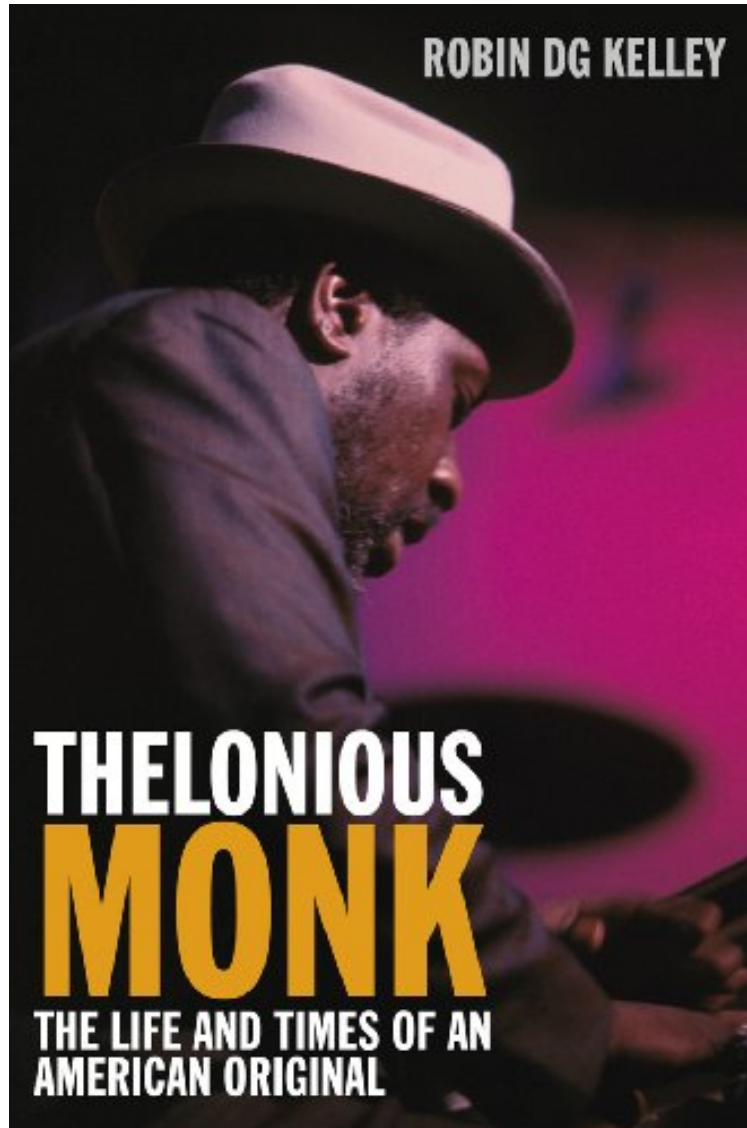


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# Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original

*Robin DG Kelley*

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**Robin DG Kelley : Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Bright light shining on a cornerstone of modern jazzBy Eric SedenskyThelonious Monk is one of those jazz icons whose legend precedes him in almost every discussion. It is all the more to Robin credit that he has constructed such a thorough and eye-opening biography as this. This book strips away many of the myths surrounding Monk and the advent of bebop and the avant-garde in jazz, but without dismissing any story or factoid out of hand without at least looking for the kernel of truth from which the plant of

hyperbole must have sprouted. The result is an interesting read that explores both jazz and jazz history, but also some history of America and the evolution of music, the music business, and the country in general. But what makes the book so readable for me is the even handedness of the author. The book is at times, excruciatingly detailed, making Monk's life look just a little bleaker and darker than we might want to know about. Although each chapter starts with a quote from Monk that gets illuminated in the pages to follow, I'm sure the author had to fight the urge to give every chapter the exact same title, which would have been, "The next bad thing that happened to Monk was..."; It really seems that for most of his life, Thelonious just couldn't catch a break. Sure plenty of good stuff happened between the insane asylum and prison terms, and there were probably a lot more successful jazz club engagements than there were firings, prohibitions, and not infrequent occasions of ostracizing, but it sure seems that Monk had a harder time bringing his music to the public than most other musicians of the time. The fact that he actually succeeded makes the reading all the more rewarding. Thankfully, this book excels at not dwelling on the misery by always harking back to the music. Each chapter is filled with insight, exploration, and history of recording sessions, studios, producers, backing musicians, song writing, improvisation, performances, club owners, record companies, musicians' unions, musical folklore, and everything musical. For me, it is refreshing to know that talented musicians often felt the same way I do about some of Monk's pieces, like when they proclaim that a piece is "unplayable"; or that Monk was uninspired and spiteful for composing the way he did. Once you read about the logic of Monk and the epiphanies of the other musicians, it becomes possible to take heart and really enjoy, and even learn from, Monk's music. Personally, as a jazz pianist who only took up the piano a few years ago as a hobby, I admit to having mostly stayed away from playing Monk's music, even though I love listening to it. This was partly to avoid frustration, and partly because I didn't understand it. Not that I understand it a little more, I find it isn't as frustrating and in fact, there is a certain joy in undertaking the challenge, knowing that if I can do Monk's music justice, there isn't much else that can get in my way. It gives me the feeling that now that I have gotten a look under the hood, I'm ready to drive the Thelonious car, and I have this five star jazz biography to thank.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. As good a biography as it gets. By Steve This is one of the finest biographies ever written. If you thought that you knew pretty much all you needed to know about Thelonious, get this superb book. It gives a very detailed account of his life. Most of it was pretty tragic. A collector like me thought of the excellent albums for Prestige, Riverside, Columbia, Black Lion, etc. and never really thought about what life was like for Thelonious. During nearly all of the 40s and 50s, it was a terrible struggle for him, and he had a wife and two small children to support. This book covers all of that, and also brings out what a loving family Monk and his relatives were. And, of course, the rebellious Rothschild, Pannonica, was always there for them, starting in 1954. America sure treats its jazz musicians badly, and the racism has been appalling. As an example, Pannonica was driving Monk to a gig in D.C. in the late 50s, and Monk asked her to stop at a hotel in Delaware, to get a drink of water. Immediately, cops were called, and they searched Pannonica's Bentley without a warrant and found one spliff. They were both arrested for this heinous crime. Pannonica took the rap for it, and the court case dragged on for ages. She was nearly jailed for a year! All of this trouble arose because a black man went into a hotel lobby to ask for a drink of water. I am not the perfect reviewer, but I hope that this has given you a taste of what this book is like. I almost felt that I was hanging out with the Monks, while I was reading it. I saw him live in 1971, when he toured with the "Giants Of Jazz". I am a saxophone player, and I wish I could have played with him. I am certain that I would have gotten on well with him. Get the book!

72 of 74 people found the following review helpful. Monk in perspective By a musician If you're interested in jazz, post war urban American history or just enjoy reading well written biographies...buy this book. Deftly written, extremely well researched and highly readable this book is a great achievement. Being a professional musician I have read many music bios (jazz and otherwise) and this ranks among the best. Robin Kelley clearly has a love for his subject and as an amateur pianist he writes intelligently about Monk and his music. But don't expect this book to be an academic bore. His detailed account of Monk, his circle of musician friends and the clubs he played made me feel like I was there. I could smell the cigarette smoke and hear the jam sessions at Minton's and feel the atmosphere of the San Juan Hill neighborhood where Monk grew up and lived for so many years. You'll find yourself in the back of a TV repair shop where pianists (known and unknown) jammed and shared ideas and eavesdrop on rehearsals at Monk's apartment and Hall Overton's loft...and so much more. Kelley had unprecedented access to the Monk family archives and in every step of the book it shows. But more importantly Kelley is a great writer that weaves the details into a saga of post war African American life. Perhaps most importantly, Kelley debunks the myth of Monk as some sort of idiot savant or "noble savage" that inherited his genius by osmosis. Monk worked damn hard to create his art and Kelly takes you along every step of the way. Poignant, funny, sad and triumphant this book's got it all covered. Do yourself a favor and check it out. "Two is one and one is two".

With his trademark goatee, dark glasses, and hat, Thelonious Monk is an image of coolness. Jazz fans revere Monk for his groundbreaking compositions and piano playing from the 1950s and 1960s, but to a wider audience he stands for something much bigger: the idea of native genius; a quirky, absent-minded, unalloyed originality that is the perfect

symbol of the undefinable essence of jazz. The man behind the mystique is now more interesting and edifying, thanks to extraordinary, unprecedented access to Monk's closest friends and family, his private papers, and hours of audiotapes of Monk himself. Monk's musical and cultural education blended together the key strands of African-American music traditions: from church hymns, to ecstatic stomping and call-and-response, to the blues. When he put it together with the Kansas City and New York dancehall music of swing, he reached a cultural apex unlike anyone before or after him. A husband and father, Monk moved in with an aristocratic Dutch hipster known as 'the Jazz Baroness,' a key, strange patron of modern jazz. He continued to compose subtle, deceptively simple-sounding classics, while descending into depression and erratic behaviour. A once-energetic, joking, handsome young man grew into a tortured artist, and the Monk mystique took hold. Now Kelley reveals that this talented musician was in fact a much more complex and interesting figure than his image would suggest. A fascinating biography, not just for Monk and jazz fans, but for those interested in the fragile spirit of human nature.

From Publishers Weekly Elusive, mysterious, strange, eccentric, weird, genius—the legend of jazz pianist Thelonious Monk began early in his career, propagated by supporters and detractors in equal measure. Kelley (Race Rebels) breaks down the mythology, taking great pains to establish, for example, that Monk, far from being an untutored savant, was intimately familiar with classical and popular music. Every step of Monk's musical journey is teased out in meticulous detail, from his childhood piano lessons to his groundbreaking half-year run headlining at New York's Five Spot, along with behind-the-scenes stories from the recording sessions for classic albums like Brilliant Corners and Monk's Music. Kelley also explains Monk's most notorious behaviors—stony silences when confronted in public, exuberant dancing during concerts—as the outward signs of a bipolar disorder that went unrecognized for much of his life, with immeasurable impact on his career. (He was often unable to even play in New York jazz clubs because his reputation precluded him from getting a work license from city authorities.) Sometimes, the sheer amount of information can be overwhelming, but whether he's charting the highs or lows of Monk's emotional swings, Kelley rarely strays from his central theme of an extraordinary talent pushing against the boundaries of his art. (Oct.) Copyright copy; Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "Monk's story, from roots in slavery, to the Great Migration north, to the cultural explosions of the 40s, 50s, and 60s, encapsulates a vivid tableau of twentieth-century American life and music. This biography is, at its best, a fitting tribute to one of America's most original and lasting creative geniuses." —The Sacramento Book "...extraordinary and heroically detailed... I doubt there will be a biography anytime soon that is as textured, thorough and knowing as Kelley's. The 'genius of modern music' has gotten the passionatenbsp;and compassionatenbsp;advocate he deserves." nbsp; —August Kleinzahler, nbsp;The New York Times Book "An omnibus of myth busting." —Ben Ratliff, nbsp;The New York Times "...a massive and impressive undertaking... Thoroughly researched, meticulously footnoted, and beautifully crafted, Thelonious Monk nbsp;presents the most complete, most revealing portrait ever assembled of the man known as the high priest of bebop." —Steve Greenlee, The Boston Globe "Every step of Monk's musical journey is teased out in meticulous detail... whether he's charting the highs or lows of Monk's emotional swings, Kelley rarely strays from his central theme of an extraordinary talent pushing against the boundaries of his art." —Publishers Weekly "A wealth of historical context is richly studded with details of Monk's family background and the broader world in which he lived and worked... Likely the most thorough possible illumination of the man behind the legend." —Library Journal "Thelonious Monk was a true originalhellip; This affectionate biography fills in the fascinating and heart-wrenching backstory of an artist the world has always longed to know better." —The Christian Science Monitor "Robin D. G. Kelleysquo;s exhaustive, necessary, and as of now definitive [book] offers a Baedeker of sortshellip; Kelley has created a lush portrait of the private, off-camera Monk, one it would have been difficult to paint without the unprecedented access he had to the Monk family." —David Yaffe, The Nation "This is an authoritative tome that pulls aside, without completely lifting, the shroud of mystery that has long surrounded one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of jazz." —Russ Musto, AllAboutJazz.com "hellip; as complete a picture of this complex, original and enigmatic artist as possiblehellip; this very welcome book is certain to be a go-to reference." —Down Beat Magazine "A seminal examination of the man and his music." —Bay State Banner "Kelley hopes to balance Monk's brilliance and historic achievements with his quirks and serious problems (bipolar disorder) to take the true measure of the man. Dedicated readers of jazz history and students of Cold War and Civil Rights Era culture won't be disappointed." —The New Haven Advocate "Robin Kelley's new biography Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original is a breath of fresh air among the biographies of our legendary jazz musicians. This book is thorough, detailed, and written with a true affinity for Monk's humaneness and creative musical output. It fills in the missing pieces about the growth of the jazz scene in New York through the forties, fifties, and sixties, detailing each step of Monk's development— who passed through his bands, what gigs he played, and what happened on those scenes. It's an invaluable and close look at the center of the world's most important creative musical developments in those decades: New York City." —Chick Corea, the Grammy-winning composer and pianist "Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original is one of the most anticipated books in jazz scholarship, and well worth

the wait. Robin D. G. Kelley represents one of this generation's most important voices equipped with the knowledge, passion, and respect for both jazz and jazz musicians required to interpret the many details and nuances of Thelonious Monk's life. This compelling book will both challenge old assumptions and inspire new assessments of the life and legacy one of the world's greatest musicians." mdash;GERI ALLEN, pianist, composer, and Director of the Jazz Studies Department at the University of Pittsburgh"Powerful, enraging, and enduring.... In Robin Kelley's finely grained and surely definitive life and-times study, Thelonious Monk, an American original, has found an original biographer." mdash;DAVID LEVERING LEWIS, biographer of W. E. B. Du Bois and Pulitzer Prize winner"An honest and eloquent treatment of one of our most important artists, Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original is a stunning tour de force! It is the most comprehensive treatment of Monk's life to date. Furthermore, in Monk's story, Kelley has found the perfect medium to shed light on a nation'snbsp;and a people'snbsp;history and persistent quest for freedom. In so doing he has given us a book that is as bold, brilliant, and beautiful as Monk and his music." mdash;FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN, author of *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*About the AuthorRobin D.G. Kelley is a professor of history and American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California. From 2003-2006, he was the William B. Ransford Professor of Cultural and Historical Studies at Columbia Univeristy. From 1994-2003, he was a professor of history and Africannbsp;Studies at New York Universitynbsp;as well the chairman of NYU's history department from 2002-2003. One of the youngest tenured professors in a full academic discipline--at the age of 32--Kelley has spent most of his career exploring American and African-American history with a particular emphasis on African-American musical culture, including jazz and hip-hop.