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A Tribute to Monk and Bird

TOMATO RECORDS. TOM-2-9X17.

There are no guarantees that by producing one of the most unusual albums of the year you will wind up with one of the best; but the tough, bright, innovative resiliency of "A Tribute to Bird and Monk" satisfies both counts with ease. And with admirable humility as well: While the cover's largest type proclaims protagonists Thelonious and Parker, and the next largest emblazons the names of the participants, you have to nearly squint to discover the man responsible for the whole exhilarating project.

But Heiner Stadler, the Polish-born American who adapted three Parker lines and four Monk compositions and conducted an all-star sextet in playing them, has created six wonderful musical events and one sure masterpiece. He has drawn on a considerable fount of conservatory theory, but the results don't sound studied. He's attacked his material with subtle melodic paraphrase (*Air Privete*), with frequently polytonal reharmonizations, with ingenious stabs at *polytempo* (a soloist slows down and speeds up while the backing rhythm remains constant), and with a marvelously ordered sense of concerto grosso technique. The result is a giant step bridging the avant garde of the 'forties, bebop, with the avant garde of today.

The result also illustrates with rare precision the thesis set forth in Robert Palmer's clearheaded liner essay: that "Young musicians . . . should be able to draw from the greatest jazz of earlier generations . . . ideas that are meaningful this minute." Not only are Stadler's reworkings brilliant separate entities; they do emphasize the lasting strength



Photo of Thelonious Monk by Lee Tanner

and wisdom of the pieces (although, as might be expected, the more carefully constructed Monk works fare better than Parker's comparatively simplistic compositions). Thus, the pure and ringing sonorities of Monk's *Ba-lue Balzar Ba-lues-are*, and the use of Monk's original piano solo as a horn background for this version's piano solo, provide ample detours for fresh exploration. And *Straight No Chaser*, on which all of Stadler's techniques come together for a very nearly perfect statement of his exciting ideas, soars upon its Monk-like thematic intimations, transmuted by the pervasive polytonality that is Stadler's major weapon against complacency.

Even better, the personnel on this challenging double-album underlines the bridging of styles at the music's heart. In the front line is Thad Jones (cornet and flugelhorn), the ageless



Photo of Charlie Parker by Mike Eagle

representative of what is now the "Old Guard" and a collaborator on some of Monk's greatest dates of the 'fifties: George Adams, who must surely now be seen as one of this decade's three truly unique tenor men, and the phenomenal young AACM trombonist George Lewis. The rhythm section matches the modern veteran pianist Stanley Cowell (he of the encyclopedic style); his contemporary, bassist Reggie Workman (who plays with a wisdom beyond his years), and Lenny White, the former Return to Forever fusion flasher and the major surprise of this quite surprising date. He plays cleanly and sensitively—adjectives that often eluded him in the past—in the best series of performances he has ever recorded (as well as the least expected).

Get a hold of this one; you cannot hear it too often.

—Neil Tesser.