

ESSAY



SONNY CLARK: MELODY AND MELANCHOLY

Sam Stephenson

Drugs and Jazz

I first heard Sonny Clark's piano in the winter of 1999 in a coffee shop in Raleigh, North Carolina. The house stereo was playing a jazz record that featured guitar, piano, bass, and drums. I am a serious jazz fan, but I'd never heard anything quite like this, a remarkable blend of deep blues and relaxed, ventilated swing. The tattooed and pierced barista showed me the two-CD set, *Grant Green: The Complete Quartets with Sonny Clark*, recorded by Blue Note Records in December 1961 and January 1962. I knew Green was a guitarist from St. Louis, Missouri, who had a

floating, hornlike style, but it was Clark's piano playing that cast a spell. There was a natural, effortless quality to Clark's right-handed solo runs—the hypnotic trickle of a mountain spring—yet his calm, light touch was haunted by melancholy blues.

I began devouring all of Clark's recordings, some of which are available only in Japan. From 1957 to 1962, he was documented on thirty-one studio recordings, twenty-one as a sideman and ten as a leader, before dying of a heroin overdose in January 1963 at the age of thirty-one. Most of Clark's recorded work is as singular as the



sessions with Green; his presence on piano creates not only the sound of one instrument but also an atmosphere. “Bewitching” is the word *New York Times* jazz critic Ben Ratliff used to describe Clark’s performance of “Nica” on a 1960 trio recording with Max Roach on drums and George Duvivier on bass. “It’s funky and clean and has the tension of changing tonality,” writes Ratliff, “so that within four bars it keeps changing from easy and secure to full of dread.”

I later learned that Clark’s life and work overlapped with some of mine. He was born and raised east of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in a rural coal-mining “patch” of eight hundred people, about seven miles as the crow flies from where my wife grew up. He was a regular visitor to a dilapidated Manhattan loft building where, from 1957 to 1965, the photographer W. Eugene Smith made thousands of photos and recorded four thousand hours of tape. I’ve been studying Smith’s materials since 1998, and I’ve interviewed more than four hundred participants from that loft scene. On one harrowing tape from September 25, 1961, Smith recorded Clark shooting heroin, strung out and moaning in and out of consciousness, in the fourth-floor hallway just outside Smith’s spring-loaded screen door.

I wanted to figure out what had happened to Clark. In my conversations with

his two surviving sisters, a number of his childhood friends, and many musicians, as well as in my research in libraries, I came across more than one indication that his recording sessions exacerbated his drug addictions.

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“Sonny made mistakes,” said trombonist Curtis Fuller, who played with Clark on a number of recordings. “He could have had a brilliant career. I don’t want to know about what happened to him.

We all have troubles. It’s a wild and crazy life, especially for black people at that time, trying to make it. There was a lot to deal with that white people can’t know no matter how hard they try. That part of history was unkind for a lot of us. I don’t want to go there. I don’t care to talk about it.”

Conrad Yeatis “Sonny” Clark was born in 1931 in Herminie No. 2, Pennsylvania, (“No. 2” refers to the second shaft of the Ocean Coal Company; the nearby larger town around the first shaft was just plain Herminie). He was the youngest of eight children born to Ruth Shepherd Clark and Emory Clark, a miner who died of black lung disease two weeks after Clark was born.

After Emory Clark’s death, the family moved into the black-owned Redwood Inn a few hundred yards down the road. Named for its owner, John Redwood, the inn hosted a thriving social scene for Afri-

can Americans. Redwood's daughter, Jean Redwood Douglass, remembers, "The inn had twenty-two rooms, a dance hall with a jukebox and a pinball machine, and a little store. On weekends, black folks from all over the region came for dances, and black musicians from Pittsburgh came out to play. Sonny began playing piano at age four, and he was still very young when he began playing the weekend dances. He could play any instrument besides piano, too. I remember him playing xylophone, guitar, and bass. Everybody marveled at him."

Clark was the pride of the family. By age fourteen, he was getting notices in the Pittsburgh Courier, the famous black paper, and he became a fixture in the city's rich jazz scene. One Courier article indicated Clark was twelve years old when he was actually fifteen, and no doubt he looked younger (he was five foot four and one hundred and thirty pounds, full grown). A bout with Bell's palsy as a child had left one side of his lower face slightly stiff and affectless, like a shy kid dribbling words out of one side of his mouth.

Ruth Clark died of breast cancer in 1953, and the Redwood Inn burned to the ground around the same time. The family dispersed. Clark followed an aunt and brother to California, where he rose to the top of the jazz scene, becoming a regular at the Lighthouse jazz club in Hermosa

Beach, near Los Angeles. The scene was inundated with alcohol and narcotics, and Clark was soon hooked.

He moved to New York in late 1956 or early '57, at age twenty-five. He would kick the habit for brief periods, often by checking himself into Bellevue, or by visiting the controversial psychiatrist Robert Freymann (who the Beatles reportedly referenced in their tune, "Doctor Robert"), but he couldn't stay clean.

"The first time I remember meeting Sonny Clark, I was working as a waiter at the Five

Spot club in Cooper Square in Manhattan in 1957," said jazz bass player Bob Whiteside. "At the time, Sonny was working as the chauffeur for Nica [Pannonica de Koenigswarter, a wealthy patron of jazz musicians], and he came in with her and Thelonious Monk. Monk was playing with his quartet, which included Johnny Griffin, Roy Haynes, and Ahmed Abdul-Malik. I knew Sonny had played piano on some wonderful records, but that's about all I knew. His appearance was not that of a dope addict. He just seemed like a nice dude."

De Koenigswarter had hired Clark to be her driver and put him up in her New Jersey home in order to help him kick his drug habit. His addictions were a topsy-turvy struggle, but people liked him personally and wanted to help him. Plus, other musicians sought him out for

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his signature mix of light propulsion and heavy blues. From June 1957 to April 1958, he was recorded on twenty-one studio sessions, including several as a leader, with some of the most eminent musicians in the jazz world—Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Lou Donaldson, and Jackie McLean.

“Sonny was my man,” said Fuller. “We were instant friends, about the same age. He was a young scholar of music. He had the same personality as Coltrane, dead serious about his music. He was also a great writer. He was hip. He had a different type of creativity, a unique and special touch, and an old-fashioned quality that was also very modern.”

But the barrage of early success in New York had an underbelly: Clark’s drug addictions worsened. His increasing reliance on narcotics periodically reached a head and would culminate with his disappearance. From 1958 to 1961, he had six-, seven-, and thirteen-month absences from an otherwise prolific recording career. Each time, he’d resurface and record some beautiful music; then he’d disappear again.

In my quest to learn more about Clark’s life and times, I picked through every jazz magazine published from 1957 to 1962, looking for any clues. In the August 1962 issue of the Canadian magazine CODA, I found this report by Fred Norworthy on an unnamed musician who is almost certainly Clark: “One of the saddest sights these days is the terrible condition of one of the nation’s foremost, and certainly original, pianists . . . I saw him several times in the past three months and

was shocked to see one of our jazz greats in such pitiful shape. Unfortunately, the album dates that he keeps getting only help his addiction get worse instead of better.”

On August 27 and 29 of that year, Clark recorded two of his most compelling performances as a sideman on saxophonist Dexter Gordon’s albums *Go* and *A Swingin’ Affair*. His solos are typically inventive, but his sensitive accompaniment of Gordon’s soaring saxophone defines the sessions. Years later, Gordon mentioned *Go* as a favorite recording of his long career.

The ambiguous relationship between black musicians and white-owned record labels is demonstrated poignantly in August Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*: it was bittersweet, lopsided but mutually dependent, and not that much different from the company-owned coal “patch” environment in which Clark was born and raised, with money holding inextricable power. Wilson’s play is fiction; not many voices have been willing to describe the relationship in nonfiction terms. In his seminal 1966 book, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (republished in 2004 as *Four Jazz Lives*), African American poet and historian A. B. Spellman quotes saxophonist Jackie McLean, concerning an unfair record deal McLean agreed to while addicted to heroin: “I was starving when I signed that contract . . . And my condition didn’t help, either; any money was money then . . . The record companies today are aware of what the cat’s problems are. If they weren’t aware that there aren’t many jazz clubs going and that record dates are a

necessity to many musicians and that some musicians use drugs, there would be more jazz musicians around with money.”

When I asked Spellman to elaborate on the relationship between labels and addicted musicians, he said, “Record labels kept stables of drug addicts. Addicts were always borrowing against royalties, and they were always behind on paying back the money. So one way they’d pay back their debts to the labels was by playing a new recording session, because the addicts never had money to pay them back. The record label’s side of the story is hard to contradict: the musicians owed them money, and the label executives could show that they lost money on the deal. The appearances of this situation looked unhealthy to many of us. The musicians were owned, almost. But it’s hard to stand up for junkies, because it’s hard to justify their behavior and, it’s true, the labels did loan them a lot of money in advance. You have to see both sides.”

A third side is that today, in my home office in Pittsboro, North Carolina, I have twenty-nine recordings—vinyl records and compact discs—documenting the beauty of Sonny Clark’s piano. I can listen to them whenever I want.

“In the summer of 1959 or 1960, I was living with a woman named Jackie on Second St. near Second Avenue and Sonny stopped by our place,” remembers White-side. “He asked for Jackie, because she had a reputation for being sympathetic to musicians. He said he needed money for a

ride uptown. He looked scruffy and haggard. I had on a short sleeved tee shirt and the needle marks on my arms were quite visible—I was strung out at the time. Sonny saw my needle marks and he rolled up both his sleeves showing the long tracks of a habitual user. Nothing was ever said; we both got the message.”

Of course, it’s no secret that jazz history is full of self-destruction. A quick survey of the life spans of some of Clark’s band mates is indicative: saxophonist Hank Mobley died at age fifty-five, saxophonist Tina Brooks at forty-two, trumpeter Lee Morgan at thirty-three, saxophonist John Coltrane at forty, saxophonist Serge Chaloff at thirty-three, bassist Paul Chambers at thirty-three, guitarist Grant Green at forty-three, bassist Doug Watkins at twenty-seven, saxophonist Ike Quebec at forty-four, bassist Wilbur Ware at fifty-six, trombonist Frank Rosolino at fifty-two, and on and on.

But why is this so? The answer is elusive, hidden beneath reticence from musicians and journalists. Writer Nat Hentoff sought an answer in his 1961 book, *The Jazz Life*, which is remarkable in its candid examination of complexities such as racial tensions and drug dependencies in the jazz scene. Hentoff writes:

The question of what in the jazz life itself has led so many of its players to addiction is complex. For one thing, for all the various kinds (and occasionally, depths) of expression of which jazz is capable, it has attracted a sizable percentage of emotional

adolescents. In *The Drug Addict as a Patient* (Grune and Stratton), Dr. Marie Nyswander observes of the personality pattern of the addict: “So great is his need for immediate recognition, for being, that he does not allow himself a period of becoming . . . He cannot take present deprivation in the hope of building toward security in the indefinite future but must continually bolster his self-esteem with immediate proof of present success.”

Clark’s need for cash, and perhaps his need for proof of his legitimacy, meant he needed the recording sessions as much as the sessions needed him.

Hentoff goes on:

It’s true that much of the freshness and unpredictability of jazz has been due to the fact that, from its beginning, its players set their own pragmatic musical standards. Music school rules of “legitimacy” of tone, for example, were ignored. A man was judged by the quality of his ear, his capacity to improvise, and the personal texture of his sound and style. But those flexible criteria also made it possible for musicians with considerable “natural” talent but limited powers of self-discipline (in music or anything else) to make a place for themselves fairly quickly in jazz life. Some blew well, but remained quasi-children all their lives.

Clark’s need for cash, and perhaps his need for proof of his legitimacy, meant he needed the recording sessions as much as the sessions needed him. Sometime in 1962, Clark was riding in the passenger’s seat of a car driven by the bassist Jimmy Stevenson, who was a resident of the same loft building as Smith. Stevenson’s wife, Sandy, was in the back-seat. They were somewhere in the upstate Hudson River Valley when they were pulled over by police. “Back then it still wasn’t safe to drive anywhere with a

white man and a black man sharing the front seat,” Sandy told me. “We were pulled over for no reason, but they did find marijuana in the car. Sonny and Jimmy were thrown in jail for a couple of days. When the police asked Sonny for his ID, he didn’t have any. He went into the trunk of the car and showed the police one of his records with his picture on the cover.”

Today, Clark’s recordings are more popular in Japan than in the United States, even though he never visited that country. According to Soundscan, which began tracking CD sales in 1991, Clark’s 1958 album on the Blue Note label, *Cool Struttin’*, has outsold, in Japan, several Blue Note albums with similar instrumentation from the same period that dwarf *Cool Struttin’* in terms of iconography and sales in the

States. For example, from 1991 to 2009, *Cool Struttin'* sold 38,000 copies in the States and 179,000 in Japan, while over the same period, Coltrane's classic 1957 release, *Blue Train*, sold 545,000 copies in the States and 147,000 in Japan. These numbers are fairly astonishing. It would be like Richard Yates outselling John Updike.

The producer Michael Cuscuna organized a tribute to Clark at the Mount Fuji Jazz Festival in 1986, and the band opened with the title track of *Cool Struttin'*. "Within the first five notes," said Cuscuna, "the crowd of 15,000 people roared with recognition." At the most sophisticated festivals in the States—say, San Francisco, New York, Monterey, or Newport—such recognition of Clark's music is unthinkable.

I asked the novelist Haruki Murakami, who once owned a jazz club, why *Cool Struttin'* is so popular in Japan. He attributed it to the rise of the "jazz kissa" (jazz coffee shops) in the 1960s. "The popularity of *Cool Struttin'* was not driven by professional critics or by sales," wrote Murakami by e-mail, "but instead by youths who didn't have enough money to buy vinyl records, so they went to coffee shops to hear jazz on the house record player. This was a phenomenon particular to Japan, or at last very different from America." Clark's buoyant blues fit the underground mood of Japan's postwar youth. It didn't hurt that his tragic life made him an unconventional, forlorn icon, too.

The symbols that frequently come up in Japanese writing to describe Clark's music

are 哀愁, pronounced "aishu." As often is the case with Japanese aesthetic terms, there isn't a direct English translation of the phrase. The first symbol can be read as *kana-shi-i* (哀しい) or *a-wa-re* (哀れ). The former means moving, sad, and melancholy. The latter can mean compassion, compassion-inducing, sympathetic, and touching. The symbol is made up of 衣, which means clothing or an outside covering, and 口, which means mouth. These symbols together mean covering, suppressing, or muffling an expression of feelings.

The second symbol is usually read as *ure-eru* (愁える), which means to feel lonely, to lament. It's made up of the symbols 秋, which means autumn, and 心, which means heart. In the fall, everything contracts, or tightens, such as trees and plants. Therefore, the symbol 愁 means the contracting or tightening of the heart and expresses a mysterious atmosphere of pathos and sorrow. Perhaps the Japanese cultural embrace of extremes gives that country an advantage in appreciating somebody like Clark, who blended extremes as beautifully as anybody ever has on piano.

Much of the American writing about Clark, and about jazz in general, is by white writers and lacks the Japanese emphasis on melancholy. It's as if it's okay to acknowledge sadness heard in white musicians like Hank Williams and Gram Parsons, or in classical composers like Beethoven and Henryk Górecki, but not the black jazz musicians who, instead, are expected to swing. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the char-

acter Rainey declares: “White folks don’t understand the blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking . . . The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone.”

“Sonny came into the Five Spot one night with a ladies stocking full of quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies,” said White-side. “He had the hose wrapped around his hand like a bandage and the foot filled with change stretched down to the ground. To me it was evidence of his status in life. Then, later, another image struck me. This

time I was working at the Jazz Gallery on St. Mark’s near Tompkins Square Park. It was a Sunday afternoon and Sonny walked in. The club owner, Joe Termini, saw Sonny and hustled over to him and said, in a normal but matter-of-fact tone of voice, ‘Go on, Sonny, get out of here. Go ahead and beat it.’ Sonny said, ‘Can’t a man buy himself a drink?’ Joe said, ‘No, get out of here.’ Sonny left and I never saw him again.”

Sonny Clark got out of bed, or the concrete alley, or the wood-planked stairwell, enough times to record some of the most original sounds in all of American music. To this day, nobody sounds like him. 🍷