meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract." And so did John Birks Gillespie, who died on the morning of January 6, 1993, at seventy-five. As Mr. Sammler observes, "A few may comprehend that it is the strength to do one's duty daily and promptly that makes saints and heroes."*

32 ❖ *Sarah Vaughan (Divine)*

Sarah Vaughan is the ageless voice of modern jazz—of giddy postwar virtuosity, biting wit, and fearless caprice. Take it as symbolically significant, at least, that Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie recorded as her sidemen before they recorded as bandleaders. Though she was not one of the musical experimenters who invented the new jazz in after-hours Harlem laboratories, Vaughan was in sync from the beginning, in the bop-breeding orchestras of Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine. Her harmonic acumen, to say nothing of her impeccable time, stupendous technique, and absolutely drop-dead gorgeous timbre, was as advanced as that of anybody in the bebop boys' club. Indeed, she validated the boys: it was the Divine One and not they who triggered the assimilation of their music into the mainstream. For forty-five years, from timid, toothy teen to sleek, sultry Circe to stout maternal diva, she enchanted audiences who didn't know bop from chop suey—making them swallow every raised fourth and like it. They didn't call her "Sassy" for nothing.

In 1950, Columbia Records set about making her a star, interring her in huge studio orchestras, usually upholstered with strings, but only once—once in five years—featuring her with a small modern jazz ensemble. At that historic outing, backed by Miles Davis and Budd Johnson, she recorded "Mean to Me," "East of the Sun," "Come Rain or Come Shine," and other consummate masterworks of twentieth-century vocal gymnastics that are invariably offered as examples of her extraordinary intelligence and radiant power. Naturally the company didn't want *that* to happen again. No matter; it wasn't the presence of a jazz band that made Vaughan a jazz singer. Consider two other records she made in more routine circumstances, but look closely—in her music, the details are everything.

*The transcriptions used here are by the composer and trumpet player Jon Schapiro, whose insights into jazz musicology helped me make sense of the stories they tell.

"Thinking of You" is a 1927 ballad that was revived in 1950 when its writers, Kalmar and Ruby, were the subject of an MGM musical, *Three Little Words*. Three versions made the charts in less than two months: those by Don Cherry and Eddie Fisher sold best, but only Sarah Vaughan's has been selling ever since. Accompanied by a studio band playing a Norman Leyden arrangement that has the virtue of staying out of her way (those occasionally jutting piano runs are by Bud Powell), she begins with a wordless two-bar cadenza that swells dynamically before gliding without a rest into time and the first word, "Why," which she sings as two pitches (a motif). Her sustained notes repose easily over the methodical tempo, sensuous yet pulsing. She completes the eight bars by expanding the last word in the title phrase, "you," into a two-bar wordless croon leading directly into the next eight.

Vaughan is so musical she is often underestimated as an interpreter of lyrics. Note how during the next sixteen bars she accents words for meaning, imparting a sexy current while heightening the rhythm and varying the phrasing. She peels off the *b* in "bliss" (prefiguring Marilyn Monroe). She mines the title phrase in the lower part of her midrange, making it coy and husky. She lightens up on "night" and the second syllable of "tiptoe" ("When I fall asleep at night it seems/You just tiptoe into all my dreams"), making them exceedingly seductive. Other words are held forth like great sunsets: "seems" ranges over three notes and is sustained eight beats; "I" spans six beats and floats into the next phrase without pause. After singing the first chorus, she essays an embellished repeat of the bridge, this time over an unexpected four-bar stop-time rhythm (accenting the first two beats of each measure), now stressing "fall" and "asleep" in the course of varying the line. In the last eight bars, she makes the first two words, "So I," two pitches each and detours into a Billy Eckstine-style coda that leads into the last, sustained note. Word by word and note by note, it is an enthralling performance, exuding a voluptuous virtuosity quite without precedence in the music of, say, Billie Holiday or Ella Fitzgerald.

A few weeks later, she recorded "Perdido," the Ellington standard, written by his trombonist Juan Tizol in 1942 and fitted with lyrics by Ervin Drake. Leyden's arrangement swings enough to serve as a springboard for Vaughan, who goes for broke on the two bridges. In the first one, she goes high on "high," a hint of what's to come. The first half of the second chorus consists of two-bar exchanges between orchestra and singer, and climaxes as she flings the word "sombrero" into the release and twirls the passage ("High was the moon when we first came close/

Low was the moon when we said adios"), fanning "high" over nine notes and finishing with a brassily tossed-off "adios," all accomplished in an instrumental manner with harmonic and melodic impetuousness that other singers may have envisioned but that only Vaughan could actually bring off. The rest is relatively anticlimactic. She outriffs the band, altering "perdido" to "perdidio" at one point for rhythmic effect and landing on cat feet after a scat break.

The "sombrero" episode, so characteristic of her, is the kind of thing that shook up mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani the first time she heard Vaughan in concert in the '70s. "She'll wire out her voice if she keeps doing that," she remarked to a companion, who astonished her with the information that she had been doing precisely that for thirty-something years. One of her celebrated set pieces at the time was an arrangement of "My Funny Valentine" (happily documented on *Live in Japan*, 1973), where she turns the bridge into an escalator-arpeggio, her voice beginning as a cello and ending as a flute. Seeing her in those years—the commanding concert performer alternating strenuous arias with self-deprecating jokes, bebop gallops, and sensuous ballads—was a revelation. And so was the audience, which behaved like the gallery in a Baptist church, cheering and whooping every spellbinding conceit. Vaughan enjoyed that, but she did not court or accept mindless acclaim, and she could not abide people clapping in time, a practice she found incomprehensible, vaguely insulting, and intrusive—they drowned out the rhythm section and interfered with her concentration. Her way of dealing with it was to subtly modulate to a different rhythm until the clappers realized to their chagrin that they could no longer find the two and four and, after the last of them desisted, slip back into the original rhythm.

Sarah Vaughan was born in 1924, in Newark, New Jersey, and she sang in the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, where her mother played organ. She had begun studying piano at six and by twelve was subbing for her mother at the organ. Like Carmen McRae and Dinah Washington, Sarah was a capable pianist who sometimes accompanied herself in performance, but her true forte at the keyboard was something she kept to herself—a talent for exploring the altered chords that ultimately informed the liberties she took singing. As a shy and awkward eighteen-year-old, she sang "Body and Soul" on Amateur Night at the Apollo, winning the contest and a job. In the audience that night was Earl Hines, and though he wasn't impressed by her demeanor, he was delighted with her voice; she was delighted when he came backstage and offered her a spot in his orchestra. Within weeks, she was playing second piano to Hines and

sharing the vocals with Billy Eckstine in a band (unrecorded because of the AFM ban) that also included Parker and Gillespie. In 1944, she recorded one of the first bop sessions (produced by Leonard Feather, who wrote that Bird and Diz had been "hailing her voice as a new development in jazz"). Two years later Sarah headlined at Cafe Society. By the time she was twenty-five, Vaughan developed a masterful stage presence and enough assurance to allow her contagious humor to blossom forth.

She also began taking greater musical chances. Her 1945 recording of "Mean to Me" is impressive, but the version introduced at the Christmas 1949 Charlie Parker Carnegie Hall concert, with its soaring second chorus, was something else entirely. Her voice had wings: luscious and tensile, disciplined and nuanced, it was thick as cognac yet soared off the beaten path like an instrumental solo, delivering on ideas other singers don't permit themselves to contemplate because even if they can pull off the improvisational gambits that were her trademark, the risks would be too great and the cost of failure humiliation. That her voice was a four-octave muscle of infinite flexibility made her disarming shtick all the more ironic. In her concert years, she would introduce herself, for the benefit of those who happened to come in out of the rain, as Della Reese, Carmen McRae, or June Carter. Several songs into the set, mopping perspiration from her brow, she would lament, "I come up here looking like Lena Horne and walk off looking like Sarah Vaughan."

Those of us who discovered her at that stage in her career were surprised to learn that her role as concert diva was fairly new, in part an expression of her frustration with the recording industry, which had been stifling her for years. All her life, Vaughan was poised between two careers: indomitable jazz creator, exquisite pop star. She sang "Lover Man" with Dizzy, made the charts with "Tenderly." After an apprenticeship at Continental and Musicraft, Columbia put the glam on her, as well as the occasional novelty ("De Gas Pipe She's Leaking, Joe")—why should she be different from everyone else on the roster? She did laudable work for Columbia, sometimes under trying circumstances, and ended up a high-priced supper club act. But they couldn't turn her into much of a hit maker—she cracked the Top 40 a dozen times, but never the Top 10 (the closest she came was with the flip side of "Thinking of You," "I Love the Guy"). She simply didn't sound persuasive singing idiotic songs such as "If Someone Had Told Me."

She switched to Mercury in 1954, an affiliation that lasted more than a decade, notwithstanding a brief sojourn in the early '60s with Roulette. This label honored her proven appeal to both audiences, and it seemed to work; that is, she made several unspeakably bad records at the same sessions that produced many of her greatest artistic triumphs, and the

former made a great deal of money. In the first year she signed, she had a major chartbuster with "Make Yourself Comfortable," a shovelful of syrup from Bob Merrill, the demon who one year earlier provided Mercury and Patti Page with "(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window." With her voice locked in an echo chamber, Vaughan is reduced to hackwork. Columbia had never been that bad, or that successful. But within a few months, she had Clifford Brown by her side for *Sarah Vaughan*, recording the exhilarating "It's Crazy." And so it went: at one session, she made the dreadful "Oh Yeah" and the intoxicating "I'm in the Mood for Love"; at another, the ghastly "How Important Can It Be?" and the inspired "The Touch of Your Lips." Meanwhile, she was appearing live with one of the great piano trios: Jimmy Jones, Richard Davis, and Roy Haynes, whose work throughout her entrancing 1957 *Swingin' Easy* (on the line about off-key singing in "They Can't Take That Away from Me," she scores a bull's-eye dissonance) is a lesson in empathic drumming.

For a while, the good albums were issued with the company's jazz logo, Emarcy, while the rest came out under the parent name. But the distinction was fudged by the high-class pop records she also made for Mercury, like the incomparable *Great Songs from Hit Shows*. Bad songs might disengage her, but sugary arrangements of good songs did no harm. Sometimes, they perversely inspired her to go an extra step, as in her immensely poignant "Little Girl Blue," where she mimics and mocks the strings with a suitably wordless croon. She was ever alert, and given room to maneuver, she did, especially with her trio, turning the phrase "and when your fortune's falling" into an ascending glide on "Pennies from Heaven" or reacting to Roy Haynes's bump on the line "I felt a bump" in "Polka Dots and Moonbeams." She had her biggest hit with the ineffable "Broken-Hearted Melody" (1959), a song that might have suited Connie Francis or Annette Funicello, but not the thirty-five-year-old artist who once sent Miles Davis into a paroxysm of admiration: "Sarah sounding like Bird and Diz," he enthused, "and them two playing everything!" The record paid a lot of bills, but she refused to subject paying customers to it. On the other hand, she recorded Erroll Garner's "Misty" in the same period and brought down the house with it for thirty years.

As long as she could have it both ways, everything was fine. But by the early '60s the label sought only middle-of-the-road hits. A new generation of producers and song pluggers was less than enchanted by her spontaneity, rapier reflexes, and invention. Vaughan complained that her producers were handing her lead sheets for new songs in the studio on the day they were to be recorded, depriving her of rehearsal time on the assumption that unfamiliarity would breed obeisance to the written

score. They underestimated her resourcefulness—she could deconstruct a chord as quickly as any instrumentalist—and her pride. By 1966, she had had enough of songs like "Dominique's Discotheque" and attempts to market her as a middlebrow pop star. When her Mercury contract was up the following year, she turned her back on the industry and refused to record for four years. She signed with Mainstream in the early '70s, reuniting with producer Bob Shad, who had piloted most of the Emarcy dates, but he now submerged her in studio orchestras and dubious material. The records, however, no longer mattered: she was onto something else. Refusing offers from supper clubs, she began nurturing a new following in concert halls. The next sixteen years were in many ways the most triumphant of her career. She bonded with audiences. Records were almost irrelevant.

The best evidence of her altered standing was the evolution of her longest-running encore, "Send in the Clowns." She first recorded Stephen Sondheim's song shortly after it was introduced in *A Little Night Music*, but her record went nowhere. Then she worked the song into a closing routine: She'd coyly solicit requests, nod her head in patient solicitude as they were shouted back at her by the dozens, then announce, "I don't know how to tell you this, but I'm not gonna do any of those." Her pianist would limn a waltz, she'd intone the words, "Isn't it rich?" and the clock stopped for the next several minutes. As she built to the final cadenza—a characteristic antic that followed the phrase "losing my timing this year," demanding flawless timing and breath control—audiences roared. Within a couple of years, word was out and people started responding to her invitation for requests by calling out, "Send in the Clowns." By the mid-'80s, the whole audience was shouting it. The "I'm not going to do any of those" bit didn't work any more. To exploit the unusual if not unique phenomenon of a concert hit without a corresponding record, her current label recorded a new version accompanied by Count Basie's orchestra. Yet after all those hundreds of renderings with her trio, Vaughan passed away without leaving a representative recording of what had become her signature tune.

Vaughan's true comeback on records took place in 1978, when Norman Granz signed her to Pablo (inadvertently adding to the insecurities of Ella Fitzgerald, whose personal manager he was). Her bumpy five-year association with Pablo began with the compelling if flawed *How Long Has This Been Going On?*—Vaughan's first jazz album since an uneven session arranged by Jimmy Rowles four years earlier, and her most effective since *Live in Japan*. Coming after so long a drought, the record, with its ten familiar songs and accompaniment by a stellar foursome—

Oscar Peterson, Joe Pass, Ray Brown, and Louie Bellson—received a strangely varied response. Those who came to admire La Vaughan as an opera singer without an opera were disappointed, but those who treasured the albums she made in the company of her musical peers were elated. Once again she was swinging hard, and she was in outstanding voice, rejecting the archness that sometimes undermined her recordings in favor of blues locutions, audacious variations, and riffs. It's one of the earthiest records she ever made.

Despite her apprenticeship in the Mt. Zion Church, gospel orthodoxies do not often crop up in Vaughan's singing. Aside from her prized 1947 recordings of "The Lord's Prayer" and "Motherless Child," she avoided spirituals. But the rudiments of soul singing do peek through here. They are apparent in the three-note melisma she attaches to the word "life" at the end of the first chorus of "I've Got the World on a String," and to the word "see" in the second chorus, and in the way she growls "anytime" in the third. They are unmistakable in the way she has rewritten "Teach Me Tonight," in the way she handles the second half of the bridge on "How Long," in numerous blues phrases, and several riffing out-choruses. The high note right before the tag ending on "Teach Me Tonight" recalls Jackie Wilson—it is not standard Vaughan procedure, although the range itself is nothing out of the ordinary for her.

How Long Has This Been Going On? was recorded in one day and sometimes sounds it. A not especially inspired "Easy Living" deserved a retake if for no other reason than that she botched the lyric; her pacing and pronunciation on the first eight bars of "Midnight Sun" are faultless, but the song finally gets away from her and she compensates with overindulged vibrato. Still, there are at least six stirring performances, more than on most people's records. Start with the first cut, "I've Got the World on a String," and then proceed directly to the second half, where she does only one number with the quartet, and one number with each member. It's hardly necessary to note how difficult it is to sing a ballad creatively with just piano or guitar or bass, or to effectively trade two-measure breaks with drums. Vaughan makes it seem effortless and natural. Peterson introduces "More Than You Know" with a few notes from the Adagio from Rodrigo's *Concerto De Aranjuez*, and Vaughan sings the verse (note the way she puts the affected emphasis on "true" in perspective with the soulfully phrased "remain") before setting up the chorus in her mightiest trombone intonation. This is a masterly, emotive Vaughan performance: she picks up the first release with the same breath as the preceding phrase; the second release is patterned with descending parallel arpeggios; and the protracted ending has her repeating the title line four times, returning to the tonic only on the very last note. "My Old Flame," accompanied by Pass, is just as good. She makes the crawling tempo swing (especially on the release), and she resolves a treacherous ending so cleanly it seems planned, though I'm sure it wasn't.

The 1978 version of "Body and Soul" is her third, and it relegates the recordings of 1946 and 1954 (as good as those are) to apprentice work. Accompanied only by Ray Brown's bass, she begins with the release at a medium up-tempo. The practice of starting a song in the middle is pretty unusual, although it's an obvious way of creating immediate tension and surprise. In his 1961 recording of "Let's Fall in Love," Frank Sinatra began with the release, moved backward to the verse, and then, after a dramatic pause, forward into the chorus. "Body and Soul," with its strenuous key change, lends itself better to such tinkering, and Vaughan heightens the drama by halving the tempo as she begins the chorus fresh. She keeps you alert to every measure's nuance, and a couple of gambits are outstanding: the paraphrase melody she introduces on the line, "I spend my days in longing," and the single, bulleting arpeggio she makes of two sentences fragments, ". . . you're making. You know I'm yours. . . ."

Excepting his splendid work on "More Than You Know," Peterson's solos are superficially bluesy, but he's attentive, and there are moments when Vaughan works closely with him, as when she scats his segue chords coming out of the release on "I've Got the World on a String." Pass's best work is his counterpoint on "Teach Me Tonight"; Brown and Bellson play well together, as usual. Vaughan never required much more from a rhythm section than reliable, observant backing, and when she sang as well as she did here, she inspired it to keep pace.

The most disappointing of her Pablo projects—because it was so promising—was the two-volume *Duke Ellington Songbook*, made in 1980. Like every artist, Vaughan had doubts, and they came out in mannerisms that she leaned on in the absence of inspiration. Yet in retrospect, the successes of the Ellington project outweigh the failures. Granz didn't give her much in the way of orchestral support (especially in comparison to Ella Fitzgerald's Ellington songbook, a collaboration with the maestro himself): a few uneven Billy Byers arrangements; and for the rest, a four-piece rhythm section and one or two soloists. For once, the chief failing is the kind of liberties Vaughan takes—the very liberties that elsewhere are the key to her genius. Not that Ellington's songs are sacred texts (though it would be a tonic to hear someone record them as written, every far-flung interval hit with precise articulation): the problem is that her playfulness occasionally minimizes the material, at times suggesting a lack of conviction.

The outstanding ballad selection, "In a Sentimental Mood," is the ex-

ception—brilliant Vaughan that dwarfs everything else on the record. She works the arpeggios with scrupulous care, her luscious voice swelling and decaying with total control, her low notes booming sonorously. Byers's arrangement is, for once, rich and supportive; after the strings interlude, Vaughan returns not at the release but five bars early. Her "Solitude," however, sacrifices Ellington's poignancy and clarity with coy variations and a brassy second release in which she whoops it up with trombonist J.J. Johnson. "Day Dream" is a spare and elegant song in which every note is essential, and Vaughan's ornaments aren't improvements: the three notes she applies to the word "glow" obscure the gracefulness of the original line, as do the three notes she adds to "came" in "Sophisticated Lady" and the two she uses for "heart" and "part" on "All Too Soon." And while the half-note/dotted-quarter/eighth-note rhythms of the "Day Dream" release can seem facile, her dotted-half/two-eighths substitution is no improvement. She scats most of "I Didn't Know About You," with results that are no more than pleasantly glib.

Elsewhere, the Vaughan imprint is so beguiling that one revels, as usual, in her willfulness, for ultimately this is a personal testament. She never goes near the original melody of "I'm Just a Lucky So and So," turning it into a febrile blues with falsetto and stop-time episodes. It isn't preferable to the original, but it's pure Vaughan in a histrionic mood, and she seems to be having fun. She also toys with "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart," displacing rhythms in the first release, then swinging the out-chorus, concluding with a trumpetlike high note and glissando. She makes the flame in an otherwise perfunctory "Sophisticated Lady" really flicker, and she's so authoritative on the release of "All Too Soon" that you wonder why the rest of the interpretation is so pale. This "Lush Life" hasn't the rich certainty of her 1956 version (a comparison of the two is particularly damning to Byers's arrangement and the sound mix), but her huskier voice, subtle parlando, and diminished tempo are earmarks of the mature and tougher Vaughan. Although the band arrangement on "In a Mellow Tone" is nondescript, this is one piece that she's made her own through frequent performances. On the combo selections, Jimmy Rowles is the most helpful accompanist; obbligati are provided by Frank Foster, Frank Wess, Zoot Sims, J. J. Johnson, and Waymon Reed—never more than two men to a selection.

If Vaughan was proud of being a jazz singer, she was—like Ellington—impatient with those who wanted to limit her. Not all the mainstream projects amounted to much (a disastrous collection of Beatles songs; an album of lyrics by Pope John Paul II; an album she never completed with Quincy Jones). But she reveled in diverse challenges, and some of those

projects—her 1957 duets with Eckstine on Irving Berlin tunes, her *Gershwin Songbook* of the same year, the 1977 *I Love Brazil*, and her last major album, the 1982 *Gershwin Live!* (featuring her thrill-ride version of "Fascinatin' Rhythm")—are momentous. Yet there were moments when her nerve failed her. Her good friend Leontyne Price tried to convince Vaughan to tour Europe with her, performing together on stage as they had done informally. Sarah agreed at first, but ultimately reneged. The prospect intimidated her, she said. It's hard to imagine Vaughan intimidated by anyone, though outside of music her life had its rocky places. Four marriages failed. She worked off her nervous energy by fast driving, developed a taste for coke, and for many years smoked too much—lung cancer took her life in 1990, at sixty-six.

On stage, she could be caustic if her requisite chair and glass of water weren't awaiting her, but talent always stimulated her. When reunited with the class of 1945—Gillespie, Eckstine (whose bass baritone she liked to mimic)—she positively glowed. For the three-concert Vaughan festival George Wein produced in her honor in 1979, she requested he hire the undervalued Eddie Jefferson and Betty Carter, allotting each a full set, and additionally boosting them by singing the girl's part on Jefferson's "Moody's Mood for Love" and instigating fours with both. She tried more than most to accommodate contemporary songwriters and inevitably made poor choices—Michel Legrand, the Beatles, Barry Manilow, "Feelings"—almost always giving more than she got. But by 1980, she was choosing her songs on merit only, and the lame material disappeared altogether from her concerts.

"The Island" was a new song she made her own. She introduced it on the album that ended her Pablo deal—significantly, the only one she produced herself, *Crazy and Mixed Up* (1982). As good as the record is, that song became more and more seductive as she explored it in concert—to the point where she would sometimes laugh. Vaughan's approach to lyrics, long underappreciated, was usually governed by a mischievous wit. It's true she often sacrificed verbal import to improvisational brio—the big arpeggio in "My Funny Valentine" has nothing to do with the song's meaning—but given a line like "climb the highest peak" in "Cheek to Cheek" (*No Count Sarah*, 1958), she could be depended on to scale Everest. "Goodnight, Sweetheart," from the thoroughly engaging 1962 Roulette album, *Sarah + 2*, is an erotic benchmark, a lullaby in which every vowel winks.

She ought to have recorded more; she ought to have had the kind of label support Pablo provided Fitzgerald, Concord Jazz provided Rosemary Clooney, and Verve provided Betty Carter and Abbey Lincoln. She might at least have rerecorded the two '40s classics she reintroduced in

concert, "The Lord's Prayer" and Tadd Dameron's "If You Could See Me Now." But she died before the revival of interest in postwar singers took hold. One person who knew what the world was losing was Frank Sinatra, who, much to her surprise, remained in daily contact with her during her final weeks.

Vaughan's playful irreverence and dauntless musicality made unmistakably clear her assumption that Tin Pan Alley is at best a starting gate and never a shrine. Yet she was as fine an interpreter of the standard pop-song repertory as we have had and almost certainly the most self-possessed. Her control of timbre, articulation, and dynamics was matched by infallible pitch; the rare ability to improvise harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically; and an unfettered imagination that made it all count for something. She was a full partner in the germination of modern jazz. But no matter how closely we dissect the particulars of her talent, marveling at her range and energy and intelligence, transcribing and analyzing her performances, tracing her development over time, we must inevitably end up contemplating in silent awe the most phenomenal of her attributes, the one she was handed at birth: a voice that happens once in a lifetime, perhaps once in several lifetimes.

33 ❖ *Thelonious Monk (Rhythm-a-ning)*

I used to have a phobia about pictures or anything on a wall hanging just a little bit crooked. Thelonious cured me. He nailed a clock to the wall at a very slight angle, just enough to make me furious. We argued about it for two hours, but he wouldn't let me change it. Finally, I got used to it. Now anything can hang at any angle, and it doesn't bother me at all.

Nellie Monk (in *The Jazz Life* by Nat Hentoff)

When Nathan Zuckerman fishes for approbation in Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, the great Lonoff tells him he has "the most compelling voice I've encountered in years, certainly for somebody starting out. I don't mean style. I mean voice: something that begins at around the back of the knees and reaches well above the head." Voices like that are rare in any art, but when one turns up in the jazz world it often has an unusually comprehensive and immediate effect. I'm referring to the kind of

musician with a voice so startling, a grasp so sure, that the whole music seems to stop in its tracks to confront the interloper and emerges enhanced and fortified. This was certainly the case with Armstrong, Young, Parker, and Coleman. But not with Thelonious Monk, who conducted his first record session at thirty, organized his first working band at forty, and dropped from sight at about fifty-five. Although a small coterie of musicians (notably Coleman Hawkins, Mary Lou Williams, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Bud Powell) esteemed him from the beginning, he labored in solitude for much of his most creative period. His records were ignored, his compositions pilfered, his instrumental technique patronized, his personal style ridiculed. Yet no voice in American music was more autonomous and secure than Monk's, and no voice in jazz relied more exclusively on jazz itself for its grammar and vision.

The controversy about Monk must be difficult for younger listeners to comprehend. One can readily appreciate why Schoenberg and his disciples or the jazz avant-garde of the '60s caused dissension. Those musics were conceived as attacks and practically demanded rejoinders. Monk's music is more accurately compared to Stravinsky's early ballets, which, though new and daring for the time, proved accessible to the general public long before intransigent critics saw the light. Monk isn't merely accessible; he's almost gregarious in his desire to entertain, as long as the listener is willing to be entertained on Monk's terms. By this, I don't mean to suggest that Monk's music is light-headed or lighthearted, though on occasion it can be both, but that everything he did was designed to heighten the listener's response to melody, rhythm, and harmony. His tools were traditional, his craftsmanship impeccable. Monk relished swing and the blues and the freedom to do with them as he pleased (his motto was "Jazz is freedom"); he pursued his muse with dauntless concentration, impressive faith, and an almost childlike glee. This, after all, was the musician who more than anyone else transformed the minor second from mistake to resource.

Immersing oneself in Monk's art is both an exhilarating and dispiritng experience—the former because his music is eternally fresh, the latter because so much else seems tame and trite by comparison. Rummaging through *The Complete Blue Note Recordings of Thelonious Monk*, I find that even the most familiar pieces unveil new mysteries and reveal new charms. One obvious reason is that this treasure box, comprising the six sessions he conducted for the label between 1947 and 1952, plus a middling 1957 session under the leadership of Sonny Rollins, includes no less than fourteen previously unreleased performances. Eleven are alternate takes, but don't for a moment think that they are merely flawed warm-ups with slightly different embellishments or changes in tempi. In