



Summer 7-24-2018

Glenn Wilson and "Straight No Chaser – The Thelonious Monk Story."

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Recommended Citation

Norton, Jon, "Glenn Wilson and "Straight No Chaser – The Thelonious Monk Story."" (2018). *Interviews for WGLT*. 67.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/67

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Glenn Wilson, July 24, 2018

Jon Norton: This is morning edition on 89.1 GLT, WGLT.org Bloomington-Normal's public media it's 5:45. Our news magazine Sound Ideas airs at noon and 6 today. Illinois Wesleyan University Jazz Director Glenn Wilson says rare concert footage is a major reason the Thelonious Monk documentary is a must-see. Wilson's non-profit *Further Jazz* is bringing "Straight No Chaser: the Thelonious Monk Story" to the Normal theatre screen for a Friday night showing. In this Sound Ideas preview Wilson says "Monk was also special." And that he and Dizzy Gillespie were the two players at the forefront of what would become the Jazz bebop sound.

Glenn Wilson: His style is so interesting because he's not really like – the other pianist that time was Bud Pow in Bebop and Bud Pow was of course the fleet – fleet of finger fast piano player really just the opposite of Monk, and monk plays very deliberately. Not afraid to play minor seconds and just dissonances on the piano and people said he can make any piano sound out of tune.

Norton: Well, am I wrong on this? Early on he wasn't lauded by the critics right?

Wilson: Not by the critics, by the musicians he was always very appreciated.

Norton: Why didn't the critics like him at first?

Wilson: I don't think they understood what he was doing and they couldn't appreciate the open harmony and the kind of pianistic style that he used. Yeah, his early Blue Note recordings in '47 were – now looked upon as masterpieces, but at the time they didn't really sell that well and Blue Note kind of dropped him from the label.

Norton: Name of the movie is *Straight, No Chaser the Thelonious Monk Story* it's playing at the Normal theatre on Friday night. What can people – let's say someone who's not a Jazz fan or a Monk fan, what can they take away from this movie?

Wilson: Well, his story is very interesting because of course he had suffered – he suffered from some mental illness problems—

Norton: So that is addressed in the movie?

Wilson: Oh yeah, yeah. And some people thought he was Bi-Polar and he would get up in the middle of a song and just twirl around and dance and leave the musicians to play by themselves, that was pretty common. He would just – whatever he felt like doing. I have a couple – actually original Monk stories because I played on Lionel Hampton's band with Frankie Dunlap for a year or so and Frankie played with Monk for five or six years.

Norton: Well tell one story.

Wilson: One story? [Wilson Chuckles]

Norton: Do you have one story you can tell on the air?

Wilson: Yeah, well I'll tell this –

Norton: Unlike the Buddy Rich stories?

Wilson: Yeah right. [Norton laughs] Well, actually this is an interesting story that has nothing to do with Frankie but, I did play a concert for Monk at the Baroness' house, the Baroness Pannonica

Norton: Oh yeah.

Wilson: Where Monk lived the last X number of years of his life. Paul Jeffery was a saxophonist that played with Monk and I had a big band, Paul Jeffery was leading. I was in a big band and so, we took the whole band over to the Baroness' house and we set up in the living room – of course she's famous for having hundreds of cats running around so, there were cats everywhere and the smell was kinda strange as you might imagine. But, the view was of the entire Manhattan skyline from New Jersey. So, Monk was in the other room, so we played this whole concert knowing that Monk was sitting in the next room but we never saw him, he never came out. And, Paul went in at the end and talked to him and he came back out and all he said was "Monk dug it." [Both laugh]

Norton: That's a great story you were in the same room as Monk playing –

Wilson: Playing Monk's music for him, yeah.

Norton: So, how intimidating was that?

Wilson: Well, I mean we couldn't see him he was in the other room.

Norton: But still, you knew he was there right?

Wilson: Yeah, it was very interesting to know he was in the next room and we cou – we never got to me –

Norton: Well you mention the Baroness she was a Rothschild and, she was basically his benefactor and romantic partner as well?

Wilson: Not that I know of.

Norton: Did that get addressed in this film or does that get addressed, his relationship with her?

Wilson: There is some of that in there yeah. But, of course she was a patron of the arts for Charlie Parker. Died in her hotel room and she was very strong patron of Jazz artists and that time, very interesting story about her.

Norton: Glenn Wilson is our guest he is the director of the Jazz program at Illinois Wesleyan University, along with a grant from the Hartman Arts Foundation –

Wilson: Hartman Arts Foundation and Illinois Per Community Foundation, both chipped in on this series of Jazz films that we're gonna do for the next six months.

Norton: And the first one is *Straight, No Chaser the Thelonious Monk Story*, this is pretty cool. You are also going to play after the show.

Wilson: Yes, we'll have a concert as we've been doing –

Norton: Who's with you?

Wilson: Chip Stevens on piano, Matthews on the bass, and Ricardo Flores on the drums, and we'll be doing of course all Monk music so, that'll be exciting. We're going to try to pull out some things we've never played before.

Norton: Illinois Wesleyan University Jazz Studies Director Glenn Wilson, his non-profit Further Jazz, showing the movie *Straight, No Chaser the Thelonious Monk Story* at the Normal Theatre on Friday night.