

What “Rewind & Play” reveals, in setting Monk’s great performances alongside Renaud’s disdainful treatment of him, is both a general vision of the appalling circumstances that surrounded Monk’s artistry and a specific sense of meaning in his performances. The percussive energy and urgency of these solos suggest both bitter defiance and regal indifference to Renaud and his ilk, a blend of righteous indignation and supreme independence. The broadcast imbues Monk’s music with the conflicts and struggles of his life and times.

In 1969, Monk continued to play splendidly; though he didn’t set foot in Columbia’s studios, his greatness wasn’t lost to history. His December trip to Paris was the culmination of a nearly two-month European concert tour, with a new band—along with his longtime saxophonist, Charlie Rouse, the group included the bassist Nate (Lloyd) Hygelund and a remarkable seventeen-year-old drummer named Paris Wright. When the quartet played at (again) the Salle Pleyel on December 15th, the performance was recorded for French television, and it was released as an official, non-bootleg album (on Blue Note) in 2013; it’s among Monk’s best albums. Wright, coltish and uninhibited, drives the band with unbridled urgency and pushes Monk into bold accelerations that the pianist meets with excited and exciting inspiration. Yet these 1969 appearances, supreme though they were, were also perched at the edge of an abyss. In 1970, Monk’s manic-depressive episodes worsened, along with his physical health; his career went into decline, and his performances became rarer. I saw him at his second-to-last major concert appearance, at Carnegie Hall, with a quintet, in 1976; it was a thrill to see him, but his playing was diminished. He died in 1982, at the age of sixty-four.

When Monk was in Paris in 1954, he made a studio recording of solo performances for French radio, which were later released as an LP. I’ve always prized the album as the best solo Monk recording I’ve heard. Despite the unfavorable terms and conditions of Monk’s involvement in that festival, the trip gave rise to a historic recording. There’s poetic justice in the bookending of Monk’s unhappy and even cruel treatment in Paris, in 1969, in the television studio, with the transcendent document of his solo performances there, which are no less inventive—and a great deal more freewheeling, with fifteen years of experience and reconception behind them—than the 1954 solos. A modest proposal: just as the Blue Note issue of Monk’s December 15th quartet performance features both a CD of the concert and a DVD of the television recording, “Rewind & Play” should be made available as a two-disk set—a DVD of Gomis’s film, and a CD of Monk’s complete performances from that studio session. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

In December 1969, legendary jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk ended his European concert tour with a performance at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. Before the show, he was invited to appear on a French television program to perform and answer questions in an intimate setting. Using newly discovered footage from this recording, director Alain Gomis (*Félicité*) reveals the disconnect between Monk and his interviewer, Henri Renaud, whose unwittingly trivializing approach conveys the casual racism and exploitation prevalent in the music industry at large. A fascinating behind-the-scenes documentary with extraordinary rarely-seen performances, *Rewind & Play* offers a unique opportunity to see Monk in a way that very few people did.

Introduction by writer, archivist, and artist Harmony Holiday.

65 min. | France/Germany | 2022

Rewind & Play by Richard Brody

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by the New Yorker, March 10, 2023

The premise of Alain Gomis’s “Rewind & Play” is as exciting as the film itself. While doing research for a fictional film about Thelonious Monk, Gomis gained access to the rushes—the unedited raw footage, including outtakes—for a documentary about Monk that had been made for French television. (The footage was shot in December, 1969, and the half-hour-long film, “Jazz Portrait: Thelonious Monk,” was broadcast in 1970.) “Rewind & Play,” which opens Friday at bam, is an hour-long reëdit of this footage, much of it unreleased until now, and it’s a remarkable film at many levels.

First, the resulting portraiture of Monk, who speaks much more and is seen in much fuller interaction with the filmmakers, is far more detailed and complex. Second, the previously unpublished footage reveals much about the making of the original documentary, because what was excluded is even more significant than what was broadcast. Third, what Gomis discovers about the filmmakers’ practice offers a revelatory and cautionary view of documentary filmmaking as such. Finally, the footage is a treasure trove of Monk in performance, and its presentation of the pianist’s mighty inspirations suggests an artist at a peak of his career, but the truth of the matter is far different, and far more disturbing.

There’s history—personal and musical—embedded in “Rewind & Play.” It furnishes the movie with its key moment, one that is mentioned in every review I’ve seen and that is so emblematic that Gomis uses its key phrase—“It’s not nice?”—as the film’s subtitle.

The roots of that moment go back almost sixteen years. In 1954, Henri Renaud, himself a professional jazz pianist, met Monk in New York and arranged for him to be invited to perform in the Paris Jazz Festival, which ran in the first week of June. In “Rewind & Play,” Renaud—the host and interviewer, as well as co-director—says as much, on camera, and asks Monk whether the Paris audiences found his playing “too avant-garde”; Monk dubiously wonders what Renaud is getting at; the interviewer repeats the question. Monk responds that he was promoted as the star of the festival, yet he “wasn’t getting the money.” Renaud tells the co-director, Bernard Lion, in French, to “erase” that passage, then repeats the question. Monk answers again, more specifically: he discovered that he was very popular in France but, unlike the other American musicians who were flown over, Gerry Mulligan and Jonah Jones, he wasn’t allowed to bring his own accompanying musicians with him, and had trouble getting local musicians to play with him. He adds, “I was getting less money than anybody.” Renaud dutifully translates—and then, again, tells Lion to erase this answer, too, because it’s “*désobligeant*”—derogatory.

Monk didn’t speak much French, but he clearly sensed that something was up; he rises from the piano bench and leaves the frame. Renaud guides him back in; Monk appears upset, and suggests they forget about the program and just go to dinner. Instead, Renaud coaxes Monk to the keyboard and asks him to play. Monk returns to the subject of his earlier Paris visit; Renaud tells him they’ll skip the subject, and Monk, bewildered, asks, “It’s no secrets, is it?” “No,” Renaud responds, “but it’s not nice.” Monk, bewildered, throws back at him “It’s not nice?” His sardonic smile and tone suggest that he now considers Renaud a stooge and the program a sham in which he’s merely meant to cooperate with docility. From that point on, Monk does his job, handling Renaud’s softball questions with more graciousness than they merit—and then he does his real work, playing the piano.

Needless to say, these exchanges aren’t included in the 1970 film “Jazz Portrait.” There’s almost no dialogue between the two men—Monk hardly speaks. That documentary mainly features Monk playing solo piano, punctuated by Renaud’s brisk and superficial overview of Monk’s career along with photos and archival documents. Its main merit is in its presentation of performance. But it does so in the abstract, treating Monk’s music in isolation from the practical and material conditions of its production—conditions that Monk, in a potent couple of phrases, offered Renaud and the world, and that Renaud and Lion saw fit to suppress.

In “Rewind & Play,” Gomis does more than reveal the discussion that didn’t see the light of day in 1970; he reveals the cinematic methods by which the fabricated and tailored view of Monk’s life and work were crafted. Not only does Renaud repeat questions to Monk (including other, anodyne or trivial ones) in the hope of getting an answer crafted to his specifications, he also appears on camera alone, in Monk’s total absence, feigning the posing of a question and the listening to an answer. His monologues about Monk’s career are delivered from the same position—standing at or leaning on the piano—in which he questions Monk, as if to simulate their delivery in Monk’s presence. What Renaud and Lion are doing is nothing unusual, and that is the point.