



THELONIOUS MONK WITH JOHN COLTRANE

TRACKS

John Coltrane tenor saxophone; Thelonious Monk piano; Wilbur Ware bass. April 12, 1957.

1. MONK'S MOOD [FALSE START] – 0:59

2. MONK'S MOOD – 7:53

Thelonious Monk Septet: Ray Copeland trumpet; Gigi Gryce alto saxophone; Coltrane, Coleman Hawkins tenor saxophones; Monk piano; Ware bass; Art Blakey drums. Monk does not play on "Blues for Tomorrow." Disc 1, Side A #3-5 and Side B #1 recorded on June 25, and Disc 1, Side B #2 and Disc 2, Side A, #1-3 on June 26, 1957.

3. CREPUSCULE WITH NELLIE [TAKE 1] – 4:34

4. CREPUSCULE WITH NELLIE [TAKE 2] – 4:34

5. CREPUSCULE WITH NELLIE [BREAKDOWN] – 1:02

6. BLUES FOR TOMORROW [FIRST STEREO RELEASE] – 13:33

(Gigi Gryce) Twenty-Eighth Street Music-ASCAP

7. CREPUSCULE WITH NELLIE [EDITED: RETAKES 4 & 5] – 4:47

8. CREPUSCULE WITH NELLIE [RETAKE 6] – 4:40

9. OFF MINOR [TAKE 4] – 5:15

Embassy Music-BMI

10. OFF MINOR [TAKE 5] – 5:09

Same June 26, 1957, septet session. Omit piano, bass, and drums on both takes of "Abide with Me."

11. ABIDE WITH ME [TAKE 1] – 0:55

(William Henry Monk; arr. by Thelonious Monk) Thelonious Music-BMI

13. ABIDE WITH ME – 0:55

14. EPHISTROPHY [SHORT VERSION] – 3:08

(Thelonious Monk-Kenny Clarke) Embassy Music-BMI/Music Sales-ASCAP

15. EPHISTROPHY – 10:46

16. WELL, YOU NEEDN'T [OPENING] – 1:25

Regent Music-BMI

17. WELL, YOU NEEDN'T – 11:26

18. RUBY, MY DEAR [WITH COLEMAN HAWKINS] – 5:27

Embassy Music-BMI

Coltrane tenor saxophone; Monk piano; Ware bass; Shadow Wilson drums. July 1957.

19. RUBY, MY DEAR [WITH JOHN COLTRANE] – 6:19

20. NUTTY – 6:39

Thelonious Music-BMI

21. TRINKLE, TINKLE – 6:39

Thelonious Music-BMI

THELONIOUS MONK WITH JOHN COLTRANE THE COMPLETE 1957 RIVERSIDE RECORDINGS



Monk with Keepnews

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Thelonious and John Coltrane are universally recognized as musical demi-gods. The idea of Monk and Coltrane—the genius mentor and the budding genius—on the same bandstand or in the same recording studio is like Julius Erving and Michael Jordan soaring as teammates, or Jean Renoir and François Truffaut collaborating on a film.

For an all-too-brief, magical time in 1957, Monk and Coltrane actually did work together every night as part of a quartet led by the uniquely brilliant pianist-composer Monk at New York's now-fabled Five Spot Cafe. And between April and July of that year they made the stunning music contained herein, their complete output in the recording studio. The planets seemed to align for Thelonious Sphere Monk (1917–1982) and John William Coltrane (1926–1967) when they joined forces in '57. Coltrane was poised to make a giant leap forward—and ready to learn from one of the masters, Monk.

There is such greatness on these three discs, so many wondrous performances and so many fascinating stories about how these masterpieces came into being. Orrin Keepnews, who as producer of the original sessions was present at the creation of every note, has written a superb essay that sets the record straight, clears up long-standing rumors about what did (and did not) go down in the studio, and, above all, lets the listener in on how a genius mentor, a budding genius, and their gifted colleagues went about the business of conceiving a work of art.

MONK & COLTRANE: A MOST REMARKABLE COLLECTION

The three LPs in this set contain all the music created by Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane, with a varying supporting cast, on the four occasions in the spring and summer of 1957 when they worked together in a recording studio. Except for probably no more than one professional and one amateur set of "live" tapes, this is all that has been preserved of one of the most memorable collaborations in the entire history of jazz. As a six-nights-a-week working unit, the Monk/Trane partnership existed only during the course of a now-legendary five-month residency—from mid-July to late December of that year—at the way downtown New York club named the Five Spot. The actual original quartet was together for less than a month of that period. (They opened on July 18 and the bassist, Wilbur Ware, was definitely replaced on the evening of August 13.) Their music survives only on the three selections that conclude this package.

I consider it extremely important to be as accurate as possible when dealing with this subject. The coming together of Monk and Trane, like all events that actually were larger than life-size, may in memory inevitably be in danger of sliding entirely outside the boundaries of reality. Let me, accordingly, pause to explain some of the language of my opening paragraph. As co-owner and self-appointed staff producer for Riverside Records, I was the man in charge during the recording of all the studio material presented here. In addition, two groups of on-the-job performance tapes from roughly this time period have emerged. One was made by a Voice of America crew during a late-November 1957 all-star benefit concert at Carnegie Hall. The other was apparently non-professionally recorded in the club at some point in the following year when Coltrane rejoined Monk for one night. (Johnny Griffin, who was the permanent replacement during the second extended Five Spot engagement, had sent Trane in as a sub on this occasion—after having once hired a lesser tenor player and been advised by Monk that there were only two acceptable stand-ins, even for a single evening: either Coltrane or Sonny Rollins.)

Both of these are "live" recordings. Both involve other substitutions in the original supporting cast. If there are any other similar tapes, they have not as yet come to light. As for the first-sentence reference to "the recording studio," that should be taken quite literally. All four of the sessions reproduced here were held in the same place: the only recording room (despite the plural spelling of the name) at Reeves Sound Studios in Manhattan, on Second Avenue between 44th and 45th Streets. It was Riverside's home studio for our first several years, under terms of a deal made by my late partner, Bill Grauer, an arrangement which I had not been involved in making and which I originally resented. The studio was too big for our mostly three- to five-man sessions, I insisted; it was a hard and angular space and too well-lit—but I had to live with what had been done. We had contracted to use this studio, mostly at night, for an annual-guarantee total amount that came to only a small fraction of what similar recording time, computed on a normal basis, would have amounted to just about anywhere else. In our original chronically impoverished but highly ambitious condition, it was a lifesaver. When I later discovered that the studio's previous jazz-recording use had been by Milt Gabler, in the early years of his pioneering Commodore Records, the very first of the independent jazz labels, I had no trouble recognizing that as a meaningful omen.

I have no idea as to how or when Thelonious first became interested in Coltrane. I had actually been listening to John with some regularity for several months—the Miles Davis Quintet, in which he was the other horn, frequently played at the Cafe Bohemia on Barrow Street in Greenwich Village early in 1957, and I was often there, primarily as part of the process of educating myself about Miles. My principal mentor was his remarkable drummer, known as "Philly" Joe Jones to distinguish him from the great swing drummer, Count Basie's Jo Jones. (Philly was about to become an integral element in the Riverside story as part of our most frequent recording-session rhythm section.) As a result, I was hearing Trane quite often, but like a lot of other listeners at that time, not being particularly impressed by what seemed a not much more than average tenor player with a drug habit. And I know I never saw Monk in the audience at the Bohemia.

Actually, the biggest thing in my professional life at this point was being in a position to record Thelonious. Riverside, the quite young and struggling jazz label where I was still in the fairly early stages of on-the-job training, had scored the coup of signing the already-controversial and famously eccentric (although not yet particularly salable) pianist. I had already made three albums with him, and had begun work on a fourth, which happened to represent his acceptance of an idea of mine. It was nothing complicated: quite the contrary, being impressed by his strikingly different approach when including an unaccompanied solo number on each of our LPs to date, I had asked for an all-solo album.

We were into the project and scheduling our second session when he casually requested that I plan to add tenor sax and bass on one number. (On an otherwise all-piano album? Fortunately, I had already reached a point in our working relationship where I was not going to let myself be derailed by anything he might propose.) He did note that there would be no need to schedule tightly. The tenor would be Coltrane; he would be arriving by train from Philadelphia, where he was now living, Miles having just broken up his quintet. We could begin with a couple of solo pieces, and when Trane and the bass player arrived, we could just switch to their number. It would be **Monk's Mood**, a rich ballad that I was particularly looking forward to. I was also eager to encounter the bassist—it was Wilbur Ware, a young player Thelonious had recently worked with on a trip to Chicago and for whom he had expressed rare enthusiasm.

The first disc opens with **Monk's Mood** simply because it seems most sensible to present this material in chronological order, but it would be hard to think of a more effective way to introduce the Monk/Trane team. The number is heard here just as it was heard in the studio. Thelonious begins a melody chorus on his own, and apparently decides that it's not quite right. After asserting, despite the engineer's unambiguous "Take 1," not to have known we were recording, he switches to a perhaps slightly firmer lead-in. Coltrane may be less than entirely comfortable when he eventually makes his first entrance, but he is not disturbed. Fresh from several months of being arbitrarily directed by Miles, he has done his homework and knows what he is supposed to do. And he does it. In retrospect, it is impossible not to sense that he knows he is at a decisive moment, that this is the first step on the important journey that would make up the extraordinary final decade of his life.

I still consider this to have been the first time I really heard Trane. As for my reaction, by the time they had finished this first and only take, I had a question to ask. Ignoring the intercom, I went charging from the control room into the studio. "John," I still remember asking, "what's your record situation?"

I will also never forget his precise answer: "I signed with Prestige three weeks ago."

It was certainly my biggest record business disappointment to that point, and I could not have had many bigger ones since. The full story did not make me feel any better. Bob Weinstock of Prestige had not necessarily been any wiser than his competitors. Actually, with several strong-selling artists under contract—Miles, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Billy Taylor, Red Garland—he was not in hot pursuit of more. But he was under particular pressure from Garland to record his good friend and Davis bandmate, and so, without an excessive amount of enthusiasm, Weinstock had offered Coltrane a modest two-year deal and it had been accepted.

By now, Monk and Trane were into the early stages of spending much time together, and the tenor player has described in more than one interview a musical bonding in which Thelonious would play, rather than try to articulate, the answers to his questions. I was made aware of their closeness through our next set of recording plans. I had proposed putting together a somewhat larger than usual band, using four horns. Although Monk rejected some of my specific suggestions, he did accept the concept, and it was hard to disagree with his idea of instrumentation—not just two tenors, but Coleman Hawkins and Coltrane, pairing one of Monk's first mentors (his debut on records had been on a Hawkins session) with his current protégé. Adding two more horns, trumpeter Ray Copeland and Gigi Gryce on alto sax, both of whom were capable of meeting the leader's demands; pairing the newcomer, Ware, with Art Blakey, whom I always considered the drummer who worked best with Thelonious; and with the leader committing himself to come up with the arrangements, it all seemed too good to be true. And it almost was.

I remember feeling we might even be a bit too conservative in our choice of material. It was indeed all "Monk's Music," but the emphasis was on compositions that, even as long ago as 1957, were among the older, more established portion of his repertoire. There was only one new work—**Crepuscule with Nellie**, dedicated to his wife during her recent illness. (The word means "twilight"; to complicate things a bit, I originally misspelled it on the jacket and it has often been wrongly listed as "crepescule.") Even the one joker had its own logic. Not that any of us accepted the deadpan claim by Thelonious that **Abide with Me** was his "favorite hymn," but it actually is credited to a 19th-century writer of religious music, William Monk.

The first startling thing to happen on the evening June 25th was that the leader showed up at the studio pretty much on time. (I was learning to be flexible about the meaning of time: our studio arrangement removed some of the need for strict scheduling, as did the sensible idea of paying musicians slightly more than union-scale minimum, to take their minds off the clock.) But it soon became obvious that I had focused on the wrong problem! As we moved into the first hour, with the engineers setting up an unusually complex series of microphones, it became clear that we would not be able to start with the most difficult part of the job—the one element missing was Art Blakey, which of course meant that his wall of drum equipment was not yet available for installation.

Adding to the difficulty, I still vividly recall, is that this had seemed an appropriate session to face the new and eventually revolutionary concept of stereophonic sound. Or as it



Coltrane

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was initially called, in recognition of its imitation of people being equipped with two ears—"binaural." Our new stereo series had begun with a sound effects disc, so Riverside 1102 was our first stereo jazz album. But we had to deal with the fact that the studio had not yet taken the drastic step of converting to the new process: the installed equipment at Reeves was still monaural. Thus we had to improvise a dual system. Studio engineer Jack Higgins presided at his usual control panel; our staff engineer, Ray Fowler, was in one of the soundproof "isolation booths" in the studio, with a newfangled portable stereo tape recorder. Thus, on this and several subsequent occasions, "binaural" was an entirely separate operation. Among other things, every musician found himself surrounded by a doubled quantity of microphones.

So we didn't quite spend all the time waiting and wondering about Blakey, but it was surely an unaccustomed position for Thelonious, who was much more likely to be that last late arrival that everyone else at the record date was waiting for. Taking into consideration his rumored sleepless concentration on preparing for this session, how long would it be before his fine-tuned anticipation would come to an end? Eventually Art arrives, the drums (and there was always a full array of tom-toms around Blakey) are suitably miked and, at least a full hour after the originally designated starting time, Monk begins the job of teaching his associates how to play *Crepuscule*.

It is pretty clear from the start that too much time had gone by. The tape machines roll on Take 1, but the ensemble opening is slow and uncertain; Monk is the only scheduled soloist, and he is having problems. But with an everything-included reissue such as we have here, it is possible to include an attempt from the first night that has never previously been issued. Even though I certainly know the sad truth better than anyone, listening now (in the first decade of the next century) it somehow sounds better than expected, and I find myself quite unrealistically beginning to fantasize that things might work out.

But of course, at the very start of the next try, Monk falls out. The take had been preceded by a little pep talk—I recognize my own voice for a few words—and then we must face the fact that his head is on the keyboard. The pianist is asleep. Exhaustion, stimulants, frustrated creativity—I have never been overly concerned with the exact cause; I do know that he had tried very hard, and that circumstances had overcome him. But I also know that he was to come back the next night, this time facing the added strain of a must-finish deadline, and succeed in recording a complete album that has stood up over the years as one of his most impressive efforts.

Monk was literally wheeled out of the room on an equipment cart, and I faced the problem of a half-dozen musicians who should be paid for their time even though we had gotten nothing out of it. Even that many years ago I seem to have been able to think on my feet in the studio; on this occasion I asked for an extended blues, which would at least give me some usable music to issue at some point. Gryce just happened to have a blues line he could quickly teach everyone; after just one take we had an interesting thirteen-and-a-half-minute solution. I was the one who named it *Blues for Tomorrow*, a title intended as a general reference to the future, not (as you might perhaps think) to express my fears about the recording work that lay just one day ahead. It eventually became the title track of a largely unnoticed compilation of otherwise unreleased blues instrumentals retained from sessions by various leaders. It has some strong performances and deserves not to be such a secret, and it certainly belongs here as the principal result of one of our Monk/Trane sessions.

I had not originally thought I'd have much use for the time booked for the evening of June 26, but we turned out to need every bit of it. As was often the case back then, we were in the position of either completing a full album that night or having to wait a long time before our entire cast was back in New

York after various road trips. Luckily, this was an evening when everyone arrived on time and ready to play; it wasn't easy, but it worked. I must admit to one anxious playback moment a couple of hours down the line, when I suddenly realized that neither Thelonious nor Nellie (she rarely attended sessions, but was on hand throughout this one) were anywhere to be seen. Racing out onto the street, I quickly spotted them not more than a block away. What was I concerned about, they wanted to know. They were just catching a few moments of fresh air and quiet.

On the whole, it was a remarkably stress-free and well-played evening, but there are some stories and comments that should be kept in mind:

We actually did not begin the second evening by returning to *Crepuscule*, but for the sake of clarity it really seems best to continue here by listening to its best takes, after which we can all give a sigh of relief that this number is now safely behind us. The piece had not gotten any easier overnight. Starting anew, with the engineer slating another "Take 1," we eventually settled for Take 6 (even though for some reason our stereo equipment was briefly not functioning). But I had come to feel that this solo indicated that by now Monk was getting kind of bored with it. So, a number of years ago, working on a previous reissue of this material, we had resumed tinkering with it and ended with a constructive edit that combined a very well-executed piano solo on an incomplete Take 4 with a satisfactory out-chorus from Take 5. It is quite probably the best overall performance. (For comparison, the originally issued Take 6 is also included here.)

The inclusion of *Abide with Me* is a put-on on two levels—both for its actual authorship by a Monk namesake, and in its absolutely straightfaced 52-second Salvation Army-styled presentation. In the studio, the joke had a third level: after these four jazz artists set it down on tape quite solidly, as written, Thelonious was able to pause for a moment in evaluation—and then quietly ask Coleman Hawkins, John Coltrane, and company to try it one more time! Maybe you had to be there to really appreciate the moment. I was. So, in an effort to share it with you, we offer both brief takes.

Well, You Needn't is played at an aggressive pace. Eventually, everyone solos, but it begins as basically a piano-driven piece, so the two early occasions on which Thelonious impatiently comes to a momentary halt and begins again are for reasons known only to himself. The engineer and I stayed out of his way, letting the tape roll and not attempting to re-slate, and it seems appropriate for this compilation to continue in the same way, until we finally get into the full take. And that soon brings us to a moment that has over the years given rise to a rather vicious myth. On a practical level it was simply a non-problem as dealt with on the spot, but as a false story it does refuse to go away. The composition was well-known by all the players and time was beginning to be a factor, so there had been no actual rehearsal in the studio—just an arbitrary assignment of solo sequence, rather unconventionally starting with piano. As we all know now, Trane is second man up—but he apparently did not realize this at the time. At the end of the piano solo, there is what amounts to a brief vamp, quickly followed by the leader shouting Coltrane's name, whereupon, just a few bars late, he smoothly and vigorously begins an excellent tenor solo. Over the years, false claimants to inside knowledge have made the point that he obviously had nodded out. I'd just like to note that no insiders, outsiders, or hangers-on were present in the studio that night. My own observation is that all that happened was a brief musical failure of communication, followed by a quick recovery. John was by that time already into a personal cleaning-up period that would be a most important element in the decade that lay ahead of him. What I learned at that point was simply not to be hasty in stopping a take that seems to have gone astray. It was a valuable lesson, and one that Monk, who had remained in charge, obviously already knew; often enough, letting the music continue can result in the creation of something valuable that would not otherwise have had a chance to happen.

The night's work also includes what could be considered a positive example of manipulation, the shorter version of *Epistrophy*. This is actually the next-to-last take, which had broken down right after good solos by Coltrane and Copeland. We wanted to retain those solos, and actually went on to make use of this selection in assembling a varied album that featured the only three selections recorded by the original Five Spot Quartet—since it certainly seemed more listener-friendly to present the number in this pseudo-complete form.

Finally, the quartet version of *Ruby, My Dear* was as planned. Historically, Coleman Hawkins was the major figure on hand—the history of the tenor saxophone in jazz literally begins with him—and Thelonious suitably planned to feature him on a ballad. As it turned out, this number quickly became a regular part of the performance repertoire of the Monk working quartet of the next several months: in reissuing both versions here, it was impossible for me to resist the idea of programming them consecutively.

As these last two paragraphs should indicate, we were fast approaching what was to be a major turning point in Monk's career. Although New York City's infamous "cabaret card" regulation seems to have been rather arbitrarily and confusingly applied in those middle years of the 20th century, it definitely had a chilling effect on the ability of many jazz musicians to work in the city that, after all, remained the center of American nightlife. I heard conflicting explanations at the time, but basically the absence of a card denied a convicted law-breaker full-week employment as a performer in a place that served liquor. Thus, I suppose, the city protected adult club-goers from exposure to being entertained by drug-users. How certain people worked around it remains a mystery to some of us, but after a questionable arrest, Monk remained virtually ineligible for local work

through most of the fifties. Considering that his supposed weirdness didn't help his overall employability, it took a growing reputation, a changing night scene, and perhaps some well-connected friends and fans to alter the situation. But somehow it became clear that by the summer of '57, Monk was going to be bringing a quartet into a jazz-friendly bar in the East Village, by now a focal point of New York's hip arts activity. In mid-July, the Monk quartet that featured Coltrane (and included Ware and the unspectacular but valuable drummer Shadow Wilson) began an open-ended run at the Five Spot Cafe. The impact was unexpected and amazing. Somehow Coltrane, now becoming thoroughly compatible with (and actually enhancing) the Monk idiom, was reaching listeners in a way he had never previously achieved with Miles Davis. What I found most impressive was how immediately jazz fans with a sense of history were making comparisons to an event a quarter-century earlier, when the major New Orleans cornetist of that era had summoned his protégé—twenty-two-year-old Louis Armstrong—to join his band at a club in Chicago. (To extend that parallel further, both Armstrong and Coltrane remained with their mentors for something less than half a year; but both pairings are probably permanently ranked among the most meaningful collaborations in the history of jazz.)

However, what I had thought of as an exciting opportunity for Riverside and me was immediately revealed to be a major problem! I have frequently been scolded for failing to take advantage of the situation. Why weren't tape machines rolling at the Five Spot from the very first set? It obviously was not because we hadn't thought of it. I had wasted no time in speaking to Bob Weinstock, founder and at that time still owner of Prestige—and had gotten a deceptively reasonable-sounding response. He would be quite willing to let us record his exclusive artist as part of the Monk group, but only if he could have equivalent use of Thelonious with Coltrane. By no means had Weinstock lost sight of how he had let Monk slip away from his label in 1955, and how Riverside had been waiting in the wings to sign the once he was available. But Thelonious had neither forgotten nor for-



Monk, piano • Wilbur Ware, bass • Shadow Wilson, drums

© Bob Parent Archive

given his dark days at Prestige and how readily they had turned him loose; I was immediately made aware that under no circumstances would he ever again be willing to record for that label.

In the jazz world in those days, there were two aspects to enforcement of exclusive recording rights. One was the generally (but not always) friendly relationship between the small labels; the other was the strength of the musicians union—which, only a decade earlier, had succeeded in enforcing several years of a total ban on recording. If we had charged ahead and aggressively recorded the Monk/Trane team without satisfying the unusual but legally appropriate Prestige demand, we could have been in a dubious position in a serious fight. Our decision was not to do battle, relying instead on the likelihood of Coltrane joining Riverside as soon as his already strained deal with the rival label was over. But, considering the fragility of a working band and the fact that they were wonderfully in sync at the moment, I quietly pushed for at least a little immediate recording, promising not to use the resulting material until it was proper to do so. That is how the three Five Spot quartet numbers came into existence; it is obviously the reason the session was not at all publicized and probably why it was not well documented (but can definitely be identified as taking place before the mid-August night when Ware was replaced by Ahmed Abdul-Malik after failing, without warning, to appear for work). And it resulted in only three numbers because Monk felt tired and wanted to stop then, and subsequently came the Ware departure and Coltrane's reluctance to do further questionable sessions. And by the time recording could have become feasible, this unique alliance had come to a friendly but definite end, and other, more affluent labels were pursuing John—and let's necessarily just be happy that these few unique examples of the legendary original quartet do exist.

—ORRIN KEEPNEWS

San Francisco; February 2006



Monk



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Thelonious Monk was certainly not the only Riverside superstar during the label's pacesetting mid-20th-century years, but he was surely the most colorful, unusual, dramatic, and—to borrow from the title of an early album—**unique**. *The Unique Thelonious Monk* boasted a cover that achieved its own legendary status. In an era where only presidents and similar world-shakers were depicted on postage stamps, Monk's solemn visage dominated the album cover, and was also multiplied on perforated sheets of oversized "stamps"—which postal authorities grudgingly admitted were not illegal—to create publicity furor that probably remains unsurpassed in jazz history. (Yes, a few of them did succeed in getting regular pieces of mail delivered to their destinations.) Therefore, to properly celebrate the unique 1957 Monk/Coltrane collaboration presented here, what could be more fitting in the cover art than to have these two immortals share a commemorative stamp. —*O.K.*



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