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Leah Reinardy
Hope College

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Neither “Mad Genius” Nor “Man-Child”: Reframing Popular Discourse Around Thelonious Monk’s Music and Madness



Leah Reinardy

ABSTRACT

The field of Disability Studies has only begun to intersect with scholarship in music theory and musicology in the last two decades. Mad Studies, a subfield of Disability Studies, reframes Madness as a sociocultural identity instead of individualizing it as “mental illness”. Joseph Straus categorizes commentary on Mad musicians based on the binary of the medical and sociocultural models of disability. These categories are all based in the medical model and are based on the degree of correlation between a composer’s music and Madness. While these categories are useful to explore common tropes such as the “mad genius” or the “tortured artist”, they do not fully address the systems of oppression that impacted the lives and music of twentieth-century Mad jazz musicians. Jazz pianist Thelonious Monk was famous for his dissonant, playful musical and personal aesthetic. **Popular narratives around this aesthetic have focused on Monk as either a “mad genius” or a “man-child”.** Monk’s ballad “Crepuscule with Nellie” directly undermines both of these narratives by serving as a serious, expressive, and realized piece of art. The analysis of this piece embedded within the context of popular media confronts typical stereotypes of Monk with thoughtfully rendered artistic statements.

CONTEXT

The medical model, a viewpoint that gained popularity in the mid-1800s, categorizes people into “normal” and “abnormal,” labeling Mad individuals as abnormal. The sociocultural model views Madness as a social construct and the societal stigma around Madness as the primary issue the Mad individual faces.

In addition to the lack of sleep, intense tour schedules, and substance abuse of mid-1900s jazz culture, Black jazz musicians navigated systemic racism. They faced segregation in predominantly-white jazz clubs, difficulties finding housing on tour, and police brutality. All New York City musicians were required to hold a cabaret card; it was a work permit that was used as a tool of control by the police.

Monk had numerous encounters with law enforcement; most of these led to his eventual psychiatric hospitalization. He was repeatedly misdiagnosed and prescribed “treatments” that included amphetamine shots and antipsychotic medications.



Above: Thelonious Monk dances next to the piano during a 1966 performance at the Cambridge Union Debating Center in the United Kingdom. Photographs and videos of Monk dancing onstage are often cited by journalists, music critics, biographers, and Monk aficionados when discussing his Madness. (Photo courtesy of the UK National Jazz Archive and Heritage Images.)

Below: The first A section of Monk’s ballad “Crepuscule with Nellie” (transcribed by Michael McClimon). The initial motive in the first blue rectangle is transposed and inverted throughout this section, highlighting the degree of realization of this piece.



Scan to download the full paper, view the bibliography, and listen to “Crepuscule with Nellie.”

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MONK: “MAD GENIUS” OR “MAN-CHILD”?

Monk was frequently hailed as a musical “visionary”, and his predominantly-rhythmic style of composing and arranging deviated from the long, melodic lines of his bebop contemporaries. A “mad genius” is seen as an artist who possesses levels of cognition and emotion inaccessible to the common person; this label distances Monk from his audience and makes his music less accessible.

Audiences found the angular melodies and dissonant harmonies of Monk’s music to be playful; this musical aesthetic led to the emergence of rhetoric calling Monk a “man-child”. A 1964 TIME Magazine article and the 1988 documentary *Straight, No Chaser* highlight anecdotes of Monk dancing onstage, wandering around New York City, and relying on his wife, Nellie, to handle business and household duties. This stereotype not only stigmatizes Madness but subjugates jazz and Black American music, positioning it as “low art” below the “high art” of predominantly-white, Western classical music.

This analysis cannot prove that Monk’s music and Madness were connected but demonstrates that twentieth-century society perceived them to be. Popular media plays an important role in amplifying musicians’ stories and works. While much of this media was sensationalized, it played a large role in bringing Monk onto the mainstream jazz scene. This benefitted Monk financially but also continues to open a broader discussion about how society remembers artists beyond their lifetimes.

“CREPUSCULE WITH NELLIE”

Unlike most Thelonious Monk tunes, “Crepuscule with Nellie” contains no improvisation; the head is simply repeated multiple times. This demonstrates the high degree of control Monk wanted to have over the music.

In addition to inverting and transposing the opening motive of the piece, Monk uses weight, space, and chromaticism to evoke a sense of seriousness in the listener. The music itself is somber, controlled, and approachable; this is in stark contrast to the perception of Monk as “out of control”. Studying live performances and recordings of Mad musicians provides more depth beyond the sensationalized anecdotes common in popular media.