5 · THE JAZZMAN'S TRUE ACADEMY

Wherever there was good musicians, there was after-hours jam joints. It was almost part of the business. CLYDE BERNHARDT

No aspect of the jazz world has been the object of more fascination than the jam session—or the locus of more misunderstanding. Its flexibility and lack of pretension, its offhand displays of virtuosity, its apparent disregard for everything outside of its own charmed circle—all seem to sum up that which is attractive and liberating in the jazz aesthetic. This peculiar constellation of qualities lies at the heart of the "modulation into a new key of musical sensibility" that bop has come to represent. For in adopting the characteristic attitudes and procedures of the jam session and making them the central focus of public presentation, bebop radically revised the prevailing definition of jazz. In place of the often tawdry transactions between artist and audience summed up by the words *entertainment* and *showmanship,* bebop offered the spectacle of musicians playing for their own enjoyment, capturing some of the dignity and autonomy of the concert stage without losing the informal atmosphere that tied jazz to a vernacular social context. The shift to the format and spirit of the jam session suggests any number of compelling dichotomies: between ponderous big bands and fleet, flexible combos, in which each individual voice is heard; between constricting written arrangements and free-flowing improvisation; between demeaning conventions of popular entertainment and a format free of associations with comedy or dance. The jam session, in short, underlies all claims for the legitimacy of be-

bop—not simply as a jazz idiom, but as the decisive step toward jazz as art. It is at the heart of our after-the-fact conviction that the emergence of bebop was both right and inevitable, a confirmation of underlying principles.

If at first bebop appeared to be an impenetrable subculture, operating according to unseen codes, that is only to be expected. The jam session offers few clues to the uncontexted outsider. There is little or no written music in evidence, and certainly no rehearsal. There is no "band": musicians come and go as they please, even during the middle of the number. They may not even know one another, although they usually have at least a passing acquaintance and may use the bandstand (if indeed the performance space is physically set apart at all) to socialize. There is no frame for the performance, no spoken introductions or attention-getting silences. Hardly a word is exchanged beyond a few cryptic phrases—"blues in B-flat," "rhythm changes," a quick countdown to set the tempo—and they are off, into a performance that may last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour. Everybody seems to know what to do without being told. The listener is left face to face with the mystery of improvisation—an alchemy that creates music out of nothingness. It is creativity without artifice.

But, of course, there is artifice. The jam session would not be possible without certain procedures with which every competent jazz musician is presumed to be familiar. The repertory is reduced to a handful of structures: the blues, Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" (the "rhythm changes" referred to above), and other pop song "standards." The only fixed personnel is a rhythm section of piano, bass, guitar, drums (although one can make do with less: in hotel rooms, drummers often spread a newspaper on a briefcase and played it with brushes); they serve as accompaniment for whoever cares to participate. The format is a string of solos—each instrumentalist playing for as many cycles, or choruses, as desired. The other "horns" either wait their turn or improvise background figures behind the soloist. Members of the rhythm section, if they are to take a solo, wait patiently until the end. Introductions are usually the responsibility of the pianist, with the rest of the band straggling in as needed. Endings—the one obvious weak spot—are notoriously formulaic or chaotic. These routines are so thoroughly internalized by the musicians that they are virtually invisible.

That the codes are not made explicit comes from the fact that jam sessions were never intended to be public spectacles. They were physically and temporally separate, usually taking place late at night in out-of-the-

way places known only to the cognoscenti. They were also carefully set apart from the monetary economy. Even the most highly paid professionals played for free or for the simple barter of food and drink. Precisely because of this, jamming was officially condemned by the musicians' union, whose firmest rule was that any performance must be remunerated at the union-mandated minimum wage. Jamming was tolerated only to the extent that it could be demonstrated to be a strictly internal affair—for the private pleasure of musicians, carefully shielded from the general public.

This history accounts for the striking indifference toward the outside world that has always marked the jam session. If in a conventional performance energy is directed outward, beyond the stage, in the jam session all attention is focused inward. Rather than being ranged linearly on a bandstand for maximum visibility, musicians tend to cluster, leaving those on the margins to strain to look over their shoulders. The musicians themselves are the audience. All others present—which may include other musicians waiting their turns or simply listening and digging, as well as the inevitable hangers-on—form concentric circles (or semicircles) around the core. As the jam session has become adapted to public spectacle, this distinctively cloistered ambience has made its way into concert settings. Audiences are invited to look in, to enjoy the private gestures of the musicians without disturbing them by more than polite applause at the end of each solo; or, if the atmosphere is rowdier, they may masquerade as insiders, exhorting the musicians to greater and greater levels of intensity. Bebop emerged in this atmosphere, its practitioners impassive and intent rather than genial entertainers.

Ironically, the ultimate viability of bebop as a *commercial* genre depended on many jazz enthusiasts' conviction that the jam session represented jazz in its purest state—an uncorrupted, unmediated, and uncommercial form of musical expression. This conviction predated bebop; it was at the core of most "primitivist" interpretations of jazz as a species of folk music struggling to survive in a ruthless market economy. The Swing Era, bringing with it the appropriation of jazz improvisation as one element in an eclectic package of entertainment, increased the enthusiasts' insistence on the isolation of "real" jazz from the broader world of commerce and the celebration of the jam session as a privileged space free from external pressures of all kinds. "Many a big-time commercial sideman likes to get away from all the phony music he plays for a living, and get

down to earth with some genuine jazz," wrote a correspondent for the jazz trade press in 1941. "When you're playing for yourself you discover the really good ideas that are inside of you. There's no audience, no crowd, no hot fans. Thank god, there are no messy jitterbugs, no critics to mutter under their breath."

It is a short step from here to the jam session as symbol of alienation. If "genuine jazz" is incompatible with the marketplace and can be played only in deliberate isolation from it, then the sincere artist's association with such commercial enterprises as the dance band is just a marriage of convenience. Jazz musicians submit to the indignities of commercial entertainment to support themselves, so that they will be free—on their own time and away from the public eye—to reconstitute the music on their own terms. The jam session is not simply a form of escape, but an act of defiance.

How that defiance was interpreted depended on the ideology of the observer. For those who saw jazz musicians as displaced folk artists, the jam session recaptured the innocence of a precapitalist economy. In his book *The Real Jazz*, Hugues Panassié, writing in 1942 on the eve of the bop revolution, described the jam session this way:

> This is the music they are not permitted to play in the large commercial orchestras which they have been forced to join to earn their living. . . . The jam session overflows and is carried away with an enthusiasm for which one would search vainly elsewhere. During these hours, the musicians play out of a love of music, without attempting to create a "work" but simply because the music makes them feel intensely alive. Here certainly music is returned to its natural state and is delivered of all preparations and artifice.

Panassié, of course, was notoriously hostile to bebop. Its self-conscious complexities were antithetical to his ideal of jazz as a "natural" folk idiom.

A different reading of the jam session, however, fit the new style perfectly: bebop as the jazz avant-garde. The privileging of the jam session as the province of embattled, marginalized artists—an artistic domain of unquestioned integrity in stark contrast to the hopelessly philistine commercial sphere of the bandstand or theater—became central to the bebop myth. Much has been made of the bebop pioneers as insurgents, alienated from the commercial music scene. Frustrated by the clichés of the swing bands and the lack of opportunity to perform their own music, the story goes, they withdrew to the obscurity of the jam session to plot a new

music, defiant in its autonomy. In particular, the late-night sessions at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem have been caricatured to the point that, as Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) has complained, they sound "almost like the beginnings of modern American writing among the emigrés of Paris."

It is unfortunately all too easy to project back onto the formative years of bebop attitudes that did not find full expression until much later or were more characteristic of one segment of the musicians' community than another. William Bruce Cameron's study "Sociological Notes on the Jam Session" puts an academic sanction on the antagonism of jazz and commercial music and the importance of jam sessions as a refuge for marginalized jazz musicians. Published in 1954, but based on the author's prior professional experience (he began playing "dance music for money and jazz for pleasure in 1939"), it explicitly defines the jam session as a "recreational rather than a vocational activity"—in the words of one musician, "a chance to get the taste of commercial music out of my mouth." Over and over, Cameron emphasizes the insuperable gulf between the two worlds in language that echoes Panassié's: "For outsiders, the intensity of distaste the jazzman feels toward money-making commercial dance music surpasses belief. In a very real sense the session is a ritual of purification for him. . . . He resides somewhere; he works somewhere else; but it is in the session that he most meaningfully lives. This is what he practices and learns for. This is the focus of his life."

Throughout his study, Cameron implies that the attitudes he has observed are universal—true of jazz musicians from the beginning and extendable into the foreseeable future.[1] But this is a questionable assumption. For one thing, Cameron fails to indicate whether his observations were made before or after the war years—a crucial point, since only in the wake of bebop, a genre no longer directly dependent on conventional dance music or entertainment, would musicians be so likely to put up a hostile front to the outside world. More troubling, he fails to specify whether the musicians he studied were white or black—although the ease with which he moved in their circles and his characterization of jazz as a form of rebellion against bourgeois norms strongly suggest the former ("Jazz is at once radical and idealistic and suffused with the glam-

1. In discussing the word *square* as a designation for the nonjazz outsider, for example, Cameron states: " 'Square' is a contemporary jazz term denoting disapproval; the word will change, but the attitude it expresses will remain to be expressed by a new term" (1954, 181).

our of Promethean artistry and the raw vulgarity of the brothel. . . . To become a great jazz artist when one is sixteen is a wonderful way of running away from the triple tyranny of home discipline, school discipline, and financial dependence").

The distinction is crucial. White musicians were far more likely to take on the role of "jazzmen as romantic outsiders," to use Neil Leonard's phrase—becoming artists as an expression of their contempt for middle-class culture, living only for "kicks" and aesthetic pleasure. With conventional paths to success open to them, their choice of music—especially a cross-racial music tainted with vice—and their embrace of a "deviant" lifestyle marked them as defiantly bohemian. For their counterparts in the black community, on the other hand, the music profession offered one of the few consistent means of social advancement. As we have seen, many had abandoned their earlier intentions to enter medicine, the law, or other skilled professions for the immediate prosperity available in the 1920s and 1930s to those with the requisite musical talents. Black musicians had little taste for romanticizing poverty, even in the service of art, and were far less inclined to disparage the virtues of a steady wage. As Charles Nanry once summed it up, "jazz selects blacks; whites select jazz."

In any case, Cameron's irritable deviants, clearly ill at ease with the very idea of music as a profession, bear little resemblance to the bebop pioneers. For black musicians at the height of the Swing Era, public performance and after-hours improvising were not separate and antagonistic spheres, reflecting an unbridgeable gulf between the need to put bread on the table and artistic self-respect, but interrelated parts of a larger whole. The jam session was an integral part of the "art world" that constituted their professional life. It was both recreational *and* vocational. The element of escape and recreation is obvious: the jam session was a part of nightlife, a window onto the varied entertainments of the city for young and energetic men with some money to burn. But it was also a kind of work. Musicians counted on having this time to practice, to work out new ideas and techniques, to exchange information, to network with their colleagues, to establish a rough-and-ready hierarchy of competence—all useful and necessary activities that could not practically be carried out on the bandstand. Far from protesting their status as professional musicians, the emergence of bebop evidenced its creators' deep commitment to the music profession and the peculiar discipline it entailed.

Friendly Competition

From the outset, jazz musicians have spent time playing for their own amusement. With the emergence of a class of professional dance musicians in the 1920s, informal music-making became a central feature of life off the bandstand. As Alan Merriam and Raymond Mack, who wrote a sociological study of the jazz community in 1960, have noted, the very nature of jazz musicians' work led them to form an isolated, self-sufficient subculture. Jazz musicians worked while others played, played while others slept, and slept while others worked. Like railroad workers, their routine was one of near-continuous travel, punctuated by occasional returns to a home base. Their recreation took on the form of a busman's holiday—a return to the pleasures of music under more relaxed circumstances, but still informed by their avocational interests.

In Harlem before the Swing Era, the most important jam session spot was the Rhythm Club (formerly the Band Box) on 132nd Street. The Rhythm Club was operated by Bert Hall, a racketeer and sometime trombonist who had earned the respect of his peers by instituting reforms in Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians to ensure that black musicians were promptly paid. According to trombonist Dicky Wells, it was "strictly a musicians' club," offering an all-purpose venue for whatever they wanted to do after hours. They could play cards, shoot pool, have a meal, gossip, joke, size each other up or put each other down, and otherwise enjoy a comforting sense of community. A parallel scene for white musicians emerged at the Onyx, a 52nd Street speakeasy where the password was, "I'm from 802."

Like James Reese Europe's Clef Club before it, or the union headquarters downtown (which black musicians considered "primarily for whites"), the Rhythm Club served as a clearinghouse for employment. On Monday afternoons, knowing that all the major bandleaders would be hanging out, musicians would come by to collect their wages for the previous weekend's work and make themselves as available as possible for the next. "The guys used to gather [there]," remembers bassist Al Hall. "You go with your shoeshine, your dark suit, maybe with your instrument, maybe not. They had a slate on the wall, and you write your name on it for availability." "You could call at any hour of the day or night and hire a musician," according to Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow. Saxophonist Ben Webster, when he first came to New York, was counseled by Count Basie to head straight to the Rhythm Club. According to Basie, "A lot of guys used to bring their instruments with them . . . just in case

somebody came by there looking for somebody to go out on a job. Which happened quite often. So there were always some of them around, and then in the late morning and after midnight, when the other joints were closing, you'd see all those cats dropping in there on their way home from work, and most of them would be carrying their instruments too."

And of course, they made music at the Rhythm Club. As was typical for jam session clubs, there was a house band; but as Count Basie remembered, "the thing about the Rhythm Club was that somebody was always sitting in." On the day that Danny Barker first arrived in New York in 1930, his musician uncle Paul Barbarin took him to the Rhythm Club. "What I saw and heard I will never forget," wrote Barker in his autobiography. "A wild cutting contest was in progress, and sitting and standing around the piano were twenty or thirty musicians, all with their instruments out waiting for a signal to play choruses of Gershwin's 'Liza.' " First came a competition among banjo players, dominated by a left-handed man known only as Seminole; then drums (with Chick Webb "washing away" the novelty playing of a vaudeville drummer); then a "trumpet battle" involving Rex Stewart, Bobby Stark, and Cuban Bennett.

The atmosphere was playful and festive, with musicians spilling out onto the sidewalk and shouting approval and encouragement. But like the professional baseball players recently studied by George Will, these were men at work. Through these "cutting contests," musicians established and maintained a hierarchy of professional competence. The particular spur for the jam session that Danny Barker witnessed that Monday afternoon was the arrival in New York of a well-known band, McKinney's Cotton Pickers—a prime opportunity to reshuffle the deck and see how the outsiders stacked up against New York's finest. As Barker noted with pop-eyed wonder, the occasion attracted a representative sampling of bandleaders and virtuoso sidemen: Benny Carter, Don Redman, Claude Hopkins, Jelly Roll Morton, Johnny Hodges, Red Allen, Sonny Greer, John Kirby—and Fletcher Henderson, who observed the scene with studied nonchalance while playing pool. These were men whose business it was to know who the best performers were, either to size up competitors or to keep track of potential employees. "On the New York gossip scene, musicians were appraised, discussed," recalls Barker. "Generally the verdict of your appraisal concerning tone, technique, facility was just about correct. . . . You would, in a musician's absence, in a gathering mention a question on his ability and be sure to get a total analysis."

At the highest echelon, the mechanisms for sorting out the pretenders

from the elite were particularly well oiled. At one Harlem club, Mexico's, special evenings were devoted to particular instruments: "trumpet night," "saxophone night," "trombone night," and so forth. The sessions were intended only for the most experienced musicians, who would "always wash you away if you were from the second division." At the Hoofer's Club—a basement room on 132nd Street—the jam sessions, called "suppers," were by invitation only, via formal announcements printed on special cards ("You Are Invited to a Trombone Supper"). According to Dicky Wells, "You had to graduate to get down there": only "those *bad* cats"—musicians of the stature of Coleman Hawkins and Jimmie Harrison—were expected to play:

> Anyone could go, but mostly performers went, mostly musicians. There was no admission charge and we weren't paid. No money was involved at all.
>
> All the musicians would be sitting around the walls, all around the dance floor. Maybe there would be forty guys sitting around there. The floor was for dancers only, and they would be cutting each other, too, while we were cutting each other on the instruments. Everybody would be blowing—maybe six trombones. Now Hawk (Coleman Hawkins) would always come by the session, whether it was a Saxophone Supper or not.
>
> "I just happened to stop by and had my horn," he would say.
>
> You knew he'd come by to carve somebody.

For Hawkins, such apparently aggressive behavior could be justified as sheer self-defense:

> What you're calling today a jam, we used to call them cutting contests. Like I hear about regular tenor players playing down there, and I had to go down and cut them, you know. But they used to come and get me. A lot of times they'd come and find me. . . .
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> They tried to catch me ever since I've been a kid. I don't know *why* they never leave me alone—they never *did* leave me alone! They got to cut *me*—if possible, and all that.

The focus in jam sessions was on competition; its specialized vocabulary—cutting and carving—suggestive of hand-to-hand combat. This ritual of competition was deeply ingrained in African American culture. It found its parallel in verbal contests such as the dozens, where quick-

witted, aggressive responses and spontaneous creativity were highly valued. While the competition was serious, the atmosphere was congenial and supportive. Individual reputations might be made or broken, but the ultimate purpose was to raise the quality of performance all around. "Through all these friendly but lively competitions," wrote white jazz saxophonist Mezz Mezzrow, a close observer of the Harlem scene in the 1920s, "you could see the Negro's appreciation of real talent and merit, his demand for fair play, and his ardor for the best man wins and don't you come around here with no jive. . . . The Negro audience is extra-critical when it comes to music and won't accept anything second-rate."

Jam sessions provided affirmation for those at the top of their game and a formidable barrier to those trying to reach the highest levels. According to Count Basie, "The Rhythm Club sessions were a good way for a new musician to get himself some quick recognition if you were somebody with something special. And if you didn't [have something special] and didn't have any better sense than to go in there and tangle with them cats, that was the quickest way to get yourself embarrassed. They didn't have any mercy on upstarts in there." The point, however, was not to humiliate and discourage beginners but to spur them on by giving them a taste of the highest standards. As Mezzrow pointed out:

> These contests taught the musicians never to rest on their laurels, to keep on woodshedding and improving themselves. Dancers had the same kind of competitions, and so did most other kinds of entertainers. Many's the time some hoofer would be strutting his stuff in the alley outside the Lafayette Theater, with a crowd around him, and [tap dancer John] Bubbles would wander up and jump in the circle and lay some hot iron that lowrated the guys, then walk off saying, "Go on home and wrastle with that one, Jim." There wasn't any room for complacency. Bubbles wasn't just showing off. He was making that cat work harder.

For younger musicians still learning their craft, the trial by fire of the jam session was as much a part of their training as practicing scales. As trombonist Trummy Young once said, "If a guy came into town, [and] he could play—well, everybody was after this guy. Man, let's try to catch old so-and-so. . . . They'd invite him, 'Come out, man, you know.' And everybody'd get up there and take shots at him. Some of them we could handle and some of them we couldn't. But every time you do that you're sharpening your knife, see."

In this way, the after-hours jam session became an integral part of an aspiring musician's musical education. As Ralph Ellison has put it, the jam session was "the jazzman's true academy":

> It is here that he learns tradition, group techniques and style. For although since the twenties many jazzmen have had conservatory training and were well grounded in formal theory and instrumental technique, when we approach jazz we are entering quite a different sphere of training. . . .
>
> In this his instructors are his fellow musicians, especially the acknowledged masters, and his recognition of manhood depends upon their acceptance of his ability as having reached a standard which is all the more difficult for not having been rigidly codified. This does not depend upon his ability to simply hold a job but upon his power to express an individuality in tone. Nor is his status ever unquestioned, for the health of jazz and the unceasing attraction which it holds for the musicians themselves lies in the ceaseless warfare for mastery and recognition—not only among the general public, though commercial success is not spurned, but among their artistic peers. And even the greatest can never rest on past accomplishments, for, as with the fast guns of the old West, there is always someone waiting in a jam session to blow him literally, not only down, but into shame and discouragement.

The jam session academy was not for everyone. It did not test such crucial professional skills or specializations as sight-reading, leading a section, or the endurance required to be the high-note man in a trumpet section. Many successful dance band musicians, even in jazz-oriented organizations, made their reputations without ever having to improvise. Others, having found their professional niche, felt no need to subject themselves to continuous competition. But for the young soloist on the make, the late-night jam session scene was a necessity. Although the most celebrated sessions were held in New York and featured established stars, jam sessions could be found across the country and were just as much the province of the less well known and unemployed. At the margins of the profession and during difficult times, playing in a jam session provided the only tenuous link to professional status that a musician might have. Of the famous nightlife in Kansas City during the 1930s, trumpeter Buck Clayton has written: "The young musicians could be found jamming at the Union during the day. The unemployed musicians were to be found at night jamming at different clubs just to keep in shape to be ready when they did find a job, then at night the pros took over after they had finished their work in various clubs."

Bassist Al Hall remembers: "We had a session going at all times, all hours, you know. That was our life. We had nothing else to do. We didn't have employment, that's for sure! [laughs]. . . . It's the same as a soldier with a gun. If he doesn't get to shoot it, he isn't much of a soldier, and an instrumentalist with an instrument [who] doesn't get to play it isn't a musician, right?"

Challenging the "No-Talent Guys"

"In those days we had several means of access to experience," writes Dizzy Gillespie, neatly summing up the division of his professional world into two complementary spheres. "Big bands were one, jam sessions were another. I tried to get plenty of both." As a teenager in Philadelphia, he observed cutting contests between Roy Eldridge and Rex Stewart from the sidelines, too intimidated to participate. But during his first restless year in New York as a professional in 1937, Gillespie remembers going to "ten or twelve places a night" to jam: "We'd go down to the Village to a lot of places, then finish off uptown: George's in the Village; the Yeah Man, and the Victoria, the Britwood [*sic*], and Hollywood on 116th Street; Smalls', the Big Apple and another place over on 111th Street. We'd play at the 101 Ranch on 139th Street, and then Monroe's Uptown House and Dicky Wells' [not the trombonist]."

The number of clubs reflects not only Gillespie's enthusiasm and determination, but also the practical need to keep one step ahead of the union "walking representative," whose thankless task was to patrol clubs, fining any performers not officially working under contract: "We'd go in a place and find out if the union man had been there. If he hadn't been there, we'd cut that one aloose and go to someplace where he'd already been and play there. 'Cause if he'd catch us there, he'd want to fine you. Fifty or a hundred dollars, that was a whole lot of money—and fine the whole band too—but they'd run you out most of the time."

The clubs Gillespie mentions were nightclubs, some operating during conventional hours but most flourishing "after hours"—after the 4 A.M. curfew nominally enforced on New York nightlife. Jamming was far more casual in these circumstances. Clubs like the Brittwood (conveniently located on the same block as the Savoy Ballroom) and Monroe's Uptown House provided a good place for "lightweights"—musicians of modest talent or fledgling reputations—to gain invaluable experience sitting in

with a small combo. Some, like Smalls' Paradise, were well established, featuring elaborate entertainment, music, and dancing, and regularly recommended by the New York police to white people looking for a "safe" place in Harlem. Others were far less prepossessing—basement rooms or "holes" (in Dicky Wells's phrase), often accessible only through a dingy boiler room.

In such environments, musicians rubbed elbows not only with fellow musicians, but also with entertainers from all areas of show business, gamblers and racketeers, and big spenders coming up to Harlem from downtown. These were the "night people"—a "conglomeration of artists, taxi drivers, . . . radio people, prostitutes, actors, musicians, adventurers and entertainers" who formed the natural constituency for the breakfast dances of Harlem and Kansas City. "The average musician hated to go home in those days," Sonny Greer, longtime drummer with Duke Ellington, remembered. "He was always seeking some place where someone was playing something he ought to hear. Ten o'clock in the morning, someone would come by and say, 'Man, they're jamming at so-and-so's,' and over he'd go."

While nightclubs and after-hours clubs were nominally open to all paying customers and not explicitly designated as the province of professionals, musicians still imposed on them a fine sense of professional hierarchy that outsiders or naive newcomers violated at their own risk. "When you were in this category you played into this club," according to Jo Jones. "You did not go over here and play into this club until you qualified. Then you begin to move up and you sit in over here." Jones was not above acting as the enforcer of this stern dictum. In a moment now celebrated in the pretentious central image of the movie *Bird,* he threw his high-hat cymbal on the floor of the Reno Club in Kansas City to make it clear to a struggling teenaged Charlie Parker that he most emphatically did *not* belong—yet.

But for the most part, musicians preferred subtler means of putting an interloper in his place. It was far more to the point if the untalented or insufficiently trained realized on their own that they were in over their heads. So jam sessions gradually accumulated special musical procedures to be called into play whenever someone's "qualifications" needed to be challenged.

One of the simplest and most effective of these devices was to play in keys outside the ken of ordinary musicians. Self-taught musicians typically felt most comfortable playing in a handful of favorite keys, and at the lower reaches of the profession nothing more might be required. But

a rising professional was sure to encounter situations that demanded a fluid grasp of almost any key: accompanying singers, reading difficult charts for floor shows, or playing tunes with sudden, distant modulations, such as "Body and Soul" or "Cherokee." Mastery of key signatures bristling with sharps—especially foreign to those playing E-flat and B-flat wind instruments (musicians used to call them "oriental keys")—was mandatory for advancement in an increasingly competitive and specialized field.

The irascible and flamboyant pianist Willie "the Lion" Smith, who like many pianists learned the trick of transposing while accompanying cabaret singers in their favorite keys, was particularly well known for insisting that the young musicians who dared to jam with him negotiate his whimsical modulations to unfamiliar keys. Benny Carter used to try to cheat, pulling out his mouthpiece to force the tune from A or E to an easier key. This dodge earned him a scolding from Smith. "After I finally had gotten a little better control of the keys," Carter recalled, "he would just play in any key. You never knew what he was going to do. He caught himself sometimes trying to trick you, you know, just for fun. And it was a very valuable musical experience for me." After listening to Smith play at a Harlem nightclub for several months, the teenaged Rex Stewart finally worked up the nerve to ask to sit in:

> "Mr. Smith, I know this tune. Would it be okay for me to play it with you?" The Lion growled, "Yeah, kid, if you know your tonics." For all the musical education I had had by then, I didn't have a clue what he meant by "tonics." Nevertheless, I hopped on the stand. Then I found out as Willie played on, each chorus in another key: [A flat to A natural,] B flat to B natural, and so on. But I struggled on. . . . And I'll never stop thanking Willie "the Lion" Smith for his important part in my musical education.

At the Rhythm Club and at various other small clubs in Harlem and on 52nd Street, harmonic obstacles were a way of keeping the unqualified at arm's length while providing a useful challenge for those with the talent and courage to remain behind. Modulating up a half step each chorus was one widespread device. Another was choosing a tune in an unfamiliar key and a brisk tempo:

> If a guy came in [to Monroe's Uptown House] that played very bad or wasn't adequate enough on his horn, instead of playing something in B-flat that he knew (and we knew he played it in B-flat) we would play it in B-natural—

> and at a faster pace—and this guy would say, "They did it to me again." And he'd pack up his instrument and leave. You see what I mean. He'd go home and practice it in B-natural. [Laughter] He'd come back and we've moved it up to C-sharp or something like that, you see. [Laughter] We kept doing this, and these guys also made us more proficient, you know . . . We didn't actually discourage musicians. But if you was gonna sit in, we didn't want you to be half, you know, I don't want to use the other half of that word! [Laughter]

"Guys used to come in when we were playing at the Onyx Club," remembered drummer Cozy Cole, "and want to sit in, and Stuff Smith would tell them right quick, 'No, don't jump up on this bandstand if you can't play, 'cause we're liable to play anything.' "

Devices of this sort were sometimes part of a game of one-upmanship. Fletcher Henderson early on helped to position his band at the top of the profession by pitching his arrangements in intimidating keys. Count Basie vividly recalled one humiliating occasion in the 1930s when he sat near the bandstand at the Roseland Ballroom to listen to the Henderson band. The bandleader noticed Basie and slyly asked him to sit in as pianist while he ran a quick errand:

> I got up there and looked at the sheet music on the piano *and everything I saw was in D or B-natural or something like that!*
>
> So I just got right back down and sat on those little steps where I had been in the first place. Then I realized that Fletcher could see every move I had made because he was looking out through the window of a little room that must have been used as a control booth during broadcasts and he was laughing his can off. . . . But I didn't fool around up there because I knew that pretty soon there was going to be a piano solo in one of those hard keys, and something like that was the last thing I wanted to get tangled up with.

Henderson's most famous alumnus, Hawkins, used unusual keys to particularly devastating effect. One night at Kelly's Stable in 1941, while Hawkins was backstage enjoying a drink of Calvert's, he allowed a "phalanx of tenors," including Ben Webster, Corky Corcoran, and Lester Young, to jam on a blues in B-flat. When he emerged, he called for the blues in G-flat. "He lost quite a few people at that point," remembers bassist George Duvivier. When he called for "East of the Sun" in B-natural, "he lost *everybody.*" The jam session ended with Webster sighing

loudly and slamming his saxophone case shut. Even the famous showdown with Lester Young in Kansas City in the early 1930s conformed to this pattern, if the testimony of Count Basie is to be taken seriously. "I don't know anything about anybody challenging Hawkins in the Cherry Blossom that night. . . . The way I remember it, Hawk just went on up there and played around with them for a while, and then when he got warmed up, he started calling for them bad keys."

Jam sessions therefore encouraged techniques, procedures, attitudes—in short, the essential components of a musical language and aesthetic—quite distinct from what was possible or acceptable in more public venues. Admittedly, the results were not always dramatically different. As surviving recordings from Minton's and Monroe's demonstrate, sometimes the only difference between what one might hear in a jam session and in a ballroom or public nightclub was that the jam session soloists played for as long as they liked without fear of interruption. When established stars like Benny Goodman or Count Basie dropped in, the house band was deferential, careful to accommodate their tastes (some musicians even brought their own rhythm sections with them when they went jamming). But where the restless energy and imagination of ambitious young progressives were given free rein, a startling new music took shape. The fast tempos and deliberately convoluted harmonic progressions, obstacles thrown up to disorient the "no-talent guys"; the pursuit of virtuosity for its own sake; the shift of focus away from the mass audience to the personal struggle of musicians to master the art of improvisation: all fed directly into the emergent bebop style.

Minton's

Until 1942 these innovations remained in the shadowy backstage world of the jazz community. It was musicians' business, not intended for public consumption. In retrospect, it is easy to see how the pattern emerged, and tempting to imagine young bebop musicians plotting their revolution step by step. But the components of the bebop style either emerged from the pressures on professional musicians to "advance" in predictable directions—range, speed, facility with chromatic harmony—or from idiosyncratic, even accidental discoveries, whose implications were not clear until much later, when the conditions for transmuting the jam session into a distinct genre emerged.

The development of modern jazz drumming by Kenny Clarke—the first piece of the bebop musical puzzle to fall into place—provides a tell-

ing example of how musical ideas and personnel tended to drift from the public sphere to the private world of the jam session, where an experimental bent could be given more latitude. By the late 1930s Clarke was already an experienced big-band drummer, content with his specialized professional role. "I always concentrated on accompaniment," he told an interviewer. "I thought that was the most important thing, my basic function as a drummer, and so I always stuck with that. And I think that's why a lot of the musicians liked me so much, because I never show off and always think about them first." He began studying arrangements carefully, playing rhythms along with the brass: "I knew exactly what they were playing because I saw it on the music, and I put what I thought was a good support for them, a special passage." Where there were "holes" in the arrangement, he filled them with drum interpolations. This practice provoked criticism from musicians used to a steady rhythmic foundation. "They said, 'Oh, that little guy is crazy. He's always breaking up the tempo.' But I stuck with it. I liked it, so I wasn't about to change something that I had found, you know."

But Clarke's most important innovation—shifting the pulse away from the bass drum to the ride cymbal—was more fortuitous:

> It just happened sort of accidentally. . . . We were playing a real fast tune once with Teddy Hill—"Old Man River," I think—and the tempo was too fast to play four beats to the measure, so I began to cut the time up. But to keep the same rhythm going, I had to do it with my hand, because my foot just wouldn't do it. So I started doing it with my hand, and then every once in a while I would kind of lift myself with my foot, to kind of boot myself into it. . . .
>
> When it was over, I said, "Good God, was that ever hard." So then I began to think, and say, "Well, you know, it worked. It worked and nobody said anything, so it came out right. So that must be the way to do it." Because I think if I had been able to do it [the old way], it would have been stiff. It wouldn't have worked.

Clarke's technique of keeping a shimmering pulse on the ride cymbal, occasionally punctuated by vigorous accents on the bass and snare drums, earned him the onomatopoeic nickname Klook-mop, or Klook. It was greeted enthusiastically by some younger musicians, including band mate Dizzy Gillespie. But it angered one of Hill's veteran trombonists, who complained to Hill, "Man, we can't use 'Klook' because he breaks up the time too much." Hill reluctantly fired his drummer in 1940.

Ironically, Hill's own band failed shortly thereafter, and the former bandleader took on new responsibilities at a Harlem club called Minton's Playhouse. Minton's Playhouse was started in 1938 by Henry Minton, a tenor saxophonist and the first black delegate to Local 802 of the musicians' union. It was located on 118th Street, adjacent to the Hotel Cecil, a frequent temporary residence of musicians passing through New York. In late 1940, to bolster sagging business, Minton hired Hill to organize the music policy for his club. As Clarke remembered, "After he became manager of this club, he came and got me. He said, 'Now, Kenny, I'm managing this place. I want you to be the bandleader. You can drop all the bombs, all the re-bop and the boom-bams you want to play, you can do it here.' So I said, 'Oh, this is wonderful,' you know! [laughter]" For the remainder of the group, Clarke chose trumpeter Joe Guy, who had been left unemployed by the collapse of Coleman Hawkins's orchestra; bassist Nick Fenton (also a veteran of the Hawkins band); and a local pianist named Thelonious Monk.

Minton's was an understated place: a bar in front, a back room for music, tables with white linen tablecloths and flowers in glass vases. But it offered a kind of sanctuary. Like the Rhythm Club, it was intended primarily for the use of professional musicians. Because of Minton's connections to the union, musicians could sit in without fear of being fined by the union delegate for playing without pay. Unlike many other jam session spots, the self-described "Showplace of Harlem" was a legitimate nightclub, staying open only until the official curfew of 4 A.M. It was ideal for musicians working with a big band at a theater like the Apollo or the Paramount, as they could drop by after their job was through for the night (which might be as early as eleven o'clock). It was also popular with out-of-work musicians (a category that, by 1942, included what one might call the *deliberately* underemployed—those like Parker or Gillespie who used their time in between jobs to explore the jam session scene). Everybody was welcome on Monday night, the traditional night off—dubbed "Celebrity Night" because Hill invited the entire cast of the Apollo Theatre for a buffet dinner. As always, the evening culminated in a jam session. "Teddy Hill treated the guys well," according to Gillespie. "He didn't pay them much money—I never got paid—but he treated the guys nicely. There was always some food there for you." The music and socializing would go on until closing time, when Hill would shatter the cozy ambience by lowering a garishly bright streetlight that he had installed on a rope for just this purpose.

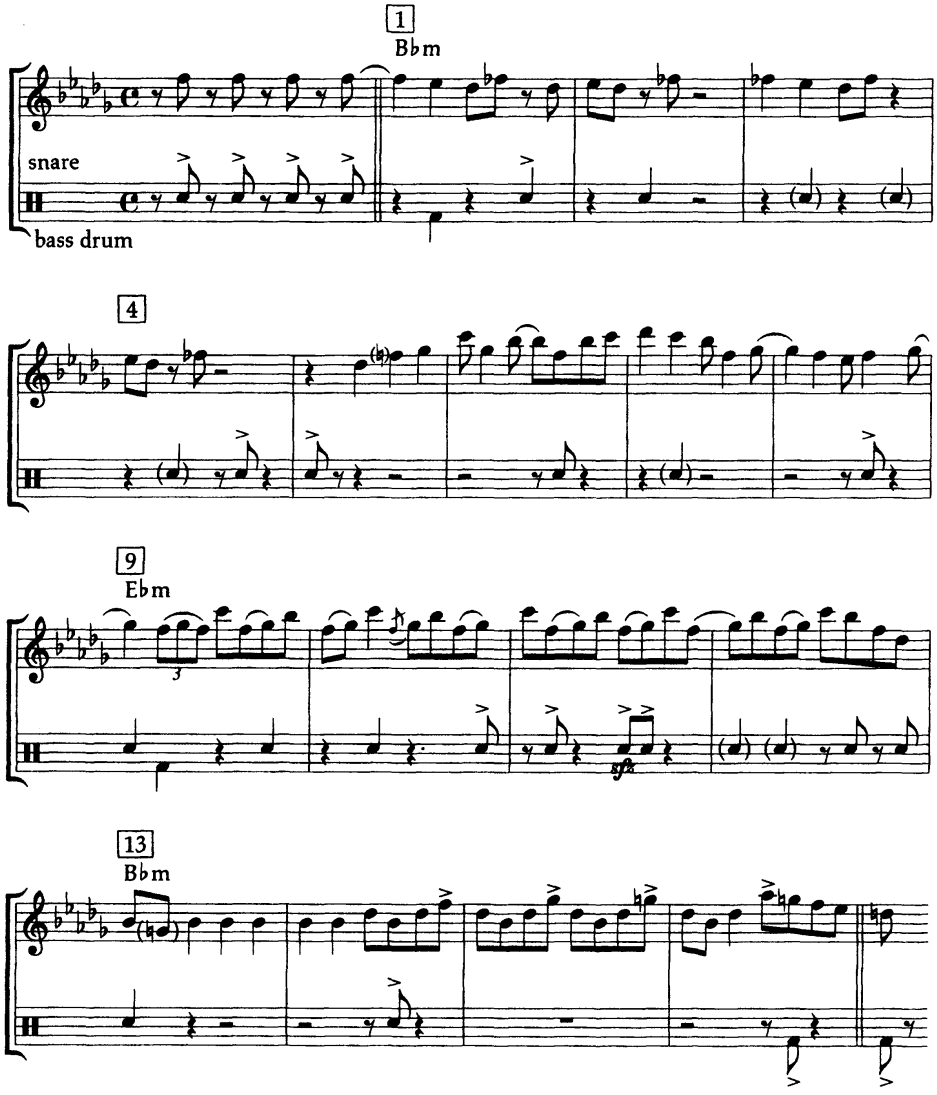
Even though it barely paid a living wage, Minton's was a pleasant and

stimulating environment in which to work. Like most jam session locales, it provided Clarke with the space to refine new and unusual techniques and the opportunity to parade these skills before his peers nightly. Fragments of this phase of Clarke's career have been preserved, almost by accident, on acetate recordings from Minton's made on a portable machine by jazz enthusiast Jerry Newman in 1941. They include one of the most remarkable documents of early bebop—the electrifying interaction of Clarke and guitarist Charlie Christian on the tune "Topsy" (later retitled "Swing to Bop" when issued on LP).

Christian—whose premature retirement from public performance in mid-1941 at age twenty-five robbed jazz of one of its most compelling voices (he was dead of tuberculosis by 1942)—provided the perfect foil for Clarke's disjunct rhythms. Thanks to the timely intervention of John Hammond, who convinced Benny Goodman to hire the guitarist in 1939, Christian had bypassed the usual phase of struggle for a young black musician, leaping directly from regional obscurity to a position of high visibility in the Goodman Sextet. Throughout much of 1940 and early 1941, the Goodman band remained headquartered in New York, leaving Christian free to sit in regularly with the band at Minton's.

Although not a progressive from the standpoint of harmony, the guitarist's sense of rhythm was startlingly supple. Most soloists of the time (Hawkins certainly among them) relied heavily on the unflagging momentum of the underlying dance pulse, even as they actively resisted it in places with syncopation. Christian's lines dissolved the usual hierarchical distinctions between strong beats and weak beats (and strong and weak *parts* of the beat), allowing him to shift effortlessly between sharply contrasting rhythmic grooves. Although the downbeat retained its overall structural importance as a frame of reference—it was still the place at which the listener (or dancer) begins to count "one, two, three, four"—Christian treated the rhythmic flow as an undifferentiated stream of eighth notes that could be shaped instantaneously into unpredictable patterns. These deliberate discontinuities invited a rhythmic partnership with Clarke's drumming. Within the confines of Minton's, Clarke and Christian quickly adopted a mode of playing that owed little to the chugging 4/4 foundation of dance music.

The final chorus of "Topsy" (music example 29) begins with an unexpected example of synergism: Christian's emphatic off-beat entrance matched precisely by Clarke's snare drum accents. (This kind of telepathic empathy happens more often than one might think in jam sessions.) From this point, Clarke retreats to a more supportive role, tending to



EX. 29.
"Swing to Bop" ["Topsy"] (c. 1941), Charlie Christian solo with Kenny Clarke drum accompaniment, final chorus, mm. 1–17.

emphasize the "backbeat" (beats 2 and 4) with accents on the snare. But as Christian raises the temperature with disorienting cross-rhythms in the remarkable passage that begins in measure 9, Clarke responds in kind on the snare, returning to the downbeat just as Christian does in measure 13. "Topsy" shows Clarke to still be a sensitive accompanist, but now, outside the fixed structures of the big-band context, he is free to engage in an open-ended and continually evolving dialogue.

At the time all this was essentially an ingenious form of musical ex-

ercise, delighting the crowd at Minton's, but not readily extendable to any other venue. Still, Clarke's self-advertisement of his formidable skills eventually paid off in more conventional terms. The veteran swing drummer Sidney Catlett began telling other drummers, "Man, that little cat is modern, if you listen to him." According to Clarke, "That was the biggest sendoff. That was the stamp I needed." When Catlett, who had been working in Louis Armstrong's dance band, decided to leave to join Benny Goodman, he took Clarke aside, set up his drums, and taught him Armstrong's entire repertory. Needless to say, Clarke got the job—leaving Armstrong shaking his head, wondering how Clarke learned his parts so fast.

For the most part, bebop pioneers were drawn to the jam sessions as the arena in which they could work out their audacious ideas, but they did not—yet—think of these ideas as an end in themselves. The immediate goal was still to get a job—a job that would, with any luck, be artistically rewarding, financially remunerative, or both, but in any case would not simply be a jam session. Not until jam sessions (or something like them) moved into the public arena and became a viable source of income, and it became clear that the dance bands offered neither acceptable working conditions nor opportunities for advancement, did some young musicians begin to move, tentatively, toward the idea of creating a new genre of music.

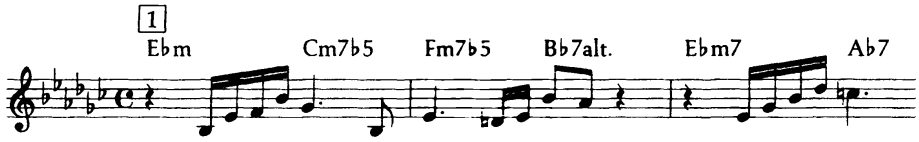
For a few musicians, however, the pressure to make it in the music business was less urgent. Thelonious Monk was not, like so many others, a recent migrant to New York struggling to gain a foothold in the big city; he was a native New Yorker, living at home with his family. Although Monk was born in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in 1923, when he was still a small child, his family had moved to an apartment on West 63rd Street in the San Juan Hill district of Manhattan. He left New York for several years as the accompanist for a touring evangelist, but by the late 1930s he was back in the city, playing "every kind of job you can think of . . . non-union jobs, $20 a night, seven nights a week; and then the boss might fire you at any time and you never got your money."

For Monk, the job at Minton's was not so much a stepping-stone to the big time as the fulfillment of his own, more modest ambitions: "I wanted to play my own chords. I wanted to create and invent on little jobs." Minton's became a second home, where he was free to work out his ideas on the piano without interruption. "He'll come in here anytime

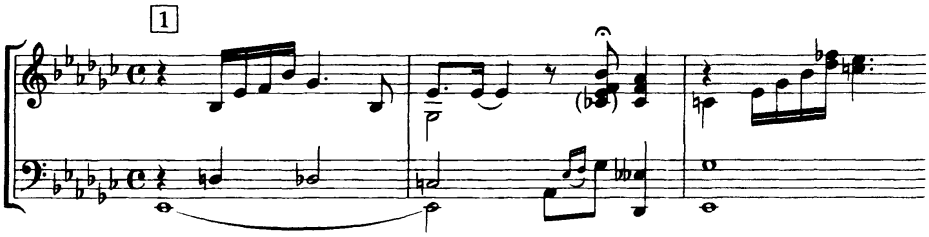
and play for hours with only a dim light," Teddy Hill noted in 1948. "Many times he's gone on so long I've had to come back and plead with him to quit playin' the piano so I could close up the place." Asked about Monk's reputation for eccentricity, Hill mused: "One reason for it, I guess, is that he was living at home with his own people. Maybe if the guy had to stand on his own two feet it might have been different. But knowing that he had a place to eat and sleep, that might have had a lot to do with it. Dizzy had to be on time to keep the landlady from saying, 'You don't live here any more.' Monk never had that worry."

It was during his first few years at Minton's that Monk began composing in earnest: "'Round Midnight," "Ruby My Dear," "Epistrophy," and "Well, You Needn't" are among the tunes that date from this period. His compositions attracted the attention of Minton's clientele and drew him at least tangentially into the orbit of the large dance orchestras. When Joe Guy joined Cootie Williams in 1942, he brought several Monk tunes into the band's repertory: "Epistrophy," a collaboration between Monk and Kenny Clarke, was used by Williams as his radio theme song and recorded by him in April 1942 under the title "Fly Right," with Guy as the main soloist. In the same year, Monk was hired briefly by Lucky Millinder, apparently at the urging of Gillespie, who was working with the band at the time: "He got me hired on piano so's he could be around me."

But Monk had a more profound influence on the small coterie of musicians at Minton's. He introduced them to the half-diminished chord, then still a "freaky sound" on or beyond the boundary of most musicians' knowledge. Modern jazz theory places the half-diminished chord securely within a conventional tonal framework, as the characteristic form of ii^7 in the minor mode. Its interpolation into a major context (i.e., substituting for the ii^7 in a ii^7–V^7 progression) provides a way to "borrow" the lowered sixth and seventh degrees from the minor scale. Bebop musicians learned to use the chord that way, in chains of chromatically related ii^7–V^7 progressions. But for Monk, it was a sonority that had a certain fascination in and of itself. "The first time I heard [the chord]," Gillespie remembers, "Monk showed it to me, and he called it a minor-sixth chord with a sixth in the bass. . . . What Monk called an E-flat-minor sixth chord with a sixth in the bass, the guys nowadays call a C-minor seventh flat five." One can see this ambiguity by comparing the striking opening bars of "'Round Midnight" as it is usually parsed today in jazz "fake books" (music example 30) with the way that Monk usually played it (music example 31, drawn from a 1957 recording).



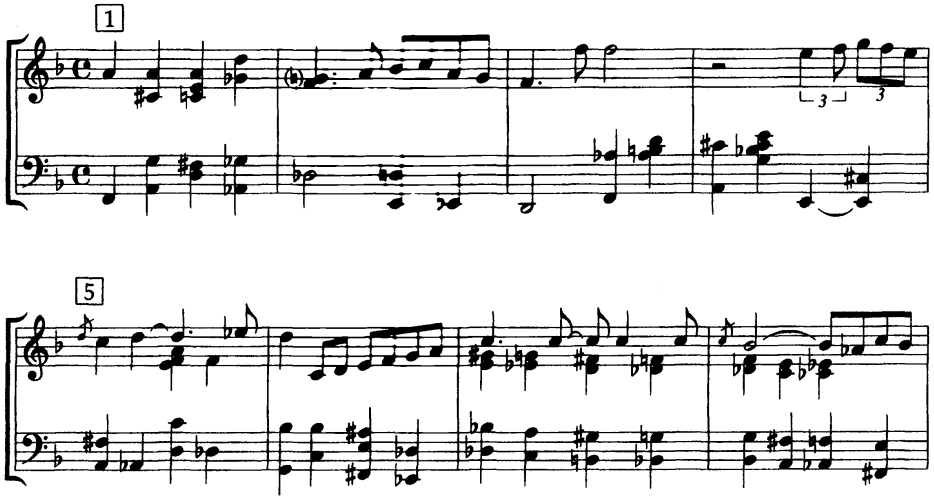
EX. 30.
'Round Midnight," standard "fake book" arrangement, mm. 1–3.



EX. 31.
'Round Midnight" (1957), Thelonious Monk solo piano, mm. 1–3.

The ultimate fascination of the half-diminished chord lay in the tritone buried in its interior. Monk's harmonic language was centered around the tritone: it showed up in his fondness for augmented chords, whole-tone scales, and the infamous "flatted fifth." Although this territory had already been explored by a number of jazz musicians, including Coleman Hawkins, Monk's compositions isolated the characteristic sonority of the tritone more systematically than any music then in circulation. In addition to writing his own compositions, Monk also reharmonized jam session standards. Indeed, many of his "originals," like "The Theme" and "Rhythm-a-Ning," were transparent reworkings of "I Got Rhythm," the hoariest of the jam session warhorses. But in the process of translating these tunes to his own harmonic sensibilities, Monk radically defamiliarized them.

One example, vividly caught by a Jerry Newman recording, demonstrates the uses to which Monk's unorthodox harmonies were typically put. The tune is "Sweet Lorraine," a 1928 pop song that had gained new currency on the basis of a 1940 Nat "King" Cole recording. Monk starts off the tune with an unaccompanied eight-bar introduction (music example 32). The melody is faithfully stated, but the harmonization veers off in unexpected directions—sometimes by the tritone substitutions that eventually became standard practice (e.g., the A-flat^7 and D-flat^7 chords in measures 1–2), sometimes by idiosyncratic chromatic inter-



EX. 32.
"Sweet Lorraine" (c. 1941), Thelonious Monk introduction, mm. 1–8.

polations (measures 6–8). Monk is joined for the tune statement proper by co-conspirator Joe Guy and by an unidentified bassist. The bassist may have been Nick Fenton, but he was more likely an interloper, to judge by his almost comical struggle to find a foothold in Monk's slippery harmonies. After thirty-two bars, this fruitful chaos is over. The drummer enters, and order is restored, just in time for the first of several instrumentalists to begin their solos over more conventional harmonic accompaniment.

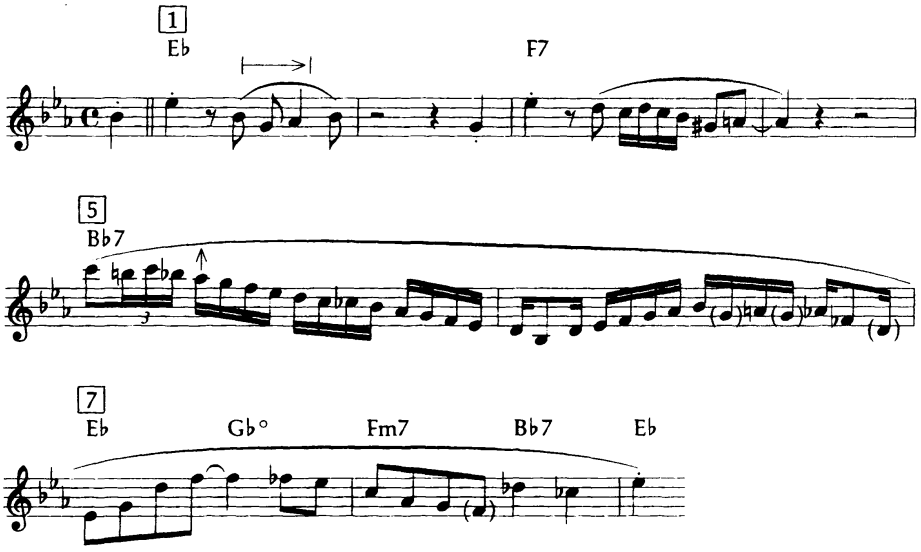
Monk's approach proved to be an ideal update of an old trick: the harmonic barrier to keep out the "unqualified." It could take the form of Monk's compositions, guaranteed to be familiar only to Minton's regulars. Or it could involve imaginative reharmonization. While working through chords on the roof of the Cotton Club, Dizzy Gillespie and Milt Hinton used to plan their strategy for the coming night at Minton's: "Let's change the changes to 'I Got Rhythm,' and we'll play B-flat to D-flat to G-flat to F. . . . When we go in there, I won't say anything—I'll just stomp off and you'll go through these changes with me and we'll blow, and these cats don't know the changes and they can't get in." Danny Barker only joined in on occasion: "I couldn't see going up there and wasting energies on something not commercial." But he was interested enough to go to Minton's to hear the results:

> [Monk] generally started playing strange introductions going off, I thought to outer space, hell knows to where. . . . Somewhere in Monk's intro there

was the melody of the song to be played. In Minton's there was complete quiet: very little talking, no glasses clinking, no kinds of noises. [Note: This is contradicted by the few existing recordings, which contain a good deal of background noise.] Everybody intense in observing and figuring out the music and the behavior of the players, especially of the musicians who dared to jump into the arena. Those who dared and played . . . were now free to talk and join the small, but gradually building bebop fraternity.

In this context, the elements of the bop style took shape. Monk's reharmonizations provided a focus for harmonic exploration and laid the foundation for a new repertory. Dizzy Gillespie continued to focus and refine his virtuoso style, which added to his luster as a featured soloist: the results can be heard plainly in the blisteringly fast double-time passage on his solo in the 1942 recording of "Jersey Bounce" with Les Hite (music example 33).

Gillespie also took charge of developing a new sense of ensemble in the rhythm section. According to Kermit Scott, "Diz was there *every night*. And he would get *on* drummers, man. He'd get back there—say, 'man, play boot-d'-ding, boot-d'-ding.' They was playing another kind of way, man, and he'd tell them how to play the cymbal because our kind of swing was a little different." The sharper young musicians, like Howard McGhee, could tell the difference:



EX. 33.
"Jersey Bounce" (1942), Dizzy Gillespie solo, mm. 1–9.

That was about the best rhythm section in them days to be had. . . . 'Cause I was playing with Kirk and he had Johnny Young on piano, and he's a damn good piano player; Booker Collins was the bass player—fair; drummer—fair. They wasn't playing, like, "ch'bop" [imitating smooth bop groove]; they wasn't playing no shit like that. They'd just play "bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang," you know, all the way.

I mean, 4/4 is all right—it's for people when they're dancing. But for solo work, it just doesn't swing, man; it leaves you like you got to be right there on the beat all the time, and that ain't the way music is supposed to be played. You're supposed to play music whatever way you feel, and if it doesn't entail that kind of rhythm section, you don't need it.

[In small combos] you have more freedom. Because if you played something a drummer could fit in things behind it and so forth. So you do that enough times and you got something happening. But with a dance band, if they wasn't dancing, what do you play when they play four beats to the bar?

McGhee recalls a conversation in the early 1940s with Roy Eldridge as the two shared a taxi to Harlem. Eldridge, who had been challenged by Gillespie in cutting contests, was baffled by the rapidly changing style:

He said, "Hey, Maggie, do you really dig this?" I said, "Yeah, I dig it, Roy. It's something new, it's something a little different from what has been played." And he said, "Well, I don't dig it." I said, "Yeah, I can understand you saying that. I mean, because you done put your foundation down, and you got to what you got going." And I say, "Dizzy's *playing*, man, I tell you, I can't say nothing wrong with what he's doing. . . . You heard Charlie Parker?" He says, "I *really* don't understand him." I say, "Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. You really don't *understand*. . . . "

See, [musicians like Eldridge] had come up in an era [with] Louis Armstrong and all the guys that played back in those days. They figured, well, if they played a little bit more than that, that they *had* something. But that wasn't the idea of playing bop. Bop, you had to *know*—not *feel*, you had to *know* what you were doing. . . .

Like Charlie Parker—I think the thing that happened to him, he came out to play with people and he didn't know music, period. He didn't know "Body and Soul" and all those things that had chord changes to it. So he tried to play and everybody laughed at him. So he went back home and stayed in the house about three months and learned all the changes and all the things, so when he came back out he knew what he was doing. And that's what you had to do in bebop, was to *know* what you were doing.

Monroe's Uptown House

All the attention given to Minton's in the mythology of bebop has tended to obscure the importance of any other venue. But the band at Monroe's Uptown House deserves no less to be called, in pianist Allen Tinney's words, "the nucleus of bop." Minton's was a comfortable but unglorified musicians' hangout, offering little to those not part of the inner circle. The Uptown House was heir to a long tradition of late-night Harlem entertainment extending back to the glory days of Prohibition. Located at 198 West 134th Street, it lay at the heart of the nightlife district dominated to the south by the Apollo Theatre on 125th Street and to the north by the Renaissance Ballroom on 138th Street and the Cotton Club (closed since 1935) and the Savoy Ballroom on Lenox Avenue, just above 140th Street. Smalls' Paradise, a posh nightclub dating back to 1925 and still open in the early 1940s, when a teenaged Malcolm X worked there as a waiter, lay just around the block on Seventh Avenue and 135th.

Since the mid-1920s, the area between 133rd and 135th Streets in particular had been a favorite for speakeasies and small nightclubs designed to attract curious white pleasure-seekers from downtown. Such clubs as the Nest Club on 133rd and Pods' and Jerry's on 132nd offered a lively, more intimate alternative to the larger venues, one that cashed in heavily on the image of Harlem as a round-the-clock playground. The sole purpose of these clubs, according to Malcolm X, was "to entertain and jive the white night crowd to get their money":

> Especially after the nightclubs downtown closed, the taxis and black limousines would be driving uptown, bringing those white people who never could get enough of Negro *soul*. The places popular with these whites ranged all the way from the big locally famous ones such as Jimmy's Chicken Shack, and Dickie Wells', to the little here-tonight-gone-tomorrow private clubs, so-called, where a dollar was collected at the door for "membership." Inside every after-hours spot, the smoke would hurt your eyes. Four white people to every Negro would be in there drinking whisky from coffee cups and eating fried chicken. The generally flush-faced white men and their makeup-masked, glittery-eyed women would be pounding each other's backs and uproariously laughing and applauding the music. A lot of the whites, drunk, would go staggering up to Negroes, the waiters, the owners, or Negroes at tables, wringing their hands, even trying to hug them, "You're just as good as I am—I want you to know that!"

Whites were encouraged to feel that they had stumbled onto an all-night party—an illusion that was carefully nurtured by the seasoned

professionals who staffed the joints. As Danny Barker describes it, a certain amount of play-acting was involved:

> I first saw the drama cleverly enacted at the old Nest Club, where there was not much action until after the big joints closed at the curfew time. . . . It was a night when the place was empty. Everybody sat around like half asleep. At the door upstairs there was Ross the slick doorman. When he rang three loud rings on the upstairs door buzzer (it rang loud), it meant some live prosperous-looking people, a party, were coming in.
>
> Like jacks out of a box the band struck up *Lady be Good.* Everybody went into action; the band swinging, waiters beating on trays, everybody smiling and moving, giving the impression the joint was jumping. . . . The unsuspecting party entered amid finger-popping and smiling staff. ('Make believe we're happy.') This was kept up until the party was seated and greeted and their orders taken. Then on came the singers, smiling and moving; then another singer, a dancer. Then it was off to the races—action—'Let's get this money.' "

By the late 1930s Harlem nightclubs were visibly in decline. On March 19, 1935, the rumor that a black teenager was being beaten sparked a night of violent rioting, which confirmed in most New Yorkers' minds the decline of Harlem from the center of exotic nightlife—"America's Casbah"—to a dangerous slum. The larger clubs, such as the Cotton Club, either closed or relocated downtown. At the same time, an alternative strip of jazz-oriented nightclubs emerged on 52nd Street, prompting some black musicians to wonder whether the widely publicized dangers of wandering through Harlem at night were simply a ruse to frighten white customers away from Harlem after-hours clubs to a more convenient midtown location. For whatever reason, by the mid-1940s the center of gravity had gradually shifted away from Harlem to 52nd Street. But during the early years of bebop, enough Harlem clubs remained in operation to provide the adventurous with late-night entertainment and musicians with sporadic employment. Among the most prominent of these was Monroe's Uptown House.

The owner of the Uptown House, Clark Monroe, was a "man about town" who harbored ambitions to become a major nightclub operator. Monroe's roots were in the entertainment business: at one time he had worked as a tap dancer. "The guys used to kid him a great deal about that," remembers Leonard Gaskin. "We used to call him a 'one-leg dancer,' because he had a couple of one-foot licks." Like his younger brother

Jimmy, who dazzled Billie Holiday into marrying him in 1941 ("he was the most beautiful man I'd laid eyes on since Buck Clayton"), Clark was a handsome man, known locally as "the Dark Gable." "He was an outspoken, dapper, colorful dude, and one that the women loved, because he was a handsome guy. He had a way about him. He was really a ladies' man. The fellows seemed to like him too." The feeling was mutual. "Clark Monroe had a warm feeling for musicians," Dizzy Gillespie has said. Like Henry Minton, he would greet them warmly, offer them a bite to eat, and otherwise create a sense of community.

Monroe's gregarious nature not only made him the ideal host for an evening's entertainment, but also allowed him to ingratiate himself with the powers that could keep an enterprise of dubious legality in operation. The club was periodically raided, but only as a formality. "Clark was very business-like," according to Danny Barker. "He was in cahoots with the mob and the people who run that business. He was well liked." He was also shrewd enough to realize that his future lay outside of Harlem and ambitious enough to try to work his way into the new networks that were taking shape. Later, in the mid-1940s, he followed the flow of capital out of Harlem, opening a club on 52nd Street. But during the formative years of bebop, the center of his entrepreneurial energies was in the Uptown House.

Like most after-hours clubs, the Uptown House was an unprepossessing basement club with no awning or sign to attract the attention of passersby. It depended on the trade of those in the know: well-off socialites with a taste for adventure, professionals in the entertainment business and their hangers-on. Harlem may have become a more dangerous place, but women could still stroll the streets late at night in their mink coats. Movie stars like Lana Turner and John Garfield frequented the club, as did the musicians from prosperous white swing bands like Glenn Miller's or Harry James's. The club opened for business in the late evening, but things didn't really get rolling until the curfew hour of 4 A.M. approached. Closing time came when the last crowds dissipated, usually well past dawn.

The entertainment was more informal than the tightly choreographed shows of the larger cabarets. Singers and dancers, including female impersonators performing raunchy parodies of current popular songs, followed one another in a flexible, semi-improvisational format called ups (as in "You're up," "I'm up next"). The house band was expected to provide accompaniment for these acts, as well as to produce "some kind of

noise" to keep the entertainment more or less continuous. Since musicians in particular made a habit of coming to the Uptown House after hours, the "noise" more often than not featured the patrons themselves. Monroe's became famous for its jam sessions, pitting established soloists from name bands against hungry up-and-comers. The famous musicians gave Monroe's its reputation, but the young upstarts gave it its energy. "Musicians used to go there and battle like dogs," remembered Budd Johnson. As Ray Abrams, a young Brooklyn saxophonist who eventually became part of the house band, recalled:

> When those guys came in to play, they wouldn't play one number or two numbers and get up and go. They'd be there all night long. And you know how it is when you're nineteen, twenty years old. You couldn't get rid of them sometimes! I've seen it happen up there where they're playing a number about this tempo [he taps a tempo of ♩ = 290], and the piano would change, like Bud [Powell] would get up and Duke [Jordan] would sit down. But the number is still going on! And the drummer has to go through all of that. And when they'd finish, man, they'd be soaking wet.

Because he knew he could count on the jazz community to enliven the proceedings on any given night for free, Monroe invested relatively little in music. The pool of musicians he drew upon were not highly competitive and unionized professionals, but local talent, teenagers mostly, willing to put up with the demanding schedule for the sake of breaking into the nightclub scene. Most had already found their way to his club, and as Monroe came to realize, they offered something quite different for relatively low cost.

One of these upstarts was Allen Tinney, whose family moved to New York in 1923, when he was only two. His interest in music came from his father, who was a professional saxophonist, but his early professional experience in the entertainment world came at the prompting of his stage-struck mother, who pushed Tinney and his siblings into parts as child dancers in numerous Broadway theatrical performances. Tinney started playing piano at an early age and was skilled enough to play in an onstage band in a Gershwin production as well as in various local dance pickup groups. For his nineteenth birthday in May 1940, Tinney went to Monroe's to celebrate, and there he was encouraged to sit in with the house band. Afterward, to his astonishment, Monroe asked him to join the house trio as the regular pianist. Tinney was working in a pro-

duction of *Sing Out the News* at the time, and like the other entertainment professionals, he realized that he could come to Monroe's after his regular evening's work was finished.

Tinney's presence attracted other musicians his age to come into Monroe's to play. They came from Harlem, Brooklyn, and Newark, and included the trumpeter George Treadwell, the saxophonist Ray Abrams, and the drummer Max Roach. The trio regularly swelled to a seven- or eight-piece group, and Monroe, seeing the possibilities, asked Tinney to hire some of these musicians regularly. The pay was low—about two dollars a night. The paltry salary could be augmented by tips, which depending on the whim of Monroe's free-spending clientele, could be extravagant. "You had these people coming in from everywhere," remembers Leonard Gaskin, "and suppose they said to the trio, 'Play "Flying Home!,' " and this dude's got a little bread and throws you a $50 bill—you're making some bread!" But such windfalls could not be counted on. If any of the musicians could get a job for higher wages, they took it. The band personnel was shuffled and reshuffled almost every night, although enough of a core remained to provide some continuity. In this way, the young New Yorkers gained some valuable experience, and drifters like Charlie Parker found their way into a stimulating and refreshingly unstructured environment.

Tinney's importance lay in imposing order on this chaos: "When I put my foot in the door, things started to happen because I always like organization. I didn't care if I had one guy playing, I wanted him to play something definite. . . . We would play different melodies on the same chord changes as an existing melody on top, which would make it our song now. We'd put some sort of—not an obbligato, but you could use it as an obbligato to the actual melody. . . . And as everything became organized, and the guys that came in would learn the things that we were doing . . . it was really no more of a jam session."

The group began developing its own repertory, with Tinney as its arranger. They listened closely to the light, propulsive swing of the Count Basie band: "When 'Every Tub,' and 'Swinging the Blues,' and later 'One O'Clock Jump' came out, we wore them out listening to them. And we tried to emulate them." They applied this rhythmic sensibility to a careful selection of obscure tunes from the recent repertory of Artie Shaw ("Zigeuner," "This Time the Dream's On Me") and Duke Ellington ("Chocolate Shake" from *Jump for Joy*, "Main Stem," "Hayfoot, Strawfoot"), to popular songs with challenging chord progressions like "Cherokee" and "How High the Moon," and even to some early Monk compositions

("Well, You Needn't," "Epistrophy," "'Round Midnight"), brought up to Monroe's from Minton's after the four o'clock curfew. " 'How High the Moon' was a ballad, for crying out loud, until it was played there," according to Gaskin. "That's how the music was born. Looking for different tunes that were not conventional. . . . All those tunes were very strange, and we used to play them all in a muted, swinging way. And so that's where Dizzy heard of us, and Cootie and Monk and all of those other fellows, they heard of this little band, and they all came around to listen to it."

Another musician who had a hand in shaping the musical direction of the house band was a now-obscure cornetist named Victor Coulsen. Coulsen frequented Monroe's as early as 1940 and became a regular member of the band under Tinney's leadership. "He was really the innovator of our little ideas," Gaskin asserts. "He didn't have a big propelling tone, but gems would come out of that instrument." Aside from the 1944 session for Apollo Records led by Coleman Hawkins (see chapter 8), where he played in a three-man trumpet section, Coulsen never recorded, so it is impossible to know exactly what he sounded like. But all who heard him agree that he played with a delicate, understated tone, frequently with a mute, and that his musical ideas were finely shaped. "He didn't have a lot of range, I don't think," pianist Al Haig reflects. "His playing was rather impeccable in a way. He did what he wanted to do. He played a little bit like beginning Miles."

Coulsen was an introverted, enigmatic man who, as Tinney says ambiguously, "had a tendency to be very evil at times." He was a sharp dresser who, like Charlie Parker, enjoyed living on the fringe between legitimate professional life and the underworld of drug addicts and hustlers. Unlike Parker, he sank into that underworld before making his mark with his music. "He did have one problem," remembers Gaskin. "He was fooling around with the stuff at the time. That *had* to be a problem." Tinney was drafted into the army in 1943, and on his return to civilian life shortly after war, he was shocked to see that the dapper Coulsen had become a "wino." Nothing more is known of him.

Most of the other musicians at Monroe's were firmly grounded in family life. Ray Abrams, Leonard Gaskin, Cecil Payne, and Max Roach lived at home in Brooklyn with their parents and involved themselves in professional life only insofar as it suited them. They began playing in nonunion bands in Brooklyn, but soon were making the trip to Manhattan to sample the music. According to Gaskin, "Ray always had a piece of junk car, or Max's father used to take us in a Model T, or Model A, or

something. And we'd all pile in and go to the city." Various nonunion engagements gave them a toehold in Manhattan musical life. Gaskin found a job at a small after-hours club called Covan's Morocco, a ground-floor brownstone on 133rd Street across from Dickie Wells's, and occasionally subbed at Monroe's. Abrams got a job at the 78th Street Taproom, a tiny Upper West Side club that offered a floor show with dancers and comedians seven nights a week. There Clark Monroe, ever the extroverted impresario, made a big show of "conducting" the band. When Monroe found the drummer inadequate, Abrams recommended Max Roach. Charlie Parker also played in the band in 1942. After the conclusion of the job at three in the morning, the musicians would head to the Uptown House. "Naturally, we were eighteen, nineteen years old," remembers Abrams. "We didn't have nothing but energy and pep, vim and vigor, get up and go!"

The teenagers' families were understandably discomfited by this bohemian lifestyle, which lacked even the clear career path and tangible accomplishments of the dance band musician to compensate for the outlandish hours and disreputable company. Gaskin was enrolled at Brooklyn College, and his father had saved enough money for him to go on to Cornell University, but such ambitious plans seemed incompatible with staying up until eight in the morning night after night: "I was undecided about what I wanted to do. I knew I liked the music, but my parents weren't particularly keen, based on what they saw. These people were always in my house, and they all seemed to be, as they put it, 'ne'er-do-wells.' I'd get up in the afternoon, and they're angry! 'Why don't you do something decent with your life?!' "

But parental support, no matter how ambivalent, gave Gaskin and other young musicians the freedom to pursue their unorthodox and vaguely articulated musical goals: "We used to kid each other all the time: 'You actually think you'll amount to anything?' . . . Those of us who were natives, we didn't push, primarily because we didn't have anything to *prove*. . . . We were all people from established families. We weren't nomads. . . . As you look back, we were lucky because we had homes, so consequently if we were hungry, it was of our own choice."

Some of the experimentation was not for public consumption. "We used to have mental rehearsals, more or less, to try to screw each other up," remembers Gaskin. "We would try to play things in five, and think in five, and solo in five, and even seven. . . . We'd do this amongst ourselves. We used to do it every afternoon, as a matter of fact." But enough found its way into the music to make Monroe's a place for musicians in

the know. "Actually, what we were doing was swinging so hard, it was ridiculous, man." Musicians—especially those who were not working regularly—made a habit of coming to Monroe's directly from Minton's.

Unfortunately, documentation of the band at Monroe's is nearly nonexistent. Jerry Newman's recordings capture something of the flavor of the club, with appearances by Billie Holiday and Count Basie, and lengthy solos by Dizzy Gillespie (see chapter 4). A recently uncovered version of "Cherokee," featuring Charlie Parker soloing against a simple arranged backdrop, provides a pale reflection of Parker's moment of glory at the Savoy Ballroom with Jay McShann earlier in the year. Nothing else remains of the labors of Tinney's crew of youthful musicians.

Nevertheless, Monroe's Uptown House holds a place of special importance alongside Minton's in the early history of bebop. By 1942 the Harlem music scene was changing rapidly. The onset of the war and the continuing economic decline of Harlem forced the bebop pioneers to look downtown, to the clubs on 52nd Street, for similar opportunities. In the process, the music also changed—becoming more codified, more commodified, more sharply focused. But the sense of community nurtured in the jam sessions of Harlem helped to sustain musicians in the difficult transition ahead.