

Out Walked Bud: The Manic Life and Obscure Death of Bud Powell

by Con Chapman

The Holy Trinity of bebop in the popular theology of jazz consists of Charlie Parker on alto sax, Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet and Thelonious Monk on piano, but jazz is a pagan art form and so admits of polytheism. Earl Rudolph "Bud" Powell is an alternate deity on the piano, a more troubled man but one who consistently produced music at a higher level of virtuosity than Monk, who made eccentricity of rhythm and melody his trademark but who sometimes seemed to be satisfied with mere cleverness.



Bud Powell

Where Monk was over-reliant on drugs to fuel his fancy, Powell came to his quirks as a result of external forces. When he was in his early twenties and a member of Cootie Williams' orchestra, he was beaten on the head by police in a racially-motivated incident and he would

spend a third of his life in mental institutions and hospitals dealing with the aftereffects. He underwent electroshock treatment at Creedmore Sanitarium to remedy the headaches and mental breakdowns he suffered from, and he was known even to musicians who admired him as erratic.



Charlie Parker said he wouldn't work with Powell because the pianist was "even crazier than me." Parker was, as a result of his fondness for marijuana and heroin, a booking agent's nightmare, so his comment is no faint praise from a master of the missed date and late arrival.



Like the little girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead, when Bud was good he was very, very good, and when he was bad he was horrid. In 1951 he had been in the hospital for eighteen months but was released to record a trio date for Alfred Lion. Lion recounts that Powell disappeared at the beginning of the session--an act that would irritate even the most forgiving producer, with dollars budgeted for studio time burning away. Powell rushed back in two hours later, having worked out a song titled, aptly enough, "Un Poco Loco." A session of factory-like productivity followed as he laid down three trio and two solo titles in rapid succession.



Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell in 1964

Powell was seven years younger than Monk but he was the first to become successful with a style that swept out the left-hand striding of the swing era in favor of "comping," clusters of chords around which extended melodies by the right hand were twined, like flowers around a bass trellis. Monk would catch up with and surpass the younger man in the late 50's, at which point he was recognized as the revolutionary and Powell became the *ancien regime*. Powell moved to Paris where a tape of an interview with a French journalist in a tuberculosis hospital revealed him to be a sharp but crotchety bopper at the age of forty. "I *told* you Al Haig," Powell snaps when the writer forgetfully asks him a second time which contemporary pianists he admires.

By that point in his life Powell's mind was so far gone that he couldn't learn new material and so he was limited to sessions of standards such as those heard on Dexter Gordon's "Our Man in Paris," on which he subbed for Kenny Drew. Bud returned to New York in 1964 and disappeared after playing in a few concerts. He died in obscurity two years later.



Clifford Brown

In addition to his high-speed recorded improvisations, however, he left behind a legacy of compositions that continue to challenge jazz musicians to this day. I came to Bud's music through Clifford Brown's *Parisian Thoroughfare*, an onomatopoeic rendition of a street scene of his adopted French hometown. I'm generally cool to program music--attempts to recreate scenes from life in tones--but this is an exception. From the opening bars that conjure up the peculiar sounds (to American ears) of European auto horns, the tune is as light as French pastry, as free and airy as a skirt blown by the wind down *Les Rue des Martyrs*.

