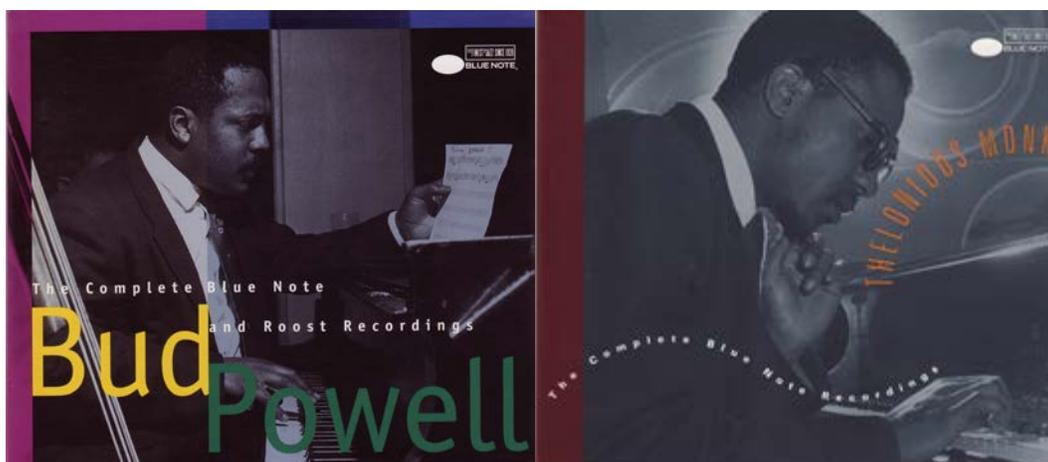


## GENIUS ON THE EDGE: BUD POWELL AND THELONIOUS MONK

Bob Bernotas



**Bud Powell** (1924-1966) and **Thelonious Monk** (1917-1982) were two of the creators of modern jazz, a pair of geniuses whose impact upon the music continues to, and always will, be felt. Over the past five-plus decades little has been played on the piano that does not bear Powell's mark, even if indirectly. And after Ellington, Monk is jazz's most unique and influential composer, as well as an equally eminent and original piano stylist.

***Bud Powell: The Complete Blue Note and Roost Recordings*** (Blue Note CDP 30083, four CDs, total playing time: 4:36:58), opens with Powell's first date as a leader, a January 1947 trio session originally released on the Roost label. Six of the eight tracks are standards and Powell is brilliant on all of them. Especially outstanding are his relaxed stroll through "Somebody Loves Me," sporting some rich, closely voiced block chords, and "Indiana," featuring rapid-fire single-note passages over percussive, asymmetric left-hand accents, two hallmarks of Powell's playing at its best. Also noteworthy is his ethereal, at times, almost harp-like, take on "I Should Care."

In August 1949 the pianist cut four quintet sides for Blue Note that number among the essential bebop recordings, three Powell originals – Bouncing with Bud," "Wail," "Dance of the Infidels" – and Monk's "52nd Street Theme." (Here, and throughout the set, alternate takes are included and, with regard to the evolution of the finished product, they prove quite instructive.) The doomed Fats Navarro, the only trumpeter of the day who could rival the great Diz, plays at peak form – in less than a year he would be gone. Sonny Rollins, just eighteen years old, is precocious and confident, displaying the germs of his distinctive tenor saxophone tone and improvisational wit. And throughout, Roy Haynes provides some of the most intelligent and adventurous drumming on any Powell date.

There also is some remarkable percussion work on Powell's next Blue Note session, the

May 1951 trio outing with drummer Max Roach that produced “Un Poco Loco,” one of his most boldly pianistic compositions and a masterpiece of modern jazz. During the montuno section – unique for its time – Roach’s dense, Afro-Cuban-inspired polyrhythms mesh with Powell’s dark, aggressive improvisation into a marvel of musical unity. Also from this session, and at nearly the same level, are “A Night in Tunisia” – four-plus minutes of pure inspiration, propelled by Roach’s unrelenting brush work, that culminate in one of Powell’s signature octave codas – and a melancholy, Art Tatum-inspired ballad reading of “It Could Happen to You.” There also is an interesting, incomplete performance of Powell’s important composition, “Parisian Thoroughfare” (previously recorded for Verve), that appears to be cruising along smoothly until the pianist suddenly cuts it short in the midst of his sixth improvised chorus.

Two 1953 sessions feature Powell’s excellent working trio, with George Duvivier on bass and Arthur Taylor on drums. On “Autumn in New York” Powell’s right-hand chords merge with a restless sixteenth-note counterpoint played by Powell’s left hand and Duvivier’s bass. The result is agitated, unsettling, and completely faithful to the text of Vernon Duke’s bittersweet urban ballad. A swinging trip through “I Want to Be Happy,” with an excellent Duvivier solo, recalls the joy of Powell’s first Roost date. On the other hand, his brooding, dirge-like interpretation of “Polka Dots and Moonbeams” is haunting and even a bit disturbing. Then there is Powell’s “Glass Enclosure,” an extraordinary through-composed trio piece with wide shifts of tempo and mood, rubato sections, and dense written passages for piano and arco bass.

Powell returned to the Blue Note label in 1957 and again in 1958 for three more trio sessions – two with bassist Paul Chambers and Taylor on drums, one with Sam Jones on bass and drummer Philly Joe Jones – plus three tracks on which he is joined by the then up-and-coming trombonist, Curtis Fuller. The previous months and years had been an erratic period for Powell, both personally and professionally, but he is in good shape on these sides. Except for the Fuller sides, these dates feature Powell’s compositions exclusively. Perhaps, knowing that he could not always rely on his piano chops, Powell began looking more toward writing as an avenue of self-expression. In any event, he was a hugely underrated composer and it’s a shame that pieces like the sixteen-bar blues, “Blue Pearl,” the sunny, Monkish “Monopoly,” and his lovely ballad, “Time Waits” (whose title, interestingly, contradicts that of an earlier Powell masterpiece, “Tempus Fugit”), aren’t played more often by the pianists of today.

The collection ends with a relaxed trio version of “Like Someone in Love,” recorded at same 1963 date that produced Dexter Gordon’s superb *Our Man in Paris* album (on which Powell appeared) and featuring the excellent French bassist, Pierre Michelot, and the longtime émigré, drummer Kenny Clarke. During this time, Powell was in the midst of his extended residence in Paris, the period in his life that, in part, inspired the 1987 film, *Round Midnight*, that starred Gordon. Powell plays well on this tune, as he did on the entire session, but it was one of his last days in the sun.

Unlike the Blue Note set, which manages to capture Powell in good to excellent form

nearly throughout, *The Complete Bud Powell on Verve* (Verve 315 521 669, five CDs, 5:14:21), spanning more or less the same period (1949-56), documents the pianist's high highs and even lower lows. Verve also has released a single-disc sampler with no weak spots or alternate takes, *The Best of Bud Powell on Verve* (Verve 314 253 392, 58:02), drawn from Powell's most assured sessions for the label.

The Verve recordings open with Powell's astounding 1949 trio performance of "Tempus Fugit," and at this breathtaking pace the time truly does fly. From the ascending rip that ignites Powell's octave-laden introduction to the final chord, Powell, driven by the nonpareil team of bassist Ray Brown and Max Roach on drums, attacks the piano with a diabolical fury that never lets up. His ferocious left-hand counterpoint in the opening and closing bridges must be heard to be believed. This is two and a half minutes of music on the edge, exciting, exhilarating, even a little frightening, and it epitomizes Powell's art at its zenith.

Powell's 1949 and 1950 trio tracks demonstrate not just his stunning technique and fertile improviser's imagination, but also his fine sense of form. Here, and throughout his best work, Powell fits much of his repertoire – even the standards – with strong, organic introductions and (nearly as often) appropriate codas. These sides are almost uniformly top-shelf, among them a lavishly reharmonized "Cherokee," two of Powell's more lasting originals ("Celia," "I'll Keep Loving You"), stormy up-tempos, smoothly navigated ("Get Happy," "Sweet Georgia Brown"), fully realized ballads ("Yesterdays," "April in Paris," "Body and Soul"), and a reshaping of Art Tatum's fingerbusting test piece, "Tea for Two" (in three takes), over parabolic waves of harmonic substitutions.

Tatum's influence, along with that of a lesser known, but brilliant, pianist, Billy Kyle, is especially evident on Powell's February 1951 solo date, which produced a complete, although, at two minutes and twenty-eight seconds, all too brief, performance of "Parisian Thoroughfare." Powell often is credited (rather simplistically) for having translated Charlie Parker's saxophone lines onto the piano. In fact, his playing is hardly horn-like at all, but profoundly pianistic, as in his ornately ornamented, rubato treatment of "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square." At times, he even effects a sort of bebop distillation of the 1920s stride piano style, as, for instance, on a quirky "The Last Time I Saw Paris." (The '20s stride masters, like James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, also exerted a major influence on Tatum's more florid playing, as well as on the eccentric stylings of Powell's contemporary, Thelonious Monk.)

By the mid 1950s Powell, suffering from chronic mental problems, had become introspective, morose, and often quite tentative in his playing. Tracks like "Moonlight in Vermont" and "Spring Is Here," as pianist and Powell disciple Barry Harris observes in the liner notes, "are not his best moments. ... This is not the real Bud." Nevertheless, he notes, "it's still Bud." But occasions of beauty and truth do peek through, as when Powell intones "It Never Entered My Mind" with simple, hymn-like triads mixed with touches of somber dissonance that actually enhance the almost otherworldly mood that he has created.

Disc number three of this set comprises three January 1955 sessions that, frankly, make for difficult listening and are more valuable for extra-musical reasons. "These would be good records for a psychologist to study," Harris notes sadly. Powell was in bad shape, he was not comfortable with much of the material – it seems that someone else, most likely Verve's owner Norman Granz, was calling the tunes – and some of the tracks are nearly disastrous. Take three of "I Get a Kick Out of You," for example, is not quite as bad as Bird's notorious breakdown version of "Lover Man," but it is disturbing and embarrassing. Perhaps the best way to deal with these performances is to steel yourself for the worst, play the disc through once, compose yourself, and, in future listenings, focus on the many brighter moments in the collection. But even here, from the depths of his troubles, Powell somehow was able to pull off a secure, swinging version of "Dance of the Infidels."

In late April of that year there were signs of a short-lived recovery, as Powell produced a pair of solid, happy dates with Duvivier and Taylor. He is more at home on these tunes – like "Bean and the Boys" (based on the changes to "Lover, Come Back to Me"), Tadd Dameron's "Lady Bird," and standards like "Willow Weep for Me," "Stairway to the Stars," and "Crazy Rhythm" – and the trio really meshes as a unit. Powell's last date for Verve, from September 1956, is less successful, but his harmonically advanced and daring "My Heart Stood Still," the bright, carefree (and oddly titled) "Elegy," and a strong "Woody 'n' You" are standout performances.

Verve's beautiful collection sets a new standard in reissue excellence. The accompanying notes, bound in a 150-page *book* (not a booklet), include a biographical sketch by Peter Pullman; interviews about Powell with pianists Toshiko Akiyoshi, Walter Bishop, Jr., Barry Harris, Bertha Hope, and Marian McPartland, and colleagues Johnny Griffin, Jackie McLean, and Max Roach; essays by Powell's daughter, Celia, his friend, Francis Paudras, and musicians Sonny Rollins and Horace Silver; commentary by Harris and pianist Michael Weiss; and dozens of classic and rare photos, all of which help illuminate the life and work of this master pianist.

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Unlike Bud Powell, who was the quintessential bebop pianist, Thelonious Monk, to paraphrase the apostle Paul, was *in* bop, but not *of* bop. In the early 1940s he participated alongside Dizzy Gillespie, Kenny Clarke, and Charlie Christian in the legendary Minton's jam sessions where bebop was nurtured, and even served as a sort of mentor to Bud Powell, seven years his junior. Still, even in the presence of these jazz rebels – and despite his unwanted, press agent-inspired appellation, "the High Priest of Bebop" – Monk's distinctive playing and unique, challenging compositions seemed far ahead of the time. Genius or eccentric – probably both – Monk never swam with the jazz mainstream. The mainstream, finally, caught up with him.

Monk's 1947-52 sessions for the Blue Note label stand out among the milestones of

modern jazz and make up the bulk of *Thelonious Monk: The Complete Blue Note Recordings* (Blue Note CDP 30363, four CDs, 3:27:52). On his first date as a leader, made in October 1947 when he was nearly thirty years old, just two of the four sextet tracks are Monk compositions. One of these, “Thelonious,” built around a series of repeated notes, serves as a piano feature. On the other, “Humph,” the horn soloists appear slightly overwhelmed by the originality of Monk’s concepts and retreat to the security of the bop lexicon.

Nine days later Monk returned to the studio for a trio session with bassist Gene Ramey and drummer Art Blakey – one musician who, early on, really seemed to understand what Monk was getting at – to record four originals (“Well, You Needn’t,” “Off Minor,” “Introspection,” and one of his two great ballads, “Ruby, My Dear”) and two standards. All the traits of Monk’s full-blown piano style are in evidence on these tracks: irregular and percussive accents, repeated staccato notes, sudden stride bursts, abundant use of space, minor seconds and other dissonant clusters, deft manipulation of thematic material and motifs, dynamic contrasts, rhythmic displacements, and his trademark, descending whole-tone runs.

A quintet session the following month produced Monk’s first true masterpiece. Previously recorded by the big bands of Cootie Williams and Dizzy Gillespie, the immortal “Round Midnight” is, in this performance, a cryptic, three-minute concerto for Monk’s piano, brashly introduced and discreetly supported by the two horns. Throughout this date, and especially in his exceptional solo on “In Walked Bud,” alto saxophonist Sahib Shihab employs a broad tone and wide vibrato that are perfectly suited to Monk’s music and anticipate Eric Dolphy’s bone-chilling sound by more than ten years.

In July 1948 vibist Milt Jackson joined Monk for a momentous quartet session. With the support of John Simmons on bass and Shadow Wilson on drums they made two sides behind balladeer Kenny “Pancho” Hagood and cut four instrumental gems. “Evidence,” a study in musical minimalism, features marvelous, almost telepathic, interplay between Monk and Bags. “Epistrophy,” which served as Monk’s theme once he finally started getting some gigs, nearly bursts from the polyrhythmic tension. Like many of his pieces, “I Mean You” sounds like a Monk piano improvisation transcribed for combo. Finally, there is “Misterioso,” a true jazz chamber work that celebrates the major sixth and overflows with unexpected musical choices.

Three years passed before Monk recorded again as a leader. His 1951 date was one of his greatest ever, bringing together Jackson, Blakey, and Shihab, three players who shared a rare affinity for Monk’s music, along with one of the top bassists of the day, the superbly sympathetic Al McKibbin. These five musicians confidently handle two of Monk’s most difficult compositions, “Four in One” and the abstract, angular “Criss Cross.” Their solos, even on the blues, “Straight, No Chaser,” avoid comfortable bebop clichés and dig deep into the essence of Monk’s music.

Monk’s final Blue Note session, from May 1952, features an all-star horn section –

trumpeter Kenny Dorham, Lou Donaldson on alto, and the great Lucky Thompson on tenor – and presents some of Monk’s finest writing ever. The out-chorus to “Skippy,” for example, offers intricate unison playing, and the heads to “Hornin’ In” and “Sixteen” foreshadow the renowned four-horn Riverside date of 1957, *Monk’s Music*. On “Let’s Cool One,” Monk integrates Max Roach’s drums into his melody line, giving them the last two bars of the theme’s A section. Roach also plays a vital role in one of Monk’s most original experiments in polyrhythm, his reshaping of “Carolina Moon” with its 12/4 head and 6/4 blowing choruses.

The collection also includes a pair of Monk appearances (“Reflections” and “Misterioso”) on a 1957 Sonny Rollins date, with Blakey on drums and Paul Chambers on bass. For the latter selection the group is augmented by trombonist J.J. Johnson, and Horace Silver joins Monk at the piano. The final disc presents five remarkable tracks by Monk, John Coltrane, Roy Haynes, and bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik, recorded in September 1958 at the Five Spot. Although by this time the saxophonist was no longer a regular member of Monk’s quartet – he was subbing for Johnny Griffin that night – this material, recorded on a portable machine by Trane’s first wife, Naima, and just recently discovered, is the only known sample of Monk and Trane performing live at this legendary venue. For this release drummer-historian Kenny Washington has corrected the pitch of these tracks, which on the previous 1993 CD issue was a half-step high.

Although Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell were hailed as geniuses they also walked and, at times, crossed that proverbial “fine line” between brilliance and insanity. For the last twenty years of his life Powell was plagued by headaches, seizures, and erratic behavior – very likely brought on by a 1945 police beating – and endured extended stays in mental hospitals, brutal electroshock “treatments,” and high doses of narcoleptic drugs. Monk’s idiosyncrasies, though seemingly less severe, were numerous and celebrated, considered eccentric and colorful at the time, but, in light of the unproductive isolation of his final years, prove ominous in retrospect.

But such morbid matters belong to the domain of medical science, not art. The subject of this moment is the glory of their music, and happily, that has been documented, with care and intelligence, in these three wonderful collections.

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