

# Thelonious himself

SOLO  
PIANO  
BY  
Thelonious  
Monk



**24**  
**BIT**  
REMASTERING

**KEEPNEWS**  
**COLLECTION**

1. **April in Paris 3:54**  
(Duke-Harburg) Kay Duke Music/  
Next Decade Entertainment-ASCAP
2. **(I Don't Stand) A Ghost of a Chance (With You) (take 7) 4:24**  
(Young-Washington-Crosby) EMI Mills Music/  
Chappell & Co.-ASCAP
3. **Functional (take 2) 9:22**  
(Thelonious Monk) Thelonious Music-BMI
4. **I'm Getting Sentimental Over You 4:08**  
(Bassman-Washington) EMI Mills/  
Catharine Hinen Music-ASCAP
5. **I Should Care (take 3) 3:15**  
(Cahn-Stordahl-Weston) WB Music Corp./Cahn Music/  
Songwriters Guild of America/Stordahl Music/Hanover  
Music-ASCAP
6. **'Round Midnight (take 7) 6:44**  
(Monk-Williams-Hanighen) Warner Bros.-  
ASCAP/Thelonious Music-BMI
7. **All Alone 4:53**  
(Irving Berlin) Irving Berlin Music-ASCAP
- \* 8. **Monk's Mood (false start) :58**  
(Monk) Embassy Music-BMI
9. **Monk's Mood 7:53**  
(Monk) Embassy Music-BMI
- \* 10. **(I Don't Stand) A Ghost of a Chance (With You) (take 5) 4:13**  
(Young-Washington-Crosby) EMI Mills Music/Chappell &  
Co.-ASCAP
- \* 11. **Functional (take 1) 9:44**  
(Monk) Thelonious Music-BMI
- \* 12. **I Should Care (take 1) 3:29**  
(Cahn-Stordahl-Weston) WB Music Corp./Cahn Music/  
Songwriters Guild of America/Stordahl Music/  
Hanover Music-ASCAP
- \* 13. **I Should Care (take 2) 3:18**  
WB Music Corp./Cahn Music/Songwriters Guild of  
America/Stordahl Music/Hanover Music-ASCAP

\* **BONUS TRACKS**

Reissue produced and annotated by ORRIN KEEPNEWS  
Project supervision — NICK PHILLIPS  
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24-bit remastering — JOE TARANTINO  
(Joe Tarantino Mastering, Berkeley, CA)

**THELONIOUS MONK** piano

**JOHN COLTRANE** tenor saxophone (on track 9 only)

**WILBUR WARE** bass (on track 9 only)

Original album produced by ORRIN KEEPNEWS

Recorded by Jack Higgins at Reeves Sound Studio in New York City; April 5 (#2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10,  
12, 13) and 16 (other selections), 1957.

Cover designed and produced by Paul Bacon

Cover photos — Paul Weller

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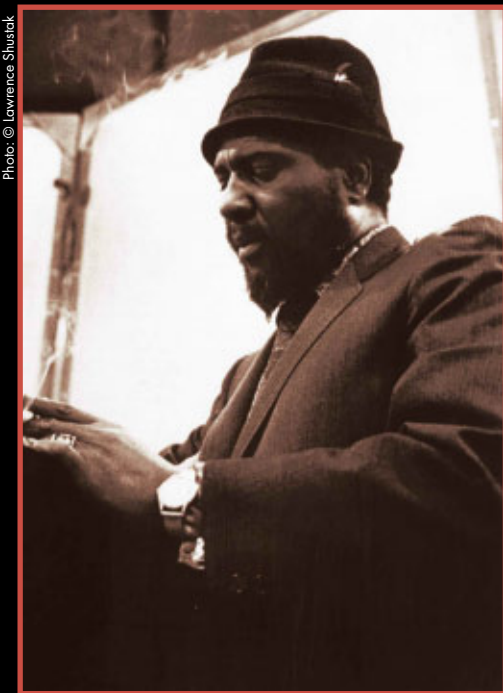
Riverside Records, Tenth and Parker, Berkeley, CA 94710.

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**THELONIOUS MONK**



Photo: © Steve Schapiro

## AN OPENING NOTE FROM THE PRODUCER

This is a series of reissues that can be described as largely centered on my incredibly long (even to me) career as a jazz producer. Each of them is of special importance to me—some because of the initial impact they made, others because they have particular personal meaning or may present a performer whose value has not been fully appreciated. Above all they are expressions of the talent—not infrequently the genius—of their featured artist. But I feel no need to downplay the several roles I have had in bringing them into being and in contributing to the careers of some of the most significant jazz performers of our day. For more than a half-century in this incredibly unstable age of jazz activity I have frequently succeeded in finding, recognizing, codding, arguing with, and collaborating with a great variety of talented and occasionally difficult people. On the whole, I am unreasonably and unshakably proud of the results.

The series follows a specific set of ground rules. In each case the original product is preserved—cover art, the notes, and the entire initial recorded content, in the exact original sequence—and it is now presented with the sonic benefits of 24-bit remastering from the original master tapes. Alternate takes or originally unissued numbers, when available, appear as bonus tracks. In some instances I've added to the total lineup a never-used version that may have been recorded forty or more years ago. When that occasionally allows you to hear for the first time a "new" performance by a long-departed artist, be aware that I join you in considering this a truly wonderful addition. Finally, I have written a complete set of new commentaries, digging back into my memories of those often very good old days to tell a few more stories about this remarkable music and its people.

**This, you might say, is an album of undiluted Monk. Like most generalizations, that would be putting things a bit too simply, but the core of truth is there. For, with the deliberate exception of the final selection, this is literally *Thelonious Himself*—Monk, alone in the recording studio, offering highly personal versions of some standards and some of his own tunes.**

Any musician who had had the experience can verify that it is hard (although rewarding) work to play with Monk. To some extent, the whole matter of the "difficulty" of his music has been overdone; but the fact remains that, like any true creative artist, Thelonious proceeds single-mindedly along his own path, and even the many modern musicians who admire him so deeply do not always find it easy to grasp fully or execute perfectly the intricate and demanding patterns that Monk's mind can evolve. This does not mean that Monk playing by himself is a perfect situation; for when Monk is with a rhythm section or scoring for horns, the other voices are fully necessary parts of what he has in mind for the occasion—and I do not know of any recording on which the men involved have not ultimately risen (often brilliantly), to meet the challenge. But what is special about this particular album is the rare opportunity it affords to hear Thelonious as he thinks and sounds when he has chosen to be, temporarily, complete in himself.

As might be expected, the overall tone of this album is reflective. The tempos are relaxed and there is a good deal of that sometimes deceptive feeling of searching, while playing, for an idea to explore, of almost unexpectedly finding in a single note or phrase the impetus for a full chorus that follows. This is a feeling that often gives Monk's playing a quality of thinking-out-loud. It isn't that he sounds unprepared, or surprised by the directions in which he takes himself; it is rather, as if he were constantly discovering and rediscovering within himself both new and remembered patterns of music.

It will be clear to anyone familiar with his work that Monk playing alone is not merely a case of a pianist performing with drums, bass, and horns removed. There is something quite different in sound, and I think even in conception and approach. It may in part be that, being alone, he feels completely free to practice his unconventional and often irregular concepts of rhythmic "time." It is also, probably, partly a matter of not having to occupy a portion of his mind with the problems of being a bandleader. On the whole, though, I prefer not to fool around with analysis: the difference is there. Hearing it and reacting to it on the one unaccompanied selection on each of Monk's first three Riverside LPs led me to suggest that he make an entire album that way. He agreed that it would be an interesting venture. (One thing about making suggestions to Monk: you need never fear that he might accept one he considers second-rate merely to be polite or politic.)

In addition to everything else, this album seems to provide a definitive answer for those who—perhaps put off by the unorthodoxies of Thelonious's piano technique—like to claim that he really doesn't play too well. His performances here are always highly articulate, often (starting with "April in Paris") compellingly lyrical. There is a deep grasp of jazz roots and tradition apparent in the blues, "Functional." (Listening to the playback, Monk said: "I sound like James P. Johnson," which is an exaggeration, but an apt one.) And in all cases it's all right out in the open, where you can't miss it.

The art of literally solo piano has virtually disappeared in current jazz, with bass and drums customarily taking over the one-time role of the pianist's own left hand. While much that is new and valuable has come out of this, there are also piano players with a tendency to sound one-handed, and there are surely few men around who could bring off what Monk accomplishes here. Thelonious, who like many revolutionaries has an almost shocking regard for fundamentals, has always had a strong and able left hand; thus his efforts here retain an explicit beat and, unquestionably, swing. So, if you like, this LP can readily be taken as just one more object lesson to the effect that, whatever the task he turns to, the still-expanding talents of his pioneer jazz modernist enable him to be legitimately different from, and usually superior to, his contemporaries . . .

Finally, "Monk's Mood," where after an opening solo portion, tenor sax and bass are added. When described in advance, this sounded like a break in the unity of the album, but Thelonious insisted that it was entirely fitting. As usual in musical matters, he was right. John Coltrane, the extraordinarily impressive young tenor who came into prominence in 1956 as a member of the Miles Davis Quintet, creates a segment of vast richness and sensitivity, assisted by the equally notable bassist, Wilbur Ware. (Both men went on, just a few months after this recording session, to become part of the original lineup of the remarkable quartet with which Thelonious dazzled New York at the Five Spot Cafe.)

—Orrin Keepnews

These notes appeared on the original album liner.

## Thelonious Himself — REVISITED

**Despite** his obvious and almost unvarying preference for working in a specific quartet format—adding tenor saxophone to an acoustic piano-bass-drums rhythm section—I don't believe I was ever present at a Monk club performance that did not begin in exactly the same way: Thelonious came on the bandstand by himself, sat down at the piano, and began to play, unaccompanied.

There was apt to be a good deal of variety in what and how he played. It almost always began quietly and at a rather slow tempo; then it might to some extent pick up speed and steam. What he would play was most likely to be a standard tune, or at least what sounded like a standard, although hardly ever anything that was part of his regular repertoire. And he never appeared to expect the rest of his band to join him until he had completed that opening number.

I thought it undoubtedly would be valuable at some point to issue an entire set as played, unedited. Actually, I was aware of one such occasion that had been recorded—it was part of a full evening of recording at The Five Spot in July of 1958, none of which had been issued at the time. I did realize that I could not identify the solo opener of the segment I had in mind, and that annoyed me, because I like to think that I know just about every obscure pop tune ever written. I went so far as to ask Michael Cuscuna, who has surely produced reissues of everything Thelonious recorded for Blue Note. He thought he did know, but when I checked out the song title he had come up with, I found that he was wrong. When I asked Johnny Griffin, who was a long-time friend of Monk and had spent substantial time as a quartet member (including the time of that particular “live” recording), he knew what I was referring to, but had no idea of the title. (And since he had been sure he'd never been called on to play it, he had never inquired.)

I knew the pianist well enough to be sure that if I had asked, I'd have been more likely to get a hard time than a straight answer. Actually, I did eventually issue that set, long after Monk had died. The opener was necessarily listed only as “unidentified solo piano,” and no one has ever come up with further information.

But I was already firmly convinced that this man never did anything accidentally or without some purpose, and our working relationship, brief though it was at that time, was what had led me to that conviction. I had begun my tenure as his producer by having little trouble getting him to agree to two albums consisting of nothing but standard songs, even though one important reason he had been considered a difficult, even impenetrable artist was his insistence on mostly recording his own original and definitely eccentric compositions.

Each of Monk's first two Riverside LPs (one entirely of Ellington material, the other a mixture of long-lived pop tunes),

basically selected by Monk and all of course approved by him, had included one solo piano performance. I was gratefully aware of this when on his third album—with our scheduled studio time running out and two key musicians about to leave almost immediately for a long stretch of work on the road—our completed work was several minutes short of acceptable long-playing album length. I practically shoved the other four musicians out of the studio and, with perhaps twenty minutes left before another client would take over the room, simply asked Thelonious to give me a solo number, at least five minutes long. His one-take, five and a half minute version of “I Surrender, Dear” was flawless.

In developing solo performance repertoire, Thelonious tended to look primarily to the work of the writers of Tin Pan Alley pop standards. And that certainly was the case on this occasion. Five of the eight compositions here are such standard songs; on the other hand, each of the three Monk compositions that complete the album has its own special reason for being included. As I have already noted, the remarkable but out-of-context “Monk's Mood” trio performance was in all respects his idea, serving as a vehicle for introducing Coltrane as his about-to-be sidekick. I certainly knew that it was wildly inconsistent to allow this oddity. But, as I have usually pointed out when asked about it for more than a half-century, this was my fourth project with this man, and by now I had learned that if he expressed a really firm conviction, no matter how strange it might seem, it made most sense to go along with it. And by now I can inquire in return: how many other 50-year-old jazz recordings do people still ask questions about? In addition, of course, there is the strange fact that this was an almost-preview of the Monk band that would open at the East Village club called The Five Spot in July of 1957, launching the brief but quite overwhelming Monk/Coltrane creative partnership.

It might have been an almost automatic choice, or perhaps it was at my suggestion that he included the wonderful ballad, “Round Midnight,” that even then was regarded as his signature number. But I must take full responsibility for now including here only the final, initially-issued take of this composition. During the original recording process, Monk had reshaped and reworked this number as if it were newly written; he abruptly stopped takes in progress; there were discussions between him in the studio and me in the control room. And all of this had survived on tape, so that I was able to convert it, with only mild editing and deletion, into a basically coherent “work in progress” unit of slightly over twenty minutes, that has been included on a couple of previous reissue packages, including the multi-volume set entitled *Thelonious Monk: The Complete Riverside Recordings*. But what to do about it on this reissue? It was a part of one of the sessions that

resulted in this album—shouldn't it therefore be included here? But I have been forced in this case to be unusually practical. Even compact discs have time limits; so to make room for all the material in the single-album format of this *Keepnews Collection* reissue series would have required eliminating virtually every existing alternate take of other selections—five other examples of this pianist's improvisational genius. In my judgment, that would have been the wrong call.

The remaining original was the only newly-composed work on the record. “Functional” is a blues; it was improvised on the spot, in response to my request. As we stood in the control room, listening to a playback of the just-recorded first take, Monk turned to me and said, in a tone of great delight and surprise: “I sound just like James P. Johnson!” My own surprise at that moment stemmed from the fact that I had not known he was at all aware of Johnson, a legendary black composer, bandleader and pianist—perhaps the greatest of all Harlem stride piano players—who was also an important early mentor of Fats Waller. In the early 1930s, as I soon learned, Johnson had lived in New York City's San Juan Hill area, in the West Sixties—which is where the Monk family also lived, so Thelonious, as a teenager, had been able to do a lot of valuable local listening to James P.

I remain pleased and proud that without even being aware of that connection, I had pushed Monk towards this path. There definitely is a difference, both in style and in attitude, between his small-band work and his solo performances; there is also a significant difference between what he does on this record and the much more relaxed playing on a second all-solo album recorded in San Francisco about two and a half years later. In contrast to the several multi-take selections here, that recording consisted of twelve numbers, only one of which was played more than once. That was also a remarkable accomplishment, but my personal preference was always for his more tense and probing mode—which is what is primarily in evidence on *Thelonious Himself*.

In addition, I have always considered this project to mark a major turning point in our working relationship. In appointing myself his record producer I had undoubtedly taken on more of a work load than I was qualified to handle. The rather aggressive way I plunged into the situation was probably the only approach that could have succeeded, but the initial decision to begin our work together with two albums of standards, played without any horns to share the solo burden, was not exactly taking the easy path. The next assignment was the quintet album, *Brilliant Corners*, essentially built around one of the most difficult to play numbers he ever constructed, which almost wrecked all of us. Doing a solo album might then have seemed uncomplicated and less stressful, but I had had advance warning when Thelonious casually noted his

intention of adding two musicians on one number.

However, it was the scheduled first evening of recording that was the real turning point. I really do not remember the exact date, and can find no paperwork to help me, but I clearly recall sitting in the control room with Jack Higgins, the basically low-key staff engineer on our sessions at Reeves Sound Studios, as time passed by and almost nothing happened. There were periodic phone calls from Baroness Nica de Koenigswarter, Monk's friend and patroness, advising us that they had been delayed by one thing or another, but were on their way. It was certainly well over an hour before the pianist and his designated driver actually did arrive. He was clearly not in working condition. I guess I had already decided that I had nothing to lose except my temper, so I proceeded to deliver a lecture. It was a long time ago, and I do not really recall much of the exact language, but there was a lot along the lines of my need to respect myself, and the specific advice not to bother showing up at future sessions if he was going to be more than a half-hour late, because I would not still be there. Then we rescheduled initial studio time for the evening of April 5.

I do quite vividly recall that occasion. I got to the studio about fifteen minutes early and walked into the control room. Thelonious was sitting there, wearing a very broad smile that I would see from time to time over the next few years, most frequently when he was about to be very pleased with himself. “What kept you?” he asked.

It was a very pulled-together, productive session, and the first time I was able to feel sure that I had reached him on a personal, human-being level.

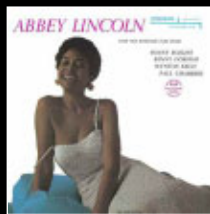
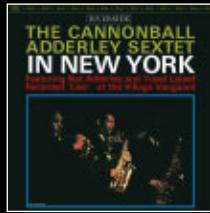
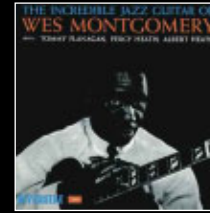
—ORRIN KEEPNEWS  
May 2008



Photo © Bob Parent

THELONIOUS MONK

# KEEP NEWS COLLECTION



# *Thelonious Himself*

solo piano by

# THELONIOUS MONK

*On Side 2, #4 only:* add John Coltrane, tenor sax; Wilbur Ware, bass. New York, April 12 and 16, 1957.

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In addition to everything else, this album seems to

SIDE 1		
1. April in Paris		(Harburg-Duke)
2. Ghost of a Chance		(Crosby-Washington-Young)
3. Functional		(Thelonious Monk)
4. I'm Getting Sentimental Over You		(Washington-Bassman)
SIDE 2		
1. I Should Care		(Cahn-Stordahl-Weston)
2. 'Round Midnight		(Monk-Williams)
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provide a definitive answer for those who—perhaps put off by the unorthodoxies of Thelonious' piano technique—like to claim that he really doesn't play too well. His performances here are always highly articulate, often (starting with *April in Paris*) compellingly lyrical. There is a deep grasp of jazz roots and tradition apparent in the blues, *Functional* (listening to the playback, Monk said: "I sound like James P. Johnson," which is an exaggeration, but an apt one.) And in all cases it's all right out in the open, where you can't miss it.

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A HIGH FIDELITY Recording — Riverside-Reeves SPEC-TROSONIC High Fidelity Engineering (Audio Compensation: RIAA Curve). Produced, and notes written by, Orrin Keepnews. Cover by Paul Waller (photography) and Paul Bacon (design). Engineer: Jack Higgins (Reeves Sound Studios).

## RIVERSIDE RECORDS

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235 West 46th Street      New York 36, N. Y.

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Another album of solo piano by Monk is —

*Thelonious Alone in San Francisco* (RLP 12-312)

He is also featured on such other *Riverside* LPs as —

*Five by Monk by Five; with Thad Jones*  
(RLP 12-305)

The THELONIOUS MONK Orchestra at Town Hall  
(RLP 12-300)

*Thelonious in Action* (RLP 12-262) and  
*Misterioso* (RLP 12-279): THELONIOUS  
MONK Quartet; with Johnny Griffin

*Mulligan Meets Monk* — featuring  
GERRY MULLIGAN (RLP 12-247)

*Monk's Music; with Coleman Hawkins,  
John Coltrane, Art Blakey* (RLP 12-242)

*Brilliant Corners; with Sonny Rollins,  
Max Roach* (RLP 12-226)

The Unique THELONIOUS MONK (RLP 12-209)  
THELONIOUS MONK plays Duke Ellington  
(RLP 12-201)

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Thelonious Monk* (RLP 12-271)

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Quintet* (RLP 12-322)

The CANNONBALL ADDERLEY Quintet in  
San Francisco (RLP 12-311)

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*Portrait in Jazz: BILL EVANS Trio* (RLP 12-315)

*Blue Soul: BLUE MITCHELL* (RLP 12-309)

The WES MONTGOMERY Trio (RLP 12-310)

This Here Is BOBBY TIMMONS (RLP 12-317)

*The Modern Touch: BENNY GOLSON; with  
J. J. Johnson* (RLP 12-256)

*Work Song: NAT ADDERLEY; with  
Wes Montgomery* (RLP 12-318)