

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 will revolve most substantially around the study of recording available online through Spotify (more information later in syllabus). As textbooks we will use *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": 30%

Comparative Essays: 40% (10% 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 easily 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. Please touch on each listening/reading assignment. Responses are fairly informal - 500 words will suffice; write more if you have more to say. The highest seven grades (out of nine reflections, since none will be due for the first class, second to last class, or last class) will be averaged at the end of the term.
- Comparative Essays (2-3 pages each): Each of these essays will compare two assigned pieces of music, picking apart the various elements that make up each performance. The “optional, un-graded 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 (6-8 pages): 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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Class 1 – Course Introduction; How Jazz Works; Jazz Before Monk and Mingus

Reading:

Priestley chapter 1; Kelley Chapters 1-7

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Class 2 – Monk 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

Reading:

Kelley Chapters 8-10

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Class 3 – Monk and Mingus in the 1940s

Begin email dialogue about final project topics

Listening:

- * “This Subdues My Passion” by Charles Mingus
- * “Mingus Fingers” by Lionel Hampton
- * “Godchild” by Red Norvo
- * “Eclipse” by Charles Mingus
- * “Weird Nightmare” by Charles Mingus

Reading:

Priestley chapter 2

Class 4 – Monk Develops

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

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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Class 5 – Mingus Develops

Initial Final Project Proposal

Listening:

- * "Portrait" by Charles Mingus
- * "Wee" by "the Quintet"
- * "Smooch" by Miles Davis
- * "Gregorian 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:

Priestley chapter 3-4

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Class 6 – Monk Establishes Himself

Comparative Essay #2: Compare Charles Mingus' recordings of "Jump Monk" and "Haitian Fight Song"

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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Class 7 – Mingus Establishes Himself

Revised/Refined Final Project Proposal

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:

Priestley chapters 5-6

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Class 8– Monk: the Later Years

Comparative Essay #3: Compare "Moanin'" by Charles Mingus to "Green Chimneys" by Thelonious Monk

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

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Class 9 – Mingus: the Later Years

Formal Final Project Proposal

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:

Priestley chapters 7-9

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Class 10 – The Enduring Influence of Monk and Mingus

Comparative Essay #4: Compare solo piano versions of “Memories of You” by Charles Mingus and Thelonious Monk

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:

Priestley chapter 10, Kelley chapter 29

Class 11 – In-Class Demo/Performance

Class 12 - Final Project Summaries

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

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:

- Specific weekly listening assignments subject to change; selections will be updated by the beginning of the semester. Listening assignments will be roughly the equivalent of a full album (45-60 minutes) of music per week.
- 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.

Spotify Information

The listening examples you will be expected to study for class assignments can be found in playlists on Spotify (www.spotify.com). Spotify "Premium" (which as of this writing costs \$10/month) allows for an ad-free environment and the capacity to listen to the tracks offline without purchasing them on iTunes or elsewhere. However, the free version of Spotify is also fully-functional for the purposes of this class if you can handle some commercials and are doing your listening from a web-connected computer ("free" Spotify on a mobile phone only allows for "shuffle" play).

The tunes you will need to download can be found by “following” me (username noahbaerman) or by using links that will be provided at the beginning of the semester.