

# THE LOONIEST MONK

There are plenty of jazz musicians who are just mathematicians; like trained bears, or truck drivers who deliver notes. I've been living in the basement of a guy who plays first chair trumpet with Fred Radke and he never listens to music, only talk shows. But there's something about the free, improv stuff that leads to drugs and psychosis and general self-infliction. How many of the greats were totally nuts from skating along a highwire made of smoking ice? And then the race thing, too. Not everybody could split to Europe—or would settle for that. A guy like Miles carrying all that bitterness; that's bad craziness right there, really.

And I don't mean craziness that works, genius idiosyncrasies. I've seen Sun-Ra playing the Fillmore surrounded by sweating anthracite seams of conga drummers while he jerked his hands around his cubic fortress of heaped-up keyboards, staring blindly up into a blue-white spot, tracing his heliocentric worlds. No more crazy than Galileo and Copernicus: just keeping his hand on the Big Switch. Or Rahsaan Roland Kirk, one of the very few musical surrealists, playing three different horns in three different keys at the one same time out of the one same mouth just to reproduce sounds bequeathed him by his religion of dreams and spirits. (I mean, Cobain dies and kids start digging *Tony* fucking *Bennett* when there's Rahsaan records around?) Nothing nutz there: surrealism is the opposite of insanity.

But how about Mingus? Everybody that was ever around the scene has a Mingus story, right? Usually of the kind where he kept an audience in Stockholm waiting three hours, then finally showed up and treated them to a two hour lecture—in English—about his personal devils, the "vultures" of the record companies conspiring to rob him of his music and just generally take him off. Then treated them to a forty five minute recital—not on bass, but on piano. Later he even took up with Joni Mitchell.

But far crazier was his transformation of a generic gig in the Village into a personal statement. He was always opposed, to say the least, to people taping him live. It's a real thrill watching a man of his stature drop his bass and plunge into the audience where a junior high fan was using a rinky-dink little cassette machine to record a personal momento of his hero. Then pile all over the kid, smash the recorder and rip the tape out of the cassette— meanwhile raging about the record vultures for whom the kid was obviously an agent. But he topped it that night in the village, when some rube came in with an old scimitar he'd copped at an antique shop in the area. Mingus, taking the stage two hours late with two scared teenaged sidemen who'd never even been introduced, got a load of that Mongol shivaree and just **knew** the record company vultures had escalated their persecution of him another diabolic notch. He came off the bandstand and unsheathed the terrible swift sword before the tourist could even show him a receipt, jabbering

the exploitation rap punctuated with flash/slash of cold steel through furniture and furbishings. Listeners elected to leave. Stampede, do yo' stuff. So few people react well to the sight of a totally demented jazzbo coming on with a swinging blade and showing some mighty tasty chops. Now to me, that's over into crazy. But the next guy could come tell you it's really about race.

Or you take Jack DeJonette, who was the hottest upcomer drummer until Tony Williams met Miles and developed into a teenaged stainless werewolf. Great drummer, DeJohnette, but a seething mass of nuttiness and superstition. He had a phobia about Burkhardt, a friend of mine who played a lot of Django/Szabo guitar at jams around Manhattan back then. He was in a dressing room behind a little Harlem club when Burkhardt and I walked in with some guys from the house band. He panicked, eyes rolling and hands sweating as he started plowing around the room. I thought he was looking for a gun, so I put a hand on mine wondering if I'd end up going through life as the "Man Who Shot Jack DeJohnette", but he suddenly grabbed up a pair of his own autograph model sticks and threw them at Burkhardt, yelling at him to take them and get the hell out of there. So we split. A skinny pianist ran out after us, weaving his hands apologetically and saying that DeJohnette had come to sit on their next set, but apparently couldn't handle being around Burkhardt, who graciously bowed out so they wouldn't miss a chance to jam with the dude. I was blown away, but the piano player

patted my shoulder and said, "It happens every time this cat shows up." Intrigued I asked if this paranoia was only directed at Burkhardt. "No, man, there's others," he said, "Only whites, you know. Don't worry; he'll cool out." I asked Burkhardt what he'd done to become a psychoactive ingredient in the life of Jack DeJohnette, but he had no idea. "I've never even spoken to him."

I'm thinking about all this because of this muscular, white-haired, old street guy I ran into at the bus stop in front of the county building on Third Avenue. I'd seem him around, lugging a large suitcase with him, but never spoken to him. Here he was with the suitcase standing open and inside were two very good speakers, an automobile tape deck, and two motorcycle batteries. The speakers were putting out some of the sweetest sax I ever remember hearing. I tend to like Getz and Desmond, and it was like that but more supple or something, gorgeous in a real stand-up way. I listened to a couple of numbers, passing on a couple of buses, and knew I had to get some of it for me. So I walked over, smiling and nodding and such, and politely asked if he'd mind telling me who the artist was. He had watched impassively while I walked over, but as soon as he spoke his face twisted up in hatred and practically spit every word he said. "That's nothing but some niggers, just old nigger music, nothing you'd want to know about." was what he said.

Kind of a conversation stopper, but I really wanted to know the players—and was getting interested in the conversation itself. I told him I didn't care what the musicians were, but would like to know who they were because they were fucking beautiful. "You don't care when they're just music in a suitcase," he said, "But if they were here, they'd be niggers, wouldn't they?"

Hey, I'm just a jazz fan. "And I'm just an old nigger, out here listening to some niggers playing nigger music, huh?"

Well, I was sure sorry he felt that way. "Just sorry I'm not kissing your white ass, maybe selling you some of this nigger music so you can say it's yours, am I right?"

He was getting more and more agitated, stalking around, yelling, fists clenched and neck corded. The crowd at the bus stop was frozen with embarrassment. I backed away from him. I was packing that time, too, but sure as hell didn't want to become the Man Who Shot the Old Nigger Over Music. A bus pulled up and I stepped on. He took a few steps after the bus as it pulled out, eye to eye with me through the window and screaming in outrage. "Peckerwood," he yelled, "Peckerwood motherfucker!"

What do you think—was he crazy? Or was it just a race thing? Is non-insane by virtue of race a possible verdict?

And what do you think about this? If I'd paid him to tell me who it was, then gone out and bought the tape, would I have been exploiting

Black music? Or just providing a market to support Black musicians? Did Whites rip off Mingus or just buy Miles his Ferrari? In my own arts career I've spent a lot of time hungry, desperately searching for somebody to exploit me. On the other hand...

Three months later I saw the old guy again, sitting in King County Jail, the open I-Deck cell we called the Old Man's Tank. I asked the other guards what his story was. It's not too hard to figure why he'd gotten into it with somebody, somebody who'd kicked his ass and ripped off his suitcase full of that soaring, glorious music. White guys, maybe. Probably not record company vultures, but who knows? He'd been defiant to the cops who responded to the incident and gotten beaten again for his troubles, including a major thumping in the elevator up to the jail that I heard about later from the guy who did it. To hear him tell it, the guy had it coming. I'll tell you a secret you won't like to hear: if you've ever been a cop working the streets one thing you know is that Rodney King had it coming. That might not make it right, but there it is.

Of course the old guy really was crazy...but maybe you don't agree. He never gave any sign of recognition in the months he was in KCJ, and I never tried to talk to him. Though I would really have liked to. Not that I'm a do-gooder or anything. I gotta say, I was just interested in pumping his brain, only interested in getting my hands on his music. He was calm enough; not a pacer but a starrer. He'd just sit there staring out

of eyes like you see on caged carnivores in the zoo; a dull, flat smolder. Eyes that might be dreaming about killing you, but would rather die than let you see how much they want it.

All I wanted was to know who was playing that sax. I still do. After all these years I sometimes find myself down in Bud's basement or Bop Street casting around for that sound. Looking for it, listening for it, sometimes almost hearing it. It's almost like I really know who it is, like the whole thing is just right on the tip of my tongue but I can't get to it.