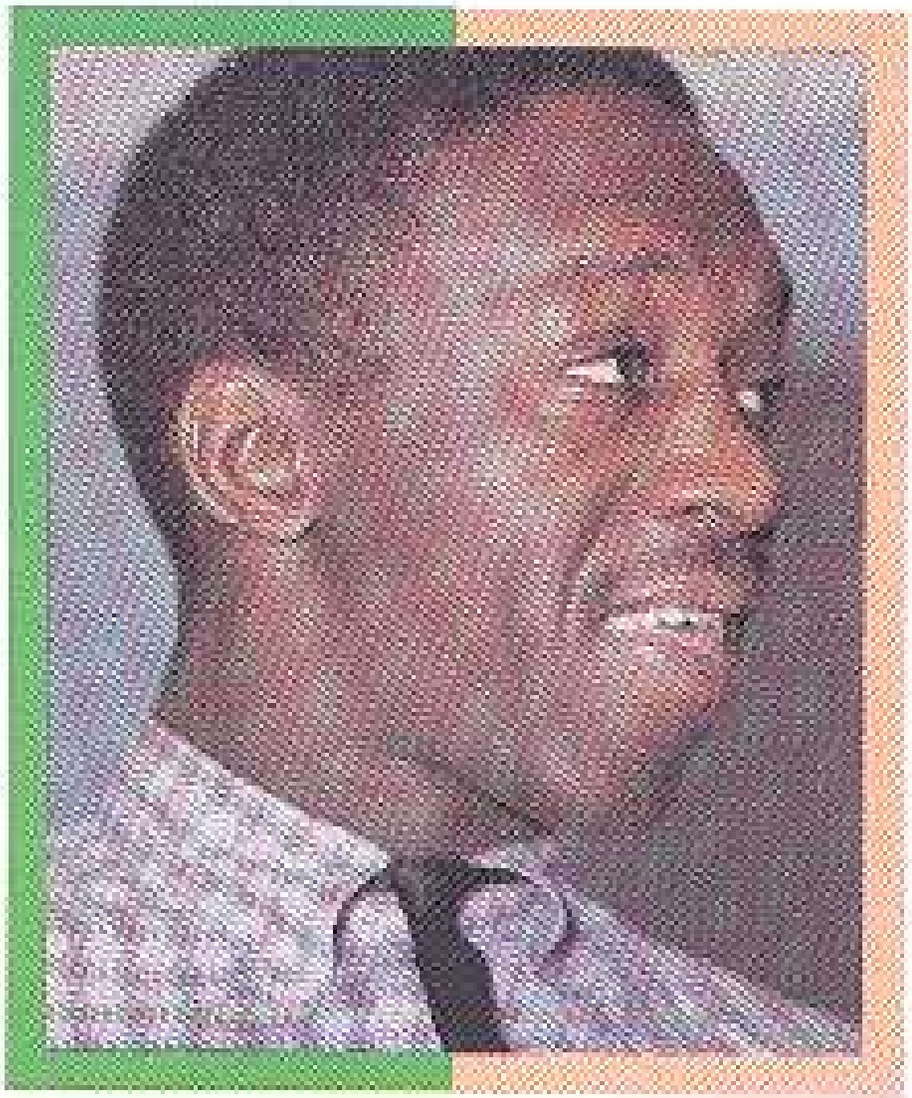
ART BLAKEY'S JAZZ MESSENGERS WITH THELONIOUS MONK





I think that this collaboration of Art Blakey's group and Thelonious Monk dramatizes important events in jazz in the late 1950's for, although each man has been heard from for years, each has recently been listened to probably more attentively than ever before, and each is a man in whose work we see jazz doing what it must do as a music with an identity of its own—finding, not borrowing, its way by developing the implicit possibilities in the materials which are its substance.

Now that the "cool" conception of the early fifties has ceased to be a fad, it should be clear which of its arrangers, its instrumentalists, and its groups have been and are capable of genuine creativity within that idiom, and of exploring it further, and which are capable only of a kind of derivative hack-work. The fashion as such has passed and the real artists and craftsmen can be counted.

When the pendulum swung, it swung almost violently, and the style it swung to soon acquired a name or two: "funky" and "hard Bop." Art Blakey has led groups of messengers for years, but the group he introduced in 1954 proclaimed the "funky" style. These men wanted to incorporate as much of the quality, as well as the devices, of blues and church music in their playing as they could. Inevitably, they were called regressive and even crude, but their conception was actually neither *naif* nor reactionary. It implied that if jazz got too far from the kinds of music in its background, it might not only be in danger of a contrivance and preciosity, but of losing something essential—indeed, even of losing its identity. Such an attitude is not merely conservative, and the style not for another reason: as I have indicated above, I think it is bringing about some stylistic changes in jazz. (For a precedent, we can remember how the dominance of the almost classic ragtime conception at the turn of the century was supplanted by what has been called a "blues craze," and how a combination of elements of these two was worked out in New Orleans.)

Some of Blakey's earliest records were made with Thelonious Monk and the two collaborate excellently. It has been said of Blakey that he took the bop style and reduced it to its elements. When such a thing happens, one had better be watching for changes.

The bop drummer both simplified his basic accompaniment and expanded it by adding to it a spontaneous series of accents and replies to the soloist's improvisations, with bass "explosions," snare and cymbal strokes, etc.

Listen to Blakey behind Bill Hardman's trumpet solo on *I Mean You.* Clearly he not only accompanies but directly leads the trumpet into ideas and motifs. It is a dangerous role for a drummer, demanding constant discretion and sympathy with the soloist. The second change is illustrated in some of Blakey's solos: probably more directly than any other drummer, Blakey saw the possibility of sustaining polyrhythmic lines and he can keep several rhythms going with an unusual kind of continuity. But the most important point for me is the one we can hear illustrated by what he does on the opening chorus of *I Mean You.* He carries the accompanying 4/4 pulse, but, at the same time, he improvises a parallel percussive line which interplays with both the melody and the fundamental time: the jazz drummer becomes an improvising percussionist on a plane almost equal to that of the horns.

Rhythm is fundamental to jazz and if one develops its role soundly, one develops jazz along the way that its own nature implies that it should go. Such an obvious thing, and yet how brilliant. In the forties, Paul Bacon, probably the only American critic who understood Thelonious Monk, said of him in *The Record Changer* that he had looked at jazz, seen the gaps and, sacrificing the obvious things that everyone could do, proceeded to fill in those gaps. The same kind of thing might be said of Art Blakey.

Almost anyone knows that Monk is supposed to have been one of the founders of bop. Undoubtedly he made important contributions to the style, but it should be clear by now that what this strikingly original musician has been working on all along is something different.

Monk is a virtuoso of time, rhythm, metre, accent. He has played versions of "standards" which are little more than sets of unique rhythmic-variations directly on a melodic line, with an evolving pattern of displaced accents and shifting metres—a conception at once more basic than the groups of melodic variations Jelly Roll Morton, James P. Johnson, and Fats Waller produced, and more "experimental" than the harmonic variations, which improvise new melodic lines, of the late swing and bop instrumentalists. At the same time, he may play melodic variations, and his solo here on *In Walked Bud* interplays the melodic line of that piece with contrasting motifs. And notice his rhythmic and harmonic experiments with the sparsely suggestive and obviously difficult tissue of notes that is *Evidence,* both in his own solo and behind Johnny Griffin's.

Monk's harmonies, always a part of the picture, are not innovations in themselves—it is the sequence and

pattern of alteration in which he plays them that is unique. In this and in simultaneous accentual shiftings, there is an almost constant element of humor (even sarcasm) that his wonderful, deliberate dissonances often point up.

Monk also plays harmonic variations, and these may seem quite simple, even casual, on the surface. His two choruses here on *I Mean You* show the kind of inner logic they can have. The first chorus is based on a descending motif variously altered. The second on a brief and contrasting riff figure which is turned several ways, subjected to a counter-riff or two and, in the end, complemented by a descent which alludes to the first chorus and ties the two together. And, lest anyone doubt that Monk can improvise a lyric melody, let him hear the solo on *Blue Monk.*

Monk's style, like Lester Young's in the late thirties, depends on surprise. It does not, like the work of earlier "stride" pianists (yes, Monk, like Count Basie, is really a member of that school) depend on the expected. He can also be one of the most exciting and original accompanists in jazz, as his work behind Bill Hardman on *I Mean You,* both horns on *Rhythm-a-ning,* and behind Griffin on *Purple Shades* illustrates. The latter example seems to me one of the best things I have ever heard him do on records and, notice also that both his solo and his accompaniment on that piece are based on similar ideas and patterns, giving that performance a fine continuity.

I think that on the whole, Monk's compositions place him with the great jazz composers, but I will confine myself to a few points which the selections here illustrate. Whereas Ellington often leans heavily on the "show tune" tradition, Monk is more directly instrumental in his conception, even when he uses the 32-bar, A A B A popular tune form. Monk, himself, has made the point about the integation of the B, bridge, melody; notice that the bridges of *I Mean You* and of *In Walked Bud* are both developments of bits of the final phrase in the A melody. It is not Monk's habit to base his compositions on "standard" chord sequences, but he may, and three of the tunes here do use slight alterations of base lines we all know. That is almost bound to be true of any 12-bar blues, of course, but notice the structure of *Blue Monk*'s melody. Most blues have an open space of about three beats at the end of each four-bar unit. There are "modern" blues which deliberately fill this hole, of course, but the deceptive simplicity with which this melody unfolds makes for neither a trick nor a contrivance, but an inevitability that flows like life.

Monk does indeed "fill in the gaps."

MARTIN WILLIAMS

1. **EVIDENCE** *(6:46)*

2. **IN WALKED BUD** *(6:37)*

3. **BLUE MONK** *(7:56)*

4. **I MEAN YOU** *(7:58)*

5. **RHYTHM-A-NING** *(7:21)*

6. **PURPLE SHADES** *(7:48)*

Art Blakey, *Drums*

Thelonious Monk, *Piano*

Johnny Griffin, *Tenor Sax*

Bill Hardman, *Trumpet*

Spanky DeBrest, *Bass*

All songs written by Thelonious Monk
except *Purple Shades* written by Johnny Griffin.
Thelonious Monk appears by arrangement with Riverside Records
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