

ARTS615
Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus: The Cutting Edge of Jazz

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SYLLABUS

Overview

Pianist Thelonious Monk (1917-1982) and bassist Charles Mingus (1922-1979) defined the cutting edge in jazz in the aftermath of the bebop movement in the 1940s. Both men had unique styles as players and both eventually became even better known for their composing and, in some circles, their personalities. Both created music that was influential yet controversial, being embraced heartily by some and rejected by others, before eventually being accepted into the jazz mainstream. Ultimately, their music and careers evolved quite differently.

In this course we will examine both musicians in depth. We will study their lives, their unusual personalities and, most of all, their music. We will explore the full trajectory of each man's career and development, learning about the elements that made up their styles as players, composers and bandleaders at different stages along the way. Along the way we will touch on the music of numerous other jazz legends with whom their paths crossed, such as Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis. We will also put the contributions of Monk and Mingus into the broader context of jazz history, including an examination of how contemporary jazz has assimilated their innovations.

Sound recordings will be the primary source material for this course, with some video footage. At-home studies of recordings will include the compilation albums *Ken Burns Jazz* by Monk and *The Very Best of Charles Mingus* (which you may buy as CDs or digital downloads), as well as 42 songs available online through iTunes (more information later in syllabus). We will also read the books *Mingus: A Critical Biography* by Brian Priestley and *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* by Robin Kelley.

Grades:

Class Participation: 10%
Weekly "Reflections": 25%
Comparative Essays: 45% (15% per essay)
Final Project: 20%

Attendance Policy:

You are strongly encouraged to attend every class. While there are no specific penalties for missing a class (aside from “zero” grades for that day’s class participation, which can add up), it is unlikely that any student who misses class with any frequency will be able to succeed. With significant emphasis on listening to recordings (including many not available on iTunes), the information and perspective presented in class will be very important. If you must miss class, it is your responsibility to submit that week’s assignment on time and to catch up on any missed information. You are encouraged to find at least one “buddy” who can share notes with you and/or record the class if you should miss one. Assignments handed in late will be lowered by one letter grade per class session.

Assignments:

This is only a brief overview. More details on these assignments can be found in the “Assignment Addendum.”

- Weekly “Reflections”: Before each class session you will be asked to write and submit (on the Discussion Boards on Moodle) brief reflections on what struck you in the week’s music and readings. This is a fairly informal assignment, and the highest six grades (out of eight reflections, since none will be due on the first or last class) will be averaged at the end of the term.
- Comparative Essays: Each of these essays will compare two assigned pieces of music, picking apart the various elements that make up each performance. The “optional, ungraded essay” assigned early in the semester allows you to pick two songs of your choice (not necessarily from this course) and write analyze in this way to get feedback about whether you are on the right track in anticipation of the graded essays.
- Final Project: This will be an in-depth examination of a specific topic relating to Monk and/or Mingus. There will be an ongoing dialogue between professor and student to explore, find and narrow down an appropriate topic. It will take the form of a written essay along with a brief in-class presentation in which you will share a summary of your findings.

Week-By-Week Overview with Assignments

Note that all assignments are due on the class dates under which they are listed. For more information about specific assignments, including each week's listening selections, see the separate *Assignment Addendum*.

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June 29 – Course Introduction; How Jazz Works; Jazz Before Monk and Mingus

Reading:

Priestly chapter 1; Kelley Chapters 1-7

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July 1 – Early Days: Monk and Mingus in the 1940s

Optional non-graded essay: follow format of Comparative Essay, but choose your own topic – pick 2 songs you like that have something in common. Do this if you want feedback on your analytical writing before the graded essays begin.

Listening:

- * “On the Bean” by Coleman Hawkins with Thelonious Monk
- * “Thelonious” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Well You Needn’t” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Round Midnight” by Thelonious Monk (version from *Complete Blue Note Recordings*)
- * “Epistrophy” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Misterioso” by Thelonious Monk
- * “This Subdues My Passion” by Charles Mingus
- * “Mingus Fingers” by Lionel Hampton
- * “Godchild” by Red Norvo

Reading:

Priestly chapter 2; Kelley Chapters 8-10

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July 6 – Monk Develops

Research local libraries with collections of recordings

Begin email dialogue about final project topics

Listening:

- * “Bloomdido” by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie
- * “Straight No Chaser” by Thelonious Monk

- * “Four in One” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Let’s Cool One” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Bye-Ya” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Let’s Call This” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Blue Monk” by Thelonious Monk (Ken Burns Jazz version)
- * “Round Midnight” by Miles Davis (Happy Birthday Newport version)

Reading:

Kelley chapter 11-14

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July 8 – Mingus Develops

Comparative Essay #1: Compare Thelonious Monk’s recordings of “Well You Needn’t” and “Blue Monk” (*Ken Burns Jazz* version)

Listening:

- * “Portrait” by Charles Mingus
- * “Wee” by “the Quintet”
- * “Smooch” by Miles Davis
- * “Gregarian Chant” by Charles Mingus
- * “Jump Monk” by Charles Mingus
- * “Pithecanthropus Erectus” by Charles Mingus
- * “Profile of Jackie” by Charles Mingus
- * “Tonight at Noon” by Charles Mingus
- * “Haitian Fight Song” by Charles Mingus
- * “Reincarnation of a Lovebird” by Charles Mingus
- * “Celia” by Charles Mingus
- * “Consider Me” by Charles Mingus and Langston Hughes

Reading:

Priestly chapter 3-4

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July 13 – Monk Establishes Himself

Initial Final Project Proposal (can be submitted in person or via email)

Listening:

- * “It Don’t Mean a Thing” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Brilliant Corners” by Thelonious Monk
- * “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance” by Thelonious Monk

- * “Ruby My Dear” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Trinkle, Tinkle” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Coming on the Hudson” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Off Minor” by Thelonious Monk

Reading:

Kelley chapters 15-20

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July 15 – Mingus Establishes Himself

Comparative Essay #2: Compare Charles Mingus’ recordings of “Jump Monk” and “Haitian Fight Song”

Listening:

- * “Moanin’” by Charles Mingus
- * “Cryin’ Blues” by Charles Mingus
- * “Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting” by Charles Mingus
- * “Better Git It In Your Soul” by Charles Mingus
- * “Fables of Faubus” by Charles Mingus
- * “Goodbye Porkpie Hat” by Charles Mingus
- * “Original Faubus Fables” by Charles Mingus
- * “Ecclusiastics” by Charles Mingus
- * “Passions of A Man” by Charles Mingus
- * “Wham Bam Thank You Ma’am” by Charles Mingus
- * “Fleurette Africaine” by Duke Ellington

Reading:

Priestly chapters 5-6

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July 20 – Monk: the Later Years

Revised/Refined Final Project Proposal (can be submitted in person or via email)

Listening:

- * “San Francisco Holiday (Worry Later)” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Rhythm-a-Ning” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Criss Cross” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Green Chimneys” by Thelonious Monk
- * “In Walked Bud” by Thelonious Monk
- * “Round Midnight” by Thelonious Monk (Ken Burns Jazz version)

- * “Blue Monk” by Thelonious Monk (Monk’s Blues version)
- * “Nice Work If You Can Get It” by Thelonious Monk

Reading:

Kelley chapter 21-28

July 22 – Mingus: the Later Years

Comparative Essay #3: Compare “Moanin” by Charles Mingus to “Green Chimneys” by Thelonious Monk

Listening:

- * “Solo Dancer” by Charles Mingus
- * “The Chill of Death” by Charles Mingus
- * “Remember Rockefeller At Attica” by Charles Mingus
- * “Carolyn ‘Keikki’ Mingus” by Lionel Hampton and Charles Mingus

Reading:

Priestly chapters 7-9

July 27 – The Enduring Influence of Monk and Mingus

Listening:

- * “Off Minor / Epistrophy” by Kronos Quartet with Ron Carter
- * “Scratch” by Sphere
- * “Monking” by Charles Davis with Barry Harris
- * “Green Chimneys” by Ben Riley
- * “Mingus Metamorphosis” by George Adams and Don Pullen
- * “Goodbye Porkpie Hat” by Joni Mitchell
- * “Open Letter to Duke” by the Mingus Big Band

Reading:

Priestly chapter 10, Kelley chapter 29

July 29 - Final Project Summaries

Final Project due for all students, with short oral summaries.

Note: with paper, please include instructions for return of paper. Options include:

- Provide a SASE with the paper
- Request that the paper be left at the GLSP office for you
- Request that your grade and general comments about the paper be emailed to you, with the paper itself to be recycled
- None of the above, simply await your final grade

Listening to Music

Jazz is primarily an aural tradition. As such, the ability to hear things is the foremost tool we use in understanding the music. Most of our class time will be devoted to listening.

Some notes about listening assignments:

- Absorbing and understanding music can't be "crammed," whether you are playing it or listening to it. It is a process that must take place over a period of time. Please take that into consideration when pacing your studying and listening – smaller but frequent "chunks" of listening tend to work better than concentrated "cramming sessions" before class (or the night before a paper is due), and your work will bear witness to this fact.

- As with reading, it is useful to be sensitive to your lucidity level when you begin a session of listening. Just as, when tired, one can read the same paragraph over and over without absorbing its content, listening to music without concentrating will have limited study value. If you are simply looking for a general impression of a song, this can be fine. Just don't mistake that sort of listening for the sort of studying necessary to get the most out of the listening for a course like this.

This is especially relevant if music typically functions in your life as "background sound." There is nothing wrong with that, it is simply important to realize that greater levels of attentiveness and concentration are necessary in this context. Just as you would not expect to get much out of reading a chapter from a book while checking your email or cooking dinner, this music warrants your undivided attention when the time comes to really study it.

- Recognize that even under the best of circumstances you can only absorb a limited amount of information in a single listening to a piece of music. Try "zoning in" and listening to more specific elements with each successive listening session. For example:

- Listening #1: Get a general feel for the music.
- Listening #2: Determine the overall structure to the piece (for example, introduction, melody, trumpet solo, piano solo, repeat of melody with the last melody phrase repeated three times).
- Listening #3: Focus on the way the song's melody (if it has one) is played and on the playing of each soloist.
- Listening #4: Focus on the rhythm section.
- Listening #5: Focus on the soloists' interaction with the rhythm section.

- Listening #6: Pick a particular member (or two) of the rhythm section on whom to focus.

This could go on ad infinitum, exploring different elements of a particular musician's performance and the interactions between different combinations of musicians. Your own levels of experience, perceptiveness, seriousness and curiosity may lead you to give a particular piece more or fewer "spins." Just realize that if you are writing an essay and listen to the same song 10 times, you are simply doing your job (and should tell that to any household members who would prefer that you move on to something else).

- Whether you are preparing to write a Comparative Essay or simply doing your weekly listening assignment, look for significant similarities and differences between musicians and recordings. Doing this will give you a deeper understanding of the common elements that define a sub-genre or "movement" and of the divergent elements that define the styles of more individualistic musicians.

As you gain more experience, you will become better able to judge what constitutes a "significant" similarity or difference. For example, "song #1 was 4 minutes long, while song #2 was only 3 minutes and 55 seconds" probably does not qualify as a significant difference, nor does "both songs sound jazzy" qualify as a noteworthy similarity.

- While a listening assignment may pertain to the specific unit to be covered in the upcoming week's class, you are encouraged to revisit that music following the class. What you have learned in class will likely impact your perception of the music and your ability to hear things within it. Consider this to be another form of reviewing your notes or readings after a class has taken place. Likewise, revisiting tracks from earlier in the semester can be illuminating as you put the pieces together.

ITunes Information

The listening examples you will be expected to study for class assignments can be downloaded as an "iMix" from iTunes (www.itunes.com). With the right computer equipment, downloading this music is quite simple. Most songs cost \$1.00 each (99 cents plus tax) and can be downloaded quickly on a high-speed connection, thus providing an inexpensive alternative to purchasing the entire album for each a piece of music assigned (the latter approach is, of course, fine for those students with unlimited time and music budgets).

If you do not already have iTunes software on your computer, it can be downloaded for free at <http://www.apple.com/itunes/download/> for either Mac or Windows. See that website as well for system requirements. If your computer does not meet these minimum requirements, you are asked to use your networking (in the traditional sense, not the computer sense) skills. That is, if you have a cooperative and computer-savvy friend, relative or co-worker, please take advantage of this! If someone can help you download the songs and burn them to a CD, you will at that point no longer need to use iTunes (unless you choose to use it as one of your sources of material, in addition to or instead of libraries, when conducting research).

The tunes you will need to download can be found by clicking on this link (or typing the address), which in turn will load the “iMix” in iTunes (assuming you have iTunes on your computer).

<http://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewIMix?id=376239832>

If you click on “Buy All Songs,” then the downloading process will be simple and streamlined. It is highly recommended that you acquire the songs in this manner. If you already own some of these songs and/or wish to acquire them another way (thus downloading only the “missing pieces” from this iMix), make sure you have and/or get the correct versions. In many cases, multiple versions of a song exist, even if the song title and artist are the same. Using the iMix referenced above is an easy and reliable method that will guarantee that you have the correct versions of the songs. You will be responsible for studying the same music that your classmates are studying, so it is important that you pay close attention to finding the correct versions if you choose to use another method of acquiring the songs.