I just came across that doomsday prediction again, that jazz will not survive the twentieth century. It's quoted in the new Penguin Guide to Jazz on cd, which attributes it to Austrian flugelhorn player Franz Koglmann, who believes there is a need for structure now. Penguin editors, Richard Cook and Brian Morton, point out that great works in any genre, such as film, for example, or Elizabethan drama and Baroque music, are made when that genre "appears to be exhausted." A few years ago, there was an exhibition of late-Byzantine art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art which argued convincingly for a reconsideration of the great art produced when the Byzantine Empire was collapsing. What was later characteristic of the new art was the way it absorbed elements from the Far East, as far as China. This eclecticism was the hallmark of its beauty.

This seems to me to be a useful context in which to regard the history of jazz, particularly at points when the music was threatened by marginalization and persecution. Bop rose from the ashes of the Big Band era. Soloists emerged from the anonymity of large-scale arrangements. Think of Thelonious Monk inscribing his own private language for piano. In the sixties, Free Jazz rolled over the scene like a boulder in a field of daisies. In Jazz Fusion, musical forms blended and in Third Stream, jazz merged with classical idioms. Cool Jazz, Hard Bop, Cubana Bop,
and Bossa Nova were new personas of jazz that arose when the music needed an added push.

It is precisely during times of cultural decline that artistic production seems to create strange and attractive forms. These are eclectic times. Times to borrow and transform. Times when jazz wears a mask of many colors. And it is a time of ferocious personalism, almost hermetic in its insistence on a private language to express a personal truth. Consider Coltrane's Eastern influences. The music of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Bud Powell, comes quickly to mind in the realm of Bop. Later, Cecil Taylor appears as a great cipher to be solved by listeners. Much less heard, although often revered, is pianist Richard Twardzik, who was destined for obscurity. He made few recordings and only one in a studio. It's called *Trio*, and he shares it with West Coast pianist Russ Freeman. The recording date for the Twardzik session is 1954. He is twenty-three years old. In less than a year, he would overdose on heroin.

Of course, we don't know what would have happened if he had made more recordings, but we know a lot about what he did while he was here. Barely out of his teens, he was playing in esteemed jazz circles. His recordings leave a trace of this activity, but they tease more than they satisfy. According to *The Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, he played Bop in Boston in 1951 with Serge Chaloff and participated in a broadcast with Charlie Parker. He worked with Charlie Mariano from 1951 to '52 and toured with Lionel Hampton. After recording with Chaloff and as a leader, both in 1954, he joined Chet Baker for a European tour in 1955. For that sole studio date in 1954, Twardzik chose Carson Smith on bass and Peter Littman on drums. The seven tracks are made up of four standards and three originals, including “Albuquerque Social Swim,” which has a curious structure of halting rhythms and sudden stops. Jazz improvisation plays against classical pretension, then resolves in an unlikely marriage between the two. This is Twardzik's wit at work, in response to what he referred to as “some young intellectuals in Albuquerque
with their pompous pronouncements to awkward pauses.” And he added, “But they liked jazz music.”

On the track, he demonstrates how those “awkward pauses” define jazz rhythm. In Twardzik’s hands, his responses appear purposely, pompously, classical. But what holds the piece together is the oddly harmonious interplay. The one Gershwin selection, “Bess, You Is My Woman,” is given a thoughtful reading by Twardzik, who creates a rumbling darkness with his left hand that puts the light in sharp relief. The slow first part of the piece achieves a solemn quality that later unleashes a torrent of constantly changing emotional states. This gives his interpretation its distinctive dramatic quality. The original, “Yellow Tango,” is a good example of Twardzik’s adeptness at rhythmical variation. Think Bud Powell. Here, you can feel him digging deep into that rhythmic core with intensity and abandon.

“Round Midnight” is unbound rhythmically and harmonically, and is taken at a slow, dreamlike, pace, ominous and enigmatic. Twardzik gives Monk’s tune a mysterious floating quality, reminiscent of Debussy. He is harmonically subtle with dark and light notes, painting night as remembrance and desire. For Twardzik, “Round Midnight,” is a door to the senses, ardently opened and quickly shut. It is a performance of Monk’s tune that can stand with the best.

In the standard, “I’ll Remember April,” Twardzik uses classical elements like the block chords Brubeck would later popularize. I can hear that rumbling left hand, generating darkness, investing the piece with a sense of momentum and drama.

About the original, “A Crutch for the Crab,” Twardzik wrote, “The idea … came from watching the hands of Polish pianist Jan Smeterlin, as they scurried crablike into the keys.” Listening to Twardzik you feel like you’re submerged in a quiet sense of otherworldliness. Think Debussy again or Alban Berg’s kind of lyricism.

Twardzik closes the album with the standard, “Just One of Those Things.” But his is a very personal interpretation. It is wholly Twardzik. His music is always personal and sometimes calls up the debate between jazz and classical music. He finds
common ground. He is harmonically and rhythmically experimental with a unique sense of song structure. His wit and humor teases and delights listeners, catching them unaware. At the same time, he was quite serious about his work: “Development is not my primary consideration. The ability to project every changing emotions or moods, plus rhythmic freedom, is far more important to me.”

Twardzik succumbed to the same fate as Charlie Parker and so many others in the bop circle. Bop was a fiercely personal music whose fires burned all the brighter for having burned in the shortest time before going out. It was an eclectic music, one where musicians were interested in the Classical composers and also forms like the tango or Cuban music. In fact, Bop’s repertoire consisted mainly of a few popular songs from the prewar-era that musicians completely transformed into new songs on which they based their improvisations.

In a period of artistic decline, everything is up for grabs. Ruins lie stranded on the roadside. They can be reclaimed, reformed, and cast in new light. There is reconsideration and reappraisal. Bop flourished up at Minton’s Playhouse in the absolute darkness of one of jazz’s lowest periods, in terms of sales and appreciation. But, at the same time, it ushered in a new approach to improvisation, a new sound. It was a constellation rising in the night sky and Richard Twardzik was one of its many brilliantly, ill-fated stars.

Recordings