

PR 7280

John Coltrane

Dakar



DESIGN PHOTO: DON SCHULTEN





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JOHN COLTRANE, tenor sax
CECIL PAYNE, baritone sax
PEPPER ADAMS, baritone sax
MAL WALDRON, piano
DOUG WATKINS, bass
ART TAYLOR, drums

- 1. DAKAR**
- 2. MARY'S BLUES**
- 3. ROUTE 4**
- 4. VELVET SCENE**
- 5. WITCHES PIT**
- 6. CAT WALK**

Recorded in Hackensack, NJ; April 20, 1957.

There are, in fact, two types of artists. On one side of the creative fence there is the Look-Ma-No-Hands Genius, associated with prodigious youth, sometimes madness and, often, early death — the artist as a direct pipeline between the source of inspiration and the resultant art. In music, the classic example is Mozart, from whose head a full-blown music sprung like Minerva's boney army, without apparent effort. On the other side is the sort of Day-Laborer Genius, whose art is the final draft of a mountain of revisions,

second thoughts and erasures. The case history usually given is Beethoven, a composer who wrote, rewrote and rewrote again. The goals of both may have been the same, but it is the execution that, in the second case, is less immediate, full of grunts and hard breathing like that of a woodsman who must cut down the entire forest to reach the golden bough.

Jazz, being a romantic as well as a performer's music, abounds in geniuses of the first type; indeed, the music itself in its spontaneous, virtuoso way often has the aspect of heaven sent, here-comes-the-flood intuition. Consequently, most of jazz' influential luminaries have, in creative temper, been more mozartean than beethovenian. In art that demands so much of the present tense, there has been precious little opportunity for after thoughts and second guesses. Louis and Bix, Pres and Bird, even the improvising compositional methods of Duke Ellington have a diffident, anything-I-do-is-okay quality. And the jazz fan has come to expect this phenomenon as the common currency of his favorite enthusiasm, ruthlessly commanding each generation and its heroes to obedience to this rule.

We may be none the wiser than we were a couple of decades ago, but we certainly are better informed. Fashions change and we would feel slightly cheated if we hadn't at least the illusion of progress. Con-

sequently, records are longer, more frequently produced and jazz is a four letter word that now can be pronounced in the parlor. In the old days (I almost said 'good old days') musicians were "discovered" after a considerable period of experimentation, apprenticeship, study and practice. All this fumbling and growing was delivered out of general earshot and disturbed only neighbors and relatives. When the young musician finally appeared before the public (you had to be a bitch to get a record date) what must have seemed a miracle of originality to the audience was often the fruit of laborious experiment, imitation and many lonely hours in the woodshed. Which brings us to our subject.

John Coltrane, a star in the ascendant in the jazz galaxy, falls into the predicament of rising to his present influential position during a time when the old show business code of the jazz performer has been overthrown; in a time when the jam session has been unionized out. Now the solution of musical problems are brought before the general public, albeit in the guise of entertainment. In other words, the laboratory, the study hall and the woodshed have been placed directly on stage. And Coltrane has been forced to find himself in the full glare of public light. Like Miles Davis, who began recording at a tender age, before he had worked out much more than the basic ideas of his approach, the stages of Coltrane's musical maturity are well-documented on records and near misses abound in his recorded work; indeed, it is only the fact that he is a serious artist that saves many of them at all. It is to Coltrane's great credit that he has survived not only the scorn of the status quo seekers and the death kiss of the cultists, but, more crucially, his own groping explorations and failures.

Hectorated by would-be defenders of the faith who were upset by the sheer quantity of notes he played (during his famous "sheets of sound" stage, when

the musical idea was to subdivide the 16th note rhythmic basis that bebop had established, Coltrane would often hurl himself into a solo with the furious indifference of a man pedaling a bicycle up and down a flight of harmonic stairs at top speed) or those who abhorred his lengthy discourses (one can appreciate the feelings of non-initiates upon whom his long-windedness has the stultifying effect of school graduation ceremony oratory), Coltrane has managed to keep his head, persevere, and accomplish a considerable quantity of music.

This session was cut in the late Fifties, during Coltrane's "sideman day's" before he moved out of the Miles Davis Quintet and into his own group. (This album, in fact, is a sort of reissue, since these tracks were released once before as one side of a really long playing record during a short-lived experiment with 16 r.p.m. phonography.) His playing had already developed his personal "cry" a quality of sound perhaps originally derived from Dexter Gordon, but now most severely his own. His jagged-metal tone, which has struck many listeners as a steel finger on the nerve, set a new emotional climate for modern jazz or perhaps signaled the victory of intellect over emotion in the music. The urgency of his approach (which detractors coldly call "strident"), the general humorlessness of his conception (often a saving grace in experimentalism) and the tortured lyricism of his ballad style (an attitude that has changed considerably in recent months, it should be noted) have driven many listeners whose associations with jazz are based on pleasure and warm feeling. It is a shame since when Coltrane's music congeals into a coherent shape, it flows with acetylene beauty and nonpareil swing.

What is the "mystery" of Coltrane's music? Why do some decry his music while others stand in passionate adoration? Is he following some twisted muse to the Cloud Cuckoo Land of excess, full of neurotic bleat-

ings and the impossible egotism of the interminable perorations of a mad Pericles? These invaluable "early" recordings, when Coltrane was not even the nominal leader of the date are serving to dispel the idea that Coltrane is a man without jazz roots and a valid direction. On most of these tracks the direction as well as the finished music are, sometimes startlingly, in evidence.

In finding baritonists to fill out the unique instrumentation of the front line one could do no better than Messers. Payne and Adams. Cecil Paynes light and airy intonation (on these sides it appears to be dressed in veils) contrasts excellently with the more rugged, burr-edged attack of Pepper Adams. Both men, with their roots imbedded in bebop and even in the older music provide a framework and limits for Coltrane's excursions that are comfortable and Stimulating. And the rhythm section is everything that one could wish for.

Dakar, the title tune is named for the Senegalese city, and its sinuous theme is stated by the ensemble. Payne solos first and his musicianship is considerably better than his geography since the song is based on Norwegian rather than African sources. Coltrane restores the original mood, trying to form a mosaic out of fragmented bits of melody and Pepper bullies his way through a chorus. Waldron takes one after the bridge and the out has Coltrane playing lead.

An original by Pepper, **Mary's Blues**, puts everyone on more comfortable ground. The blues and bebop mix smoothly as Pepper and Cecil split the intro, then solo with Coltrane splitting the difference. Quotes and semi-quotes from the Forties abound, mostly Parker and Tadd Dameron (a variation of his **Good Bait** line forms the basis for Coltrane's excursion) before a false ending unison statement, four exciting rounds of fours and the final ensemble.

The most fulfilling track to me is Teddy Charles' **Route 4**. His writing is more "legitimate" than either Waldron's or Adams' (**Dakar** and **Cat Walk** are his as well) and Cecil plays lead with a straight but swinging sound. The rhythm section really gets itself together as Waldron plays a strikingly Bud Powellian chorus. Payne, with a sound like a nervous man wringing his hands, takes a furious solo and then Mr. Coltrane unleashes one. On the bridge his daring attempt to construct a melody out of harmonic fragments works, and he brings off the gambit in breathtaking style. Pepper's squat and robust voice loses nothing at the tempo and the whole thing comes together with great unity.

And so it goes. **Velvet Mood** has Coltrane playing melody with acetic grace; **Witches' Pit** is a broiling blues by Pepper Adams and contains the baritonist's best solo of the date and **Cat Walk** has good solos all round.

Here is Coltrane in his formative years, a record that will delight his admirers and perhaps rankle his enemies. It may even win a few new recruits. A trip down **Route 4** is sure to be instructive.

Notes: David A. Himmelstein (Oct. 1963)

Supervision. Teddy Charles

Recording: Rudy Van Gelder