

Andolfi & Sphere Films present
in coproduction with INA

REWIND & PLAY

"it's not nice?"

THELONIOUS MONK

a film by Alain Gomis

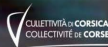
produced by ANOUK KHELIFA and ARNAUD DOMMERC - re-recording mix MATTHIEU DENIAU - editing ALAIN GOMIS - colorgrading JULIEN PETRI
a ANDOLFI and SPHERE FILMS production - in coproduction with INA - in association with ARTE France - LA LUCARNE
associated coproducers DIE GESELLSCHAFT DGS, STUDIO ORLANDO - with the participation of CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE
with the support of PROCIREP / ANGOA, SACEM and CULORI - Laboratoriu Culturali in Sotta in partnership with the Collectivité de Corse
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arte



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A FILM BY ALAIN GOMIS

*65 MIN / DCP / COLOUR / 2022
FRANCE - GERMANY*

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SYNOPSIS

December 1969, Thelonious Monk arrives in Paris. Before his evening concert, he recorded a program for French television.

The rushes that have been preserved show us a Thelonious Monk who is rare, close, and in the grip of the violent factory of stereotypes from which he tries to escape.

The film becomes the crossing of this great artist, who would like to exist only for his music. And the portrait in hollow of a media machine as ridiculous as revolting.

INTERVIEW WITH ALAIN GOMIS

BY FARAH CLÉMENTINE DRAMANI-ISSIFOU

Can you go back to the genesis of the film? How did you discover the Jazz Portrait program (1969) from which the images in your film were taken?

I am working on a fiction film about Thelonious Monk. Olivier Rignault, the documentalist with whom I collaborate, asked the INA for archives. They sent me, among other things, the program «Jazz Portrait» that I knew, which lasts about thirty minutes, but to which they added, to our great surprise, the end to end of the program which lasts about two hours. In general, the INA does not keep what could be considered as rushes, so it is very rare to have access to them. Someone must have considered who should keep it.

These images were a gift, it reveals a lot of Monk's personality: you see him talking! He is peculiar indeed, but almost affable, friendly, gentle, honest, and tries to answer meaningless questions... In these pictures, I finally saw Thelonious Monk the way his relatives describe him, and Robin D.G Kelley in his stunning biography, Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of American Original. His son TS Monk Jr was very moved when he saw the film, he saw the man he knew.

But it also shocked me deeply, it is hallucinating to see what they allow themselves. It was painful in some ways to see the journey he had to endure.

Why rework these archives? What do they say?

After three weeks of touring Europe, 6 days a week - the day before the show, he was playing in Switzerland - he arrived in Paris to perform at the Salle Pleyel the same evening, following the show.

In 1969 Monk was getting tired. He had just completed ten years of touring... it was just before he began to retire, soon not to play at all.

The archive is never neutral, it has a point of view, it delivers with it a look, but there, long shots not yet cut allowed to divert the point of view, to reverse it, and to try to enter Monk's. It's hard to imagine what these kinds of trials were like for black artists at the time (not so different from today).

The recording of the show is chaotic: he is made to wait, then they make him play, they cut and then ask him to restart, he is repeatedly asked pointless questions, he snaps his fingers to ask him to take back his place at the piano... then when he finally expresses himself freely, the journalist decides not to keep the take...

There is something ambivalent in these images: they show both a certain fascination for the artist and at the same time, they testify to a real brutality. As in these very beautiful and at the same time very surprising shots where the camera is so close to him that his breath produces mist on the lens... He remains astonishingly calm, incredibly centered, in front of what then appears as a circus.

We can wonder if this medium is capable of something else, if in its will to promote, to highlight, it does not necessarily produce only caricatural, rancid stories, while wanting to be benevolent.

The program is made above all to tell what the journalist wants to say about Thelonious Monk. By the way Henri Renaud is not a journalist, but a jazz pianist, yet he wears the costume as clumsily as with zeal. He develops his fascinated vision of a misunderstood genius, of a cursed artist before the consecration... we feel that he is admiring, but the gap is deep. He seems himself the tool of a mechanism. He is perhaps afraid that he will not be understood, that his truth will repel, that he will even appear ungrateful. He constructs a narrative, without realizing what it conveys. This real symbolic violence is what Thelonious Monk was confronted with throughout his career. It is this misunderstanding, this evil ambiguity made of smiles and respect that bothers. The journalist looks at Monk far from any concrete reality, in an almost exotic way. He sees only what he can or wants to see, and makes it extraordinary, fascinating. In the program broadcast in 1970, there are only two anodyne questions, the rest is the story told by the presenter.





How did you work with this material?

It was an exciting job. Trying to let the points of view appear, to share them, and to share the duration; keeping the traces of the production and playing with them, tearing up the rushes.

As these are rushes of a program that was edited live, I couldn't go from one camera to another as I wished, for example... What I did was to put it back into its shooting chronology, to keep moments that were not kept in the final editing of the program, and to go back in time to show the man I got to know through the testimonies I was able to consult.

It's amazing that the sound engineer and cameraman, for example, decided to film and record the altercation between Monk and the reporter...This intervention by the technicians almost produces an opposite movement to the show...it's strange.

Thanks to these moments, I was able to expose the factory of the representation of Thelonious Monk and the violence associated with this machine. This film is about music first, and deconstructing the discourse of the program through the work of editing.

Can you come back to the structure of the film?

The structure of the film is based on its rhythm: the flashbacks, the silences, the dissonances, syncopes, that we created in the editing and in the sound editing...

Here, I told myself very quickly that I had to follow the chronology of events, and go backwards so that Monk would appear as we could perceive him when we got to know him better, to get him out of this box in which they had locked him. I chose the moments and modified the times of the sequences to make two elements appear: Monk's point of view and the making of the show, notably by trying to feel the camera on him.

Monk is friendly, he does the job. A very exhausting job.

We also «fictionalized» the story by using sound, adding breaths for example... to share as much as possible the experience he is going through. What a strange experience to step into the land of fools, but this land is everywhere.

This are Monk's lessons. As in his music, the silences take up a lot of space in the film. It says the essential. The dissonances also help us to "hear". The only real reference point in the film was the music, and to try to have a real moment of listening when he finally plays. Everything is in his music. And it's beautiful.

The microphone is handed to him, but his voice is muffled. In the end, it is only when he plays that we listen to him. For me that was the most important thing... Monk is a musician, I wanted to try to make his music heard. That's where it really happens.

In fact, I think the titles of the songs he chooses to play on the show are not insignificant: *I Should Care*, *Thelonious*, *Crepuscule With Nellie*, *Ugly Beauty*, *Don't Blame Me* and *Coming on the Hudson*... He is extremely intelligent, and sensitive to what is going on, he knows very well what they are trying to make him say, but he has a strength that allows him to face these painful moments without a struggle. He lets them appear for what they are thanks to his silence and his smile. But the weight of the years spent in this exercise starts to be felt. When the journalist asks him «another tune please, a medium tempo, again?», he complies, exhausted, but not for long.







ALAIN GOMIS

The Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis studied art history at the Sorbonne (France).

He made his directorial debut in 2002 with L'AFRANCE, a film about the struggles of migrants in France which won a Silver Leopard award at the Locarno Film Festival. His film ANDALUCIA was shown at the Venice Film Festival in 2012. AUJOURD'HUI (TEY), shown in competition at the Berlinale, won a Golden Stallion at Fespaco.

He returned to the Berlinale in 2017 with FÉLICITÉ. The film won him the competition's Grand Jury Prize, a second Gold Stallion at Fespaco, and represented Senegal at the Oscars where it was shortlisted for Best Foreign Language Film.

FILMOGRAPHY

DOCUMENTARY

REWIND AND PLAY, 2022

FEATURE FILM

FÉLICITÉ, 2016

Grand Jury Prize at the Berlinale 2017

Golden Stallion Fespaco in 2016

AUJOURD'HUI / TEY, 2011

Golden Stallion of Yennenga

FESPACO Festival 2013 - Berlinale 2012 - Competition

ANDALUCIA, 2007

Venice Days - Competition

L'AFRANCE, 2001

Silver Leopard - Locarno Festival

SHORT FILM

CAMELS ET CHOCOLATS, 12', 1996

TOUT LE MONDE PEUT SE TROMPER, 8', 1998

TOURBILLONS, 13', 1999

Clermont-Ferrand, New York, Namur...

PETITE LUMIÈRE, 15', 2003

Bayard d'Or of the Namur Festival 2003

Grand prize of the Festival of Villeurbanne 2003

Prize of the GNCR of the Festival of Pantin 2003

Audience Award at the New York Children Film Festival

Nomination 2004, 7th Edition of the Lutins du court-métrage,

Selection for the Césars 2004

Sundance festival - Berlinade - Marrakech - Fespaco - Clermont-Ferrand

Carthage - Marrakech - Angers - Montreal - Amsterdam - Oslo...

AHMED, 15', 2007

Clermont-Ferrand, Montreal...

TV PROGRAM

LES DÉLICES DU MONDE, 2012

France Télévision, Elzévir Production.

CAST AND CREW

Director

ALAIN GOMIS

Sound and Re-recording Mix

MATTHIEU DENIAU

Editing

ALAIN GOMIS

Colorgrading

JULIEN PETRI

Produced by

ANOUK KHÉLIFA (SPHERE FILMS)
and ARNAUD DOMMERC (ANDOLFI)

In coproduction with

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In association with

ARTE FRANCE

and

LES FILMS DU WORSO (FRANCE)
SCHORTCUT FILMS (LEBANON)

Associated Coproducers

DIE GESELLSCHAFT DGS (GERMANY)
STUDIO ORLANDO (FRANCE)

THELONIOUS S. MONK

1934, aged 17

Thelonious meets Nellie.

1942, aged 25

Pianist and composer, creator of Bebop alongside Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, his particular style meant that fame eluded him until his time came... “the un-years”.

1954, aged 37

Thelonious meets Pannonica.

1957, aged 40

Glorious times... Finally recognized, Thelonious travels the world.

1970, aged 53

The “avant-gardist” became “standard”, exhausted, stops playing and remains practically immobile until his death in 1982.

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