Chasin' The Trane - *The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane*
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> Working with Monk brought me close to a musical architect of the highest order. I felt I learned from him in every way—sensually, theoretically, technically. I would talk to Monk about musical problems, and he would show me the answers by playing them on the piano. He gave me complete freedom in my playing, and no one ever did that before.
>
> JOHN COLTRANE

> I once saw John with Monk, and I think he learned an incredible amount of harmonic background from him. Monk opened him up to the point where he was able to compose complex tunes like, "Giant Steps." I learned a lot myself just listening to Monk play. His concept of space alone was one of the most important things he taught Coltrane; when to lay out and let somebody else fill up that space, or just leave the space open. I think John was already going in that direction, but working with Monk helped him reach his goal that much faster.
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> MCCOY TYNER

Thelonious Sphere Monk is one of the most reclusive people one could meet, yet paradoxically, or perhaps perversely, he is listed in the Manhattan telephone directory. However, he is not especially fond of receiving phone calls, and if he answers at all it's usually to say "Monk's not here" and then hang up.

He comes from Coltrane's home state—his birthplace is Rocky Mount—but was brought to New York as a child, remaining with his mother when his father returned to stay in North Carolina due to illness. By the time he reached his teens he was a good enough pianist to get jobs playing Harlem rent parties. At sixteen he quit school to go on the road with a faith healer, and at nineteen he was house pianist at Minton's.

As a self-taught musician, he claims few influences; but one he does acknowledge, and surprisingly so to many of his listeners, is Fats Waller. And with some striking parallels to the fellow Carolina boy he'd work with during 1957, Monk also lived with his mother for a long, extended period, moving his wife, Nellie, right

into the same West Sixties apartment with her after he got married. In addition, like Coltrane's, his music can be difficult to dig, and he can be quiet (and sometimes what he calls "disconnected") to the point of catatonia.

Much respected by musicians, Monk's music is oblique and astringent; his advanced harmonics are sometimes broken down into quarter tones or even smaller musical measurements. Yet his drawing power is so strong that when the Five Spot booked him on an open contract, weekend customers lined up for blocks, and even during the week the house was rarely less than full. Monk brought Trane with him for that gig, which began in spring 1957 and carried on well into the following fall, when, for reasons no one will reveal, the job was terminated almost as abruptly as it had begun. A strangely similar situation to Trane's sudden departure from Miles the preceding year.

Monk, of course, knew of Coltrane's work with Davis. Once, while backstage at the Bohemia to say hello, Monk saw Miles slap Trane in the face and then punch him in the stomach, probably in a dispute about something Trane had, or hadn't, played. Coltrane, gentle to the point of passivity, let it pass. But Monk didn't; he said to Trane, "As much saxophone as you play, you don't have to take that. Why don't you come to work for me?"

Thus the genesis of the Thelonious Monk Quartet, which also included Wilbur Ware on bass and Shadow Wilson on drums.

The music was mostly by Monk, with a few standard songs added for variety and because the leader liked their changes. His own music, however, was marked by the eccentric sentiments of its composer: "Well, You Needn't"; "Criss Cross"; "Off Minor"; "Epistrophy"; "Blue Monk"; "Crepuscule With Nellie." Each tune sounds as if the title had been phonetically applied to the harmonies at hand. They weren't Broadway show tunes or Bavarian drinking songs, but the music got right to the guts, made the toes tap. It was so naturally swinging that some of the customers got up to dance in the aisles.

Monk was one of them.

He'd do his dance too, choreographed by and for nobody but himself. After his solo, Monk would "stroll," that is, not play, but

rise from the piano, bending and whirling, making pivots and foot stomps that accented his music right on the beat, as if he was leading the band with his body. Body English; he'd spin and shuffle, his wispy beard bouncing in time to the beat, his grinning eyes staring down his long nose, his fur hat stuck tightly to his skull. Sometimes he'd wave his hands, as if playing the role of symphony conductor.

Meanwhile, Trane was struggling with Monk's music, especially since Monk was not at the piano to feed him the accompanying chords. The saxophonist had to fend for himself while soloing, searching his way carefully among the extremely small intervals that were so much a part of the music. Of course, that was one of the ways that Trane really learned the leader's music; on stand, at least, he had no other choice.

Behind him, bassist Wilbur Ware, a graying, restless sprite, was playing melodic fills, weaving his lines in and around the music, setting up whoever was soloing and assisting him with just the right choice of notes. Meanwhile, drummer Shadow Wilson, handsomely mustached, a tight smile creased on his thin lips, was kicking the band with a savage subtlety, a loose propulsion he'd picked up when he had played with Count Basie.

The Thelonious Monk Quartet, wailing while they worked.

Naima often stopped by the Five Spot with a tape recorder, transcribing as many complete sets as possible. Then, upon returning, after the evening's engagement was over, to the hotel they had moved into in June 1957, while Trane was working with Monk, they'd play back the music for criticism and study. Naima would often fall asleep, but he'd continue listening until he'd heard and analyzed every note of not only his own performance but also Monk's and that of the rhythm section and the entire band.

Once, listening to a long arpeggiated solo of his own on another introspective Monk ballad, "Ruby, My Dear," the saxophonist heard something that was not tenor or piano but another instrument.

He played that passage back. Again and again.

He still couldn't match the sounds on tape to what he imagined

he'd heard previously in his head. Sighing, he woke up Naima and asked her to listen. She knew classical music better than he did. She listened, at his suggestion, for some European influence he thought had slipped into his solo but whose origin he could not place. After a few minutes of listening and thinking, she said, "It reminds me of *Daphnis and Chloe.* What you played was very similar to the opening passages."

He nodded, looking at her with those huge eyes, and by the way he looked she knew that he wanted to know the composer but didn't ask, afraid of displaying his ignorance. She told him, "Ravel."

Then he recalled his former teacher, Dennis Sandole, suggesting that he listen to the French impressionists, in particular Debussy and Ravel.

"What instrument am I hearing?" he asked her. "I don't mean any instrument in the band; I mean another instrument that my solo reminds me of."

He explained what he meant. She placed her fist on her jaw, assuming a thoughtful pose. "Well . . . it's mostly strings and woodwinds, as I recall. . . ." Then, after a pause of several seconds, she added, "Now that I think about it . . . there's a harp solo. . . ."

Silence, for several more seconds.

Then Coltrane recalled hearing a harp concerto in Philadelphia, in a recital at the Academy of Music, where a friend had once taken him. He had wondered how the instrument could sustain such glissandos and overtones, as if the harp was really a giant guitar with a hidden amplifier causing those gorgeous, shimmering sounds.

"Harp," he said, thoughtfully, reverently, as if uttering a sacred word.

Then he said, decisively, "Tomorrow we're going to get some harp records." Pause. "So I can hear what I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing."

Joe and Iggy Termini had originally opened the Five Spot at 5 Cooper Square, in the neighborhood now called Manhattan's East Village, in 1956. Later, they opened another club, the Jazz Gallery,

and almost as quickly closed it, moving the Five Spot to 2 St. Marks Place in 1962.

Both brothers had many occasions to observe both Trane and Monk during that long-running gig of 1957.

> Trane was getting a lot of attention. I heard many people talk to him, urging him to go out on his own. But I remember many times when he'd sit in the back between sets, testing reeds, a worried look on his face, as if he was perpetually dissatisfied.
>
> JOE TERMINI

> I remember Monk doing his dancing bit. But sometimes, after he was through dancing, he'd wander into the kitchen and start talking to the dishwasher about God knows what. Once in a while he'd fall asleep at the piano, and when it was time for him to come in again, he'd wake up and start playing, just liked that.
>
> IGGY TERMINI

Trane, as if embarking on an astral projection and stepping out of his body to analyze his own visual and visceral performance, said about Monk and himself: "I always wanted a large tone, big and solid. I'd work out on ninth chords, but soon found that they limited me. I started playing fourth chords, and soon I could create more volume than on ninths. Monk gave me complete freedom. He'd leave the stand for a drink or to do his dance, and I could just improvise by myself for fifteen or twenty minutes before he returned."

Antonia/Syeeda Coltrane was out of school when the Coltrane family moved to New York. They stayed in their hotel until October 1957, then moved into a three-and-one-half-room, rent-controlled apartment on Manhattan's West 103rd Street. Their new home was on the second floor of a six-story building, with a tavern on the corner. Coltrane sometimes said that he chose that particular loca-

tion so that he'd have to pass the tavern every time he came home, thus testing himself daily and with a concrete reminder that he was through with liquor for good.

The Coltranes bought new furniture, in a contemporary style; not exactly plain but nothing fancy. And they bought an upright piano for Coltrane's composing, for he was now spending considerable time writing tunes to play or record later, under his own name.

Six nights a week, he put on a suit and tie, kissed his family goodby, walked out the door with saxophone case in hand, and took the subway to his job at the Five Spot. There, more than 150 people were jammed shoulder to shoulder in the small, smoky room, some crowded around small tables, others pushed alongside the bar, all absorbing Monk's music.

And Trane's music, too.

David Amram recalls, "Trane was getting into different harmonic textures, pouring out such a cascade of notes that he was attracting the audience's attention as much as Monk. A lot of musicians were there, digging Monk at first, then commenting more and more on Trane each time they'd come in. One thing I really noticed, though, was that Trane was always playing himself, even in the context of Monk's music."

The audience was quite mixed, from a few as young as fourteen to some in their seventies. One night a merchant seaman from Sweden dropped by, telling everyone within earshot that he'd shipped out just to be in New York while Monk and Trane were playing together.

Painters were there, too; especially those of the Abstract Expressionist school, such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. Amram and de Kooning often talked about music—the painter liked New Orleans jazz in particular; he'd created a canvas of trumpeter Bunk Johnson once—and de Kooning proved more than receptive to Trane. He once told Amram, "Coltrane is so different; he's almost like an Einstein of music."

How strangely prophetic; John Coltrane would later say that there was one man he admired more than any other.

Albert Einstein.

I think there's a strong analogy between the abstract painters and avant-garde jazz musicians. They're both into colors and shapes and basically non-programmatic art. Almost all the painters I knew in the 1950s, and the 60s too, were interested in jazz. And in their painting, they were splashing or dripping colors on canvas, using random and chance techniques. Like the musicians, they placed extreme reliance on improvisation to get the results they wanted.

MALCOLM RAPHAEL

Monk was one of the first to show me how to make two or three notes at one time on tenor. It's done by false fingering and adjusting your lips, and if it's done right you get triads. He also got me into the habit of playing long solos on his pieces, playing the same piece for a long time to find new conceptions for solos. It got so I would go as far as possible on one phrase until I ran out of ideas. The harmonies got to be an obsession for me. Sometimes I'd think I was making music through the wrong end of a magnifying glass.

JOHN COLTRANE

I played drums on the *Monk's Music* album for Riverside, where Monk expanded his group to a septet, with both Coleman Hawkins and John Coltrane on tenor. Naturally, Monk wrote all the music, but Hawk was having trouble reading it, so he asked Monk to explain it to both Trane and himself. Monk said to Hawk, "You're the great Coleman Hawkins, right? You're the guy who invented the tenor saxophone, right?" Hawk agreed. Then Monk said to Trane, "You're the great John Coltrane, right?" Trane blushed, and mumbled, "Aw . . . I'm not so great." Then Monk said to both of them, "You both play saxophone, right?" They nodded. "Well, the music is on the horn. Between the two of you, you should be able to find it."

ART BLAKEY