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Last Friday night, March 6, 2009, my mom and I had the pleasure of listening to the "Men in Gray," also known as the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, led by Pulitizer prize winning music director Wynton Marsalis. Their tribute to Thelonious Monk, performed at Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall, highlighted the range and genius of Monk's contribution to jazz. Born in 1917 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, Thelonius Sphere Monk lived in New York City with his family from the age of four onward. He attended Stuyvesant High School, but never graduated; and while his sister took piano lessons, Monk's affinity for music and the piano were essentially self-taught, and began as early as age nine, signaling him as a musical child prodigy. Monk is considered a standard bearer by jazz aficionados, and one of the innovators of "bebop." This style of music gained popularity in the 1940s, replacing the then-popular "swing." Bebop, sounding like its name, consisted of fast tempos, improvisation, and emphasized the different pitches and chords (harmonic structure) over melody. Other bebop giants included Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Kenny Clarke, and later Miles Davis.

In his heyday, Monk was known as a virtuoso improvisational, but difficult to follow, jazz musician. His style included a heavy percussive style, punctuated by silences and hesitations, playfully dubbed "Melodious Thunk." The Men in Gray captured this unique style of Monk, when playing some of his standards such "Epistrophy," "Light Blue," and their own tribute to Monk.