

Ravi Coltrane

ANOTHER TYPE of ENERGY

By Josef Woodard | Photo by Mark Sheldon

On a Sunday evening in Los Angeles this summer, Ravi Coltrane was having a bit of internal GPS-challenged vertigo. “I turned the wrong way on Sunset,” he said with a touch of alarm, by way of a humble and unnecessary apology for being a few minutes late to an interview at Catalina Bar & Grill, the premier jazz club in L.A. for 25 years. Directional dysfunction might be expected of outsiders lost in the thicket-like topography of Lost Angeles, except that this Coltrane spent more than half of his 47 years coming up in the region, growing up in the care of his mother, the late keyboardist and Vedantic spiritualist Alice Coltrane.

By this point, the jazz world knows certain things about Ravi Coltrane: He has been steadily, sturdily building an artistic reputation over the years, overcoming speculation and second-guessing about his life as the tenor sax-wielding son of the greatest tenor saxophonist in jazz history, John Coltrane, who died when Ravi was 2. Coltrane the Younger has worked hard to create his own intriguing artistic voice over the decades, intensifying when he moved to New York in 1991. He has ascended to a lofty place with this year's release of his Blue Note debut, *Spirit Fiction*, which he co-produced with saxophonist Joe Lovano. Following a handful of previous albums, Coltrane's latest has been embraced by critics and discerning listeners as a sign of the artist having matured while still maintaining his youthful verve and willingness to stretch.

He has returned “home” to play Los Angeles sporadically, and this summer's three-night stint with his quartet at Catalina came seven years after the last such gig, back when he was turning 40. Between then and now, he has flown in for special occasions, including a momentous and memorable concert on Feb. 18, 2006, with his mother at UCLA's Royce Hall, supporting her much-treasured, final album, *Translinear Light*, produced by Ravi and released on Impulse!

Records in 2004.

At Catalina this summer, over the course of two captivating and musically liquid Saturday night sets, Coltrane and his quartet, featuring his drummer of a decade's standing, E.J. Strickland, casually but passionately covered a telling, self-defining expanse of ideas and tunes. Originals from Coltrane's oeuvre merged currents with material by Ornette Coleman, Thelonious Monk, the occasional standard and, to close out, a one-two of songs with links to his notable parents: Charlie Haden's lyrical tribute to Coltrane's mother, “For Turiya,” and the mantra-like chordal maze of his father's classic “Giant Steps.”

After our interview the next night, the ever-articulate and affable Coltrane was headed off to play his Sunday night set, and we broached the subject of becoming obsessed with music, even as a musician or listener slides into ever more mature turf in life. “I don't know what it is,” he mused, “but it gets into your ear. It gets into your head. It gets into your body. It gets into your thoughts and your dreams, and our desires. We should desire this music. We should have a longing for it. This music's very, very powerful.”

Before he left the Naugahyde booth, Coltrane said, “We'll play something weird for you.” I half-jokingly requested Bob Dorough's

“Nothing Like You,” the infamous non sequitur charmer capping off Miles Davis' *Sorcerer*, which Coltrane's band had done up in mercurial fashion the night before. Voilà: the band's Sunday set opened with an ambling, half-hour version of the Dorough tune, varying left and right, hither and yon, full of the fire and exploratory verve we expect of Coltrane.

This Coltrane.

Below are excerpts from our wide-ranging Aug. 5 conversation.

DownBeat: *Spirit Fiction* is wonderful album. Do you have a sense of arrival with this record?

Ravi Coltrane: A sense of relief [*laughs*]. This record's over. Now I can actually move on to the [next] record. This was the debut record. Just being on Blue Note is definitely a dream that many young musicians have when they come to New York. I came there in '91 and it was this dream. I appreciated the opportunities that I had, on the labels that I did work with. I was never somebody who was hungry to gain this type of stature or exposure versus another type.

But when the Blue Note thing became more of a possibility, I was thinking, “OK, well now what? What are we going to do here?” I had a



Ravi Coltrane
performing in
Chicago,
Sept. 2, 2011

hyper-awareness of the fact that I was recording for Blue Note. That definitely made it challenging. That's why I feel a bit of relief now that it's done and the reviews have been good. I didn't really know what to expect from that.

But clearly, you want it to be as effective and at your maximum potential as a recording musician. You want to get all of these things on tape and get that onto the record and out to the people. That's always the goal. Sometimes you reach it; sometimes you get close.

And that's the nature of jazz anyway, in that it's a fluid music, don't you think?

Yeah, and it should be that way. If things are too controlled, too organized, too routinized, that's not the kind of thing that interests me.

I always felt another energy. When you listen to the masters that we reference on a regular basis, there seemed to be another type of energy behind how they made their records, how they made their work. Clearly, they wanted to be recognized. They wanted to have success. But there was something else that was driving it, which was as important or more important. It was about their idea, their vision, what they were trying to express. If you can work with the right people and have a good relationship between the record company and the artist, and work with musicians who understand what your intentions are, you can start to get that happening.

At the same time, you want it to be balanced

Personal History

Tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano plays a guiding role on Ravi Coltrane's acclaimed *Spirit Fiction* (Blue Note) as co-producer and also as a player, dialoguing with the leader on Ornette Coleman's "Check Out Time" and "Fantasm," composed by the late Paul Motian (in whose great trio Lovano was involved for nearly 30 years).

Coltrane has been a part of Lovano's Saxophone Summit band, taking the place of the late Michael Brecker in that group, among other more casual interactions with Lovano over the years.

Lending an overview of Coltrane's background and status as an evolving and respected player in jazz, Lovano notes that "his whole family history is amazing."

He continues, "Coltrane *Live At The Half Note* was made when Ravi was born. Growing up with Coltrane's influence like that, but really growing up with Alice and her music and her beautiful spirituality and incredible influence, Ravi has developed into being his own player. [It is] an amazing world that he has grown up in. I see him, today, as being definitely one of the top saxophonists on the scene.

"We all feed off of each others' ideas and energies and personalities on the scene. That happens when you're living in that community together. He's a serious young man, as a composer and improviser and someone who is always studying and developing within the world we live in. He's not living in the past, but he's feeding off of his rich history. He has an amazing history of his own. Our personal histories make us the players we are. You tell your personal story through your music, whether you're playing famous songs or soon-to-be famous songs.

"It's *your* personal story, and if you can tap into who you are and translate that with your ideas in your music, you're going to live a lifetime as a player.

"There are a lot of cats who play. But there are only a handful who are *players*."

Lovano feels that this is a ripe period in Coltrane's musical life. "As a player," Lovano comments, "his foundations are growing all the time and his roots are getting deeper in all kinds of ways of playing. We're hearing it and feeling it. To be a leader and present a band at that level—that experience grows every time you do it." —Josef Woodard



JACKIEM JOYNER
CHURCH BOY

Contemporary jazz saxophonist **Jackiem Joyner's *Church Boy*** features a collection of modern Gospel tunes including Toby Mac's "City On Our Knees," Israel & New Breed's "You Are Good" and Kirk Franklin's "Hosanna." Kirk Whalum and Jonathan Butler join label mate Joyner on two tunes and the results are spectacular, as you might imagine!

 mackavehue.com • jackiemjoyner.com
available wherever you like to buy music

by a collective of people who are going to make sure that the record has something to say, and is something of value.

We can look back on the era when your dad was making records as a golden era in jazz. For you, does having a connection with Blue Note mean more because there are fewer major-label jazz albums getting released nowadays?

This label [Blue Note] is very historic. We do have other labels out here making great jazz music. I know that, as a musician, we have to document our work. With all of the highs and the lows, the creative anguish and whatnot, it's still something that is a part of what we do. There are still people around who want to make jazz records, and try to extend that history and lineage to whatever comes next.

One of the strongest pieces on the album is Paul Motian's "Fantasm." Was that recorded while he was alive?

It was recorded maybe a month after [he died]. I saw Paul Motian play dozens of times. I never got to really work with him, but always admired his music. The first time I heard Lovano was on a Paul Motian record, *Monk In Motian*. That was the first time I heard [pianist] Geri [Allen], on the same record, in '88. After Paul passed [on Nov. 22, 2011], Joe was the guy I called. When someone dies, you have to call somebody and give condolences. Joe was the first one I thought of. I called Charlie [Haden], as well.

It just felt like we had to record some of his music. I told Joe I wanted to do something with just piano and two saxophones, and was thinking about Paul and one of his compositions. Joe said, "I know the perfect tune." That's how we got to "Fantasm."

Part of what made Motian a special musician was his unique, open sense of time. Working with and around time is also an aspect of your music. Last night, for instance, I found myself trying to count out "Thirteenth Floor," to crack the code of its meter.

Well, there are two versions of "Thirteenth Floor." I wrote this reharmonization that goes between measures of 4/4 and 3/4. But the original piece was written over a bass line in 7, next to a drum part that was in 6. After seven cycles of 6, the pattern repeats, and after six cycles of 7, the bass part repeats. Eventually the two patterns will sync up down the road.

Speaking of this band, you have a great rapport with E.J. Strickland.

Yeah, it's going on at least 10 years with E.J. I was playing with [pianist] Luis [Perdomo] in 2000. E.J. started making gigs with me around 2001, and [bassist] Drew [Gress] came in around 2003. When Drew came in, it was like the glue. Things that felt on the edge and close to being

there, when he came along, we all got it.

You belong to a group of New York jazz musicians who easily straddle stylistic lines or camps. You're not avant-garde per se, although experimentation sneaks in there. You're not straightahead ...

Per se [laughs].

So, what are you?

It's interesting when you're not on the hard right or the hard left, but somewhere in-between. And that somewhere in-between doesn't have to be static, either. You can still maintain your character. For me, it's not about thinking, "OK, let me try to play this way, and that way." That would require a lot of effort for someone like me. I'm just looking for the sweet spots. It's like splitting these hairs and getting a bit of X and a bit of Y. It's never black or white. It's some strange combination of the two. Then you throw some M-BASE in there and get a strange combination.

[When] I got to New York, it was like you had to pick sides. You were going to be wearing a suit and playing this way, or wearing a dashiki and playing *that* way. You were either straightahead or you were out. You were playing at the Knitting Factory or Lincoln Center. There was very little middle ground. I felt that was just so rigid. I never felt completely comfortable in one situation or another.

I ended up falling, organically, in with these other types of scenes. I was doing gigs with Jack DeJohnette, with Kenny Barron, with Rashied Ali, with Joanne Brackeen. Starting out by playing with Elvin [Jones] was a whole other kind of introduction. And then Steve Coleman came along. There were a lot of things I could draw from that I did feel comfortable with. Again, they all fit somewhere in the middle of these polar extremes—or what seemed like polar extremes.

Joe Lovano, for me, is one of those guys who could be at Lincoln Center one night and the Knitting Factory the next night, and it would be very seamless. He is a perfect model for that idea of finding your place, finding your way within all the stuff that's out there. [Trumpeter] Ralph Alessi has a lot of that ability, as well. He can play traditional things or more avant-garde things, and still sound like himself. Mark Turner is another one. Wherever he goes, whoever he's playing with, he still sounds like himself.

When it's a matter of having to play this way when you're over here and *that* way over there, you're starting to lose your center.

Was your work with Steve Coleman a catalyst for you, an influential turn in your musical life?

It was, without a doubt. He is one of the biggest influences on me, and not in all the surface ways people would assume—that he plays saxophone and plays this rhythmically aggressive music. It is [influential] in those ways, but also in ways that move closer to method—how you approach your work, regardless of whether you're



DEBORAH FENICOLD

leaning closer to the avant-garde or straightahead end of the spectrum. It was more about the methodizing of getting his stuff together.

By playing with Steve, I realized I could shift the directions just by virtue of certain types of musical gestures, and reinforcing those gestures with codes and little moves. You can make these little segues and do these spontaneous arrangements, when everyone understands that this is part of the deal. It isn't about controlling what people could play. But I like to know that if we're going to have a unified focus, somebody has to lead that focus. I'm listening to them, they're listening to me, and hopefully, we're going the same place at the same time, and hopefully, I'm steering that to some degree.

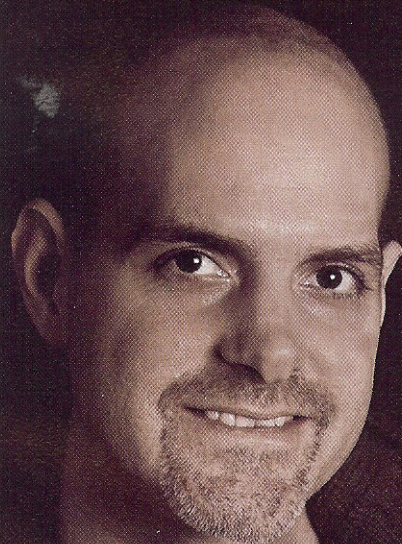
A lot of that, again, comes from Steve, but it's more methodizing rather than some strict rhythmic codes or some specific M-BASE-like language. But that's part of the language—the more open-ended idea of the possibilities for form and rhythmic placement and pulse.

Your 2009 album was called *Blending Times*. Great title, and maybe one with a double or even triple meaning? There is the metric angle, but you have also managed to blend different eras on your musical path.

That's really what it is, more than anything. It was more on the idea of combining *before* and *after*. Half the record was recorded in 2006. In the beginning of 2007, my mother passed away, and I was still not done with the record. Now, I've got all this stuff on my mind. The idea of

Freedom to DREAM

5 Cymbal Lines, One Sound Price!



Dream

"DREAM has created the perfect balance of classic sounds and modern aggressiveness."

Richard Irwin
- Nikki Yanofsky



www.dreamcymbals.com

playing music and picking up the saxophone was very foreign to me after my mother passed away. I'm faced with finishing the record from this very different perspective.

In a historic sense, you've always blended styles, times, eras and attitudes. Does that idea make sense from your perspective?

Well, it helps being from the post-'60s, post-'70s generational time. And it's not just about being a player. I was born in the '60s. I watched [the TV show] "Laugh-In" with my mom [laughs]. We watched Lawrence Welk. I listened to James Brown records as an infant. That was being played constantly through the house, along with Stravinsky records and the Jackson 5. Suddenly, I was hearing Steely Dan on the radio. What's happening here?

That was a really cool time to absorb things, and to live and have those things as reference points in your life. I feel fortunate to live in a time where we can reference all of these amazing moments in creative art and creative music. I know that it has only benefitted me, whether or not I'm trying to tie all these things [together]. I know I'm not doing that consciously, but subconsciously and unconsciously, there are a lot of things that can motivate us and affect us.

You're probably tired of people asking you about your dad ...

Depends on what they ask [laughs].

Have you felt influenced or guided by his music and his legacy, and the fact that you're part of his direct lineage? And has that feeling changed over the years? What is your relationship to the subject now, compared to when you started out as a musician in the public sphere?

My feeling about him is still very consistent with the feeling I've always had for him. I can speak about him as a father that I didn't know. I can also speak about him, and most often do, as John Coltrane, one of the greatest instrumentalists of recent times, somebody who inspired me to do what I do, along with other great musicians.

All of those records are important to me, and I can sing every solo note-for-note. The meaning for me is as profound as it is for any lover of that music, any follower or student of that music. I've been listening to it most of my life. I had very focused type of listening as a saxophone player. I stuck to my favorites, and kind of OD'ed on a lot of them. I transcribed solos. I analyzed certain aspects of the music.

But my goal never was that I had to emulate or master this before I could be myself. You could spend your whole life doing that, and loving it. It's not that it would be a drag to say, "I love John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt and that's all I want to play. I'm going to learn all these things, play them in every key and write etudes based on it, because that's what I love." That notion is compelling for young musicians. For us to even begin to walk—forget

about running—we're crawling and we're trying to gain this foundational information and we're getting it from these players.

At some point, I recognized that for as much as I wanted to take in, just merely copying them or trying to emulate them in some literal, concrete, direct sense, was not my thing. This is not how John Coltrane played, or how Bird played, or Ornette. They weren't just stockpiling these things they had learned or worked out and inserting them into improvisations. They were able to channel very in-the-moment types of sounds.

From a broader angle, are you influenced by the evolutionary sprawl of John Coltrane's musical life? It was one of the wider and more radical evolutions in jazz history, from his '50s work, what we hear on *Fearless Leader*, through to *Interstellar Space* and adventurous later moves. Do you look at that as a model of what you'd like to, ultimately, do in your musical life?

Sure. You can see this very perfect arc. I just see one person, expanding and moving and growing. You can find these things that he's playing in 1965 that you can relate back to the rhythm-and-blues licks he was playing in 1955, and earlier, in 1950 with Dizzy's big band and Johnny Hodges' big band. There are rhythmic call-and-responses. There are certain things in his phrasing, and a certain momentum that stays very consistent.

I don't even know if I call it *changing*. It seems more like an expanding process. It's really easy to hear that it is one voice. Clearly, the styles and approaches were changing. The music changed radically, but I really hear a singular voice. That always blew my mind that you could do that, and do it throughout this very unique setting, utilizing all these unique approaches in improvised music.

The next logical question: What's your own next step in the expanding story?

Yeah, steps are good. They don't have to be big steps, as long as they're steps. The unknown is risky, man. It's easier to just say, "Well, this is what's already happening. This is what people like. Let me just do that and do it very well, or just put my little spin on it."

Well, you can do that, but why not push a little bit and see what happens? What's the worst that could happen in this jazz era? People are going to like it or they're not going to like it. People can make records in their bathrooms now. You're worried about record sales? There's no more record sales. At this point, it should be liberating. It should be an incentive to try to find something unique, find something that's coming from inside you—something that's informed by not just the stuff that exists, not just the things you love from the past.

All these things are going to be fuel for us, things that motivate us, push us, guide us, gently sometimes and more forcefully other times. But ultimately, we have to take the reins. **DB**