

8th August 2024

Pianos

“The piano ain’t got no wrong notes.”

Thelonius Monk, *As quoted in ‘Thelonius Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original’, (Keeley, 2009)*

From keys yesterday to pianos today, seemed like an obvious connection!

Thelonius Monk was an American Jazz pianist who died in 1982. He had a unique improvisational style, and many of his contributions to the jazz repertoire are now considered to be standards in their genre: *Round Midnight; Blue Monk; Straight, No Chaser; Ruby, My Dear; In Walked Bud, Well, You Needn’t*; and many more. For those of you who understand these things (and I don’t, so I had to look it up ...) Monk’s individualistic style featured dissonances and “angular melodic twists”, often using flat ninths, unexpected chromatic notes together, low bass notes and stride, switched key releases, with the occasional use of “a highly percussive attack”. So, now you know! Every day’s a school day, in seems.

But the point is, such was the ground-breaking nature of his composing and playing that Monk was often misunderstood as a musician and occasionally lampooned. His seven-word response (quoted above) to an “expert” who had said that Monk created extraordinary music “in spite of playing the wrong notes on the piano” is wonderful. There *are* no wrong notes on the piano (though the legendary line from Eric Morcombe that “I’m playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order” comes to mind ...) Every key has its place: black and white, of course, but high and low too, all eighty-eight of them, if you’re playing a grand piano.

Tom Lehrer, the American composer and pianist, once said: “Life is like a piano: What you get out of it depends on how you play it.” It is, therefore, the combination of these notes, how they work together, that matters. The tunes may be different. The style of music may vary. The quality of the composition and the playing may differ. Indeed, what’s produced may be completely misunderstood. But Thelonius Monk’s defence of his improvisational style remains valid.

So, it’s worth remembering that in your church, community, society, workplace, social-circle, sports’ team, or whatever, “The piano ain’t got no wrong notes.” *Every* note matters. Every note can be put to good use.

A prayer for today

Lord, if I’m black or white, high up or low down, help me remember I have a place. Amen

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