



by Kyle Gann

I remember the day I fell under Meredith Monk's spell forever. It was December, 1988. I had just returned from a festival in Miami, flying into New York City's first deadly cold spell of the year. I was not happy. But I sat down in the Town Hall audience in front of a wiry little woman who was crooning a whimsical language of nonsense syllables, glissandos, and tongue clicks—and I was enchanted.

It certainly wasn't my first time hearing Monk. I had been collecting her music from *Key* (her first record, in 1970) on, and I'd first seen her perform with her ensemble in Chicago in 1982. From the beginning I thought she was one of the leading minimalists. It's a term Monk hates, since

alone, making eye contact with all those people, visibly zinging the audience with her contagious energy, that I realized what a shaman she was, a storyteller from an ancient world.

That her stories don't always make narrative sense is beside the point—or rather, it often *is* the point. Her musical logic goes deeper than narrative, deeper than sonata logic, to the archetypal depths of the lullaby. She'll sing a phrase; sing it again, sing a different phrase; sing the first one, but dropping a note or syllable, and later surprise you by popping that note or syllable back in. Her songs can be like a pre-verbal secret language you and your mother had before you connected with

Meredith Monk

minimalism is known for motoric repetitive patterning, and her music is so warm and intuitive; but she does come from that same New York scene that Steve Reich and Phil Glass do and was an innovator as early as they were. (Monk calls herself a folk musician, and notes that Glass and Reich went to a conservatory.) I'd been impressed with her melding of choreography and group singing processes. But it wasn't until 1988, when I saw her sit down onstage

the rest of the world, and it grabs you at a primal level. What additionally hit me that evening at Town Hall, though, was how honest her music is, how much she wants to connect with the audience, and how unafraid she is. Faced with this woman who was whispering primitive language games straight into my unconscious, I just surrendered. Ever since, I've considered Meredith Monk her own musical category.

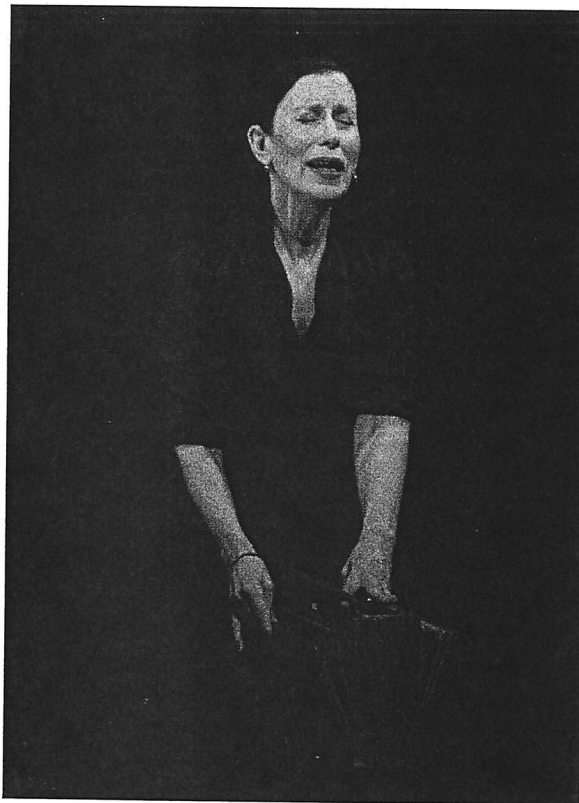
Part of Monk's honesty is that her effects

are not at all dependent on her means. I have this notion that a real musician, stranded on a desert island, should be able to make music with two sticks, but Meredith Monk wouldn't even need those. I've heard her wonderful opera *Atlas*, I've seen her big theatrical productions like *Mercy*, I love her Hildegard of Bingen choral CD (*Monk and the Abbess*), and I know that in her 1969 piece *Juice* she surrounded the Guggenheim Museum with 85 Jew's harps. But when she wants to, she can sit down by herself, pick a vocal curlicue out of the air, even just meow like a cat, and transfix you with what she does to it.

When she does marshal larger forces, this folk musician follows methods outside the Western classical tradition. Though she reads and writes music perfectly well, she considers learning music from the page a cold process that drains the music's personality. Instead, she teaches her singers their parts by singing to them, much the way Indian and many other non-Western musicians teach. In *Atlas*, based on the life of the French-Belgian Buddhist writer and explorer Alexandra David-Néel, the instrumental parts are notated, as are some of the vocal parts. Many of the vocal parts, though, even choral sections, are developed through improvisation in rehearsal. The relation of the score to the performance or recording is variably reliable, often sketchy. That's entirely by design: it allows the work to breathe and live, lets it respond to momentary inspiration, like jazz.

One scene of *Atlas* even gives us a hint of the composer's creative process. In "Choosing Companions," Monk—playing David-Néel, and searching for guides for her trek into the Himalayas—sings a

long, sinuous vocal line over many repetitions of a walking ostinato. One by one, the applicants for her guide job come in and attempt to sing, in their own style and register, the same melody. It's a striking demonstration of how Monk uses pure, non-verbal sound for communicative purposes, and makes language seem almost an unnecessary distraction. It also reveals her approach to casting; like Duke



Ellington, but in a very different world, she makes music theater for the specific singers she works with, bringing out their individual personalities in a stage world as varied as real life. She also works with a range of unusual vocal sounds—screeches, glissandos, yells—that in other contemporary music often connote anguish and violence. Draped by her comforting accom-

paniments, though, all those sounds keep their uninhibited energy and lose their negative emotional charge. Listening, I sometimes think: "Dissonance, where is thy sting?"

A lifelong composer of vocal and theater pieces, plus the occasional piano work, Monk has recently written for orchestra and for string quartet. Having always thought of the voice as an instrument, she says, "Now I am allowing myself to think of the instruments as voices." For some classical musicians, this folk-music approach is just too outré, too outside-the-lines. Monk still got dismissive reviews in the *New York Times* years after she won one of the most deserved MacArthur "genius" awards in the history of the prize. If you want proof that she's capable of more conventional musical sophistication, her new album *Impermanence* offers her most chromatic music ever, with chord progressions worthy of late Liszt, rocking in an atmosphere of mystic calm. *Impermanence* is something we all fear, but as Monk says in the liner notes, "We will lose our loved ones, our own health and finally our own bodies. Keeping this in mind leads to a deep appreciation of the moments we have, not to take anything for granted." Listening, I'd already gotten the point without the words.

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College. His latest book is Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice, and his music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.