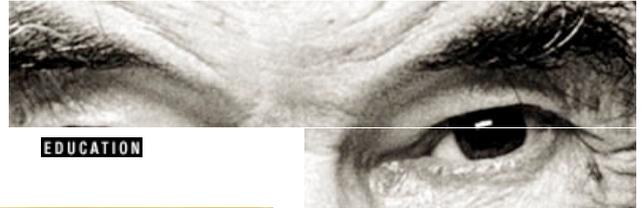


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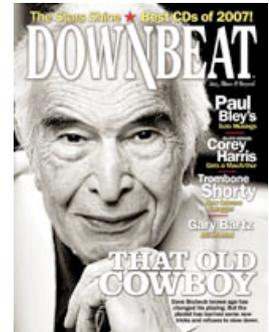
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John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer The Jazz Critics

An Exclusive Online Extra

4/12/1962

John Coltrane has been the center of critical controversy ever since he unfurled his sheets of sound in his days with Miles Davis. At first disparaged for his sometimes involved, multinoted solos, Coltrane paid little heed and continued exploring music. In time, his harmonic approach—for the sheets were really rapid chord running, in the main—was accepted, even praised, by most jazz critics.

By the time critics had caught up with Coltrane, the tenor saxophonist had gone on to another way of playing. Coltrane II, if you will, was much concerned with linear theme development that seemed sculptured or torn from great blocks of granite. Little critical carping was heard of this second, architectural, Coltrane.

But Coltrane, an inquisitive-minded, probing musician, seemingly has left architecture for less concrete, more abstract means of expression. This third and present Coltrane has encountered an ever-growing block of criticism, much of it marked by a holy-war fervor.

Criticism of Coltrane III is almost always tied in with Coltrane's cohort Eric Dolphy, a member of that group of musicians who play what has been dubbed the "new thing."

Dolphy's playing has been praised and damned since his national-jazz-scene arrival about two years ago. Last summer Dolphy joined Coltrane's group for a tour. It was on this tour that Coltrane and Dolphy came under the withering fire of Down Beat associate editor John Tynan, the first critic to take a strong-and public-stand against what Coltrane and Dolphy were playing.

In the Nov. 23, 1961, Down Beat, Tynan wrote, "At Hollywood's Renaissance club recently, I listened to a horrifying demonstration of what appears to be a growing anti-jazz trend exemplified by those foremost proponents [Coltrane and Dolphy] of what is termed avant garde music.

"I heard a good rhythm section ... go to waste behind the nihilistic exercises of the two horns. ... Coltrane and Dolphy seem intent on deliberately destroying [swing]. ... They seem bent on pursuing an anarchistic course in their music that can but be termed anti-jazz."

The anti-jazz term was picked up by Leonard Feather and used as a basis for critical essays of Coltrane, Dolphy, Ornette Coleman and the "new Thing" in general in Down Beat and Show.

The reaction from readers to both Tynan's and Feather's remarks was immediate, heated, and about evenly divided.

Recently, Coltrane and Dolphy agreed to sit down and discuss their music and the criticism leveled at it.

One of the recurring charges is that their performances are stretched out over too long a

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time, that Coltrane and Dolphy play on and on, past inspiration and into monotony.

Coltrane answered, "They're long because all the soloists try to explore all the avenues that the tune offers. They try to use all their resources in their solos. Everybody has quite a bit to work on. Like when I'm playing, there are certain things I try to get done and so does Eric and McCoy Tyner [Coltrane's pianist]. By the time we finish, the song is spread out over a pretty long time.

"It's not planned that way; it just happens. The performances get longer and longer. It's sort of growing that way."

But, goes the criticism, there must be editing, just as a writer must edit his work so that it keeps to the point and does not ramble and become boring.

Coltrane agreed that editing must be done-but for essentially a different reason from what might be expected.

"There are times," he said, "when we play places opposite another group, and in order to play a certain number of sets a night, you can't play an hour and a half at one time. You've got to play 45 or 55 minutes and rotate sets with the other band. And for those reasons, for a necessity such as that, I think it's quite in order that you edit and shorten things.

"But when your set is unlimited, timewise, and everything is really together musically-if there's continuity-it really doesn't make any difference how long you play.

"On the other hand, if there're dead spots, then it's really not good to play anything too long."

One of the tunes that Coltrane's group plays at length is "My Favorite Things," a song, as played by the group, that can exert an intriguingly hypnotic effect, though sometimes it seems too long.

Upon listening closely to him play "Things" on the night before the interview, it seemed that he actually played two solos. He finished one, went back to the theme a bit, and then went into another improvisation.

"That's the way the song is constructed," Coltrane said. "It's divided into parts. We play both parts. There's a minor and a major part. We improvise in the minor, and we improvise in the major modes."

Is there a certain length to the two modes?

"It's entirely up to the artist-his choice," he answered. "We were playing it at one time with minor, then major, then minor modes, but it was really getting too long-it was about the only tune we had time to play in an average length set."

But in playing extended solos, isn't there ever present the risk of running out of ideas?

What happens when you've played all your ideas?

"It's easy to stop then," Coltrane said, grinning. "If I feel like I'm just playing notes ... maybe I don't feel the rhythm or I'm not in the best shape that I should be in when this happens. When I become aware of it in the middle of a solo, I'll try to build things to the point where this inspiration is happening again, where things are spontaneous and not contrived. If it reaches that point again, I feel it can continue-it's alive again. But if it doesn't happen, I'll just quit, bow out."

Dolphy, who had been sitting pixie-like as Coltrane spoke, was in complete agreement about stopping when inspiration had flown.

Last fall at the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Coltrane-Dolphy group was featured opening night. In his playing that night Dolphy at times sounded as if he were imitating birds. On the night before the interview some of Dolphy's flute solos brought Monterey to mind. Did

he do this on purpose?

Dolphny smiled and said it was purposeful and that he had always liked birds.

Is bird imitation valid in jazz?

"I don't know if it's valid in jazz," he said, "but I enjoy it. It somehow comes in as part of the development of what I'm doing. Sometimes I can't do it.

"At home [in California] I used to play, and the birds always used to whistle with me. I would stop what I was working on and play with the birds."

He described how bird calls had been recorded and then slowed down in playback; the bird calls had a timbre similar to that of a flute. Conversely, he said, a symphony flutist recorded these bird calls, and when the recording was played at a fast speed, it sounded like birds.

Having made his point about the connection of bird whistles and flute playing, Dolphy explained his use of quarter tones when playing flute.

"That's the way birds do," he said. "Birds have notes in between our notes-you try to imitate something they do and, like, maybe it's between F and F#, and you'll have to go up or come down on the pitch. It's really something! And so, when you get playing, this comes. You try to do some things on it. Indian music has something of the same quality-different scales and quarter tones. I don't know how you label it, but it's pretty.

The question in many critics' minds, though they don't often verbalize it, is: What are John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy trying to do? Or: What are they doing?

Following the question, a 30-second silence was unbroken except by Dolphy's, "That's a good question." Dolphy was first to try to voice his aims in music:

"What I'm trying to do I find enjoyable. Inspiring-what it makes me do. It helps me play, this feel. It's like you have no idea what you're going to do next. You have an idea, but there's always that spontaneous thing that happens. This feeling, to me, leads the whole group. When John plays, it might lead into something you had no idea could be done. Or McCoy does something. Or the way Elvin [Jones, drummer with the group] or Jimmy [Garrison, the bassist] play; they solo, they do something in a different way. I feel that is what it does for me."

"Eric and I have been talking music for quite a few years, since about 1954. We've been close for quite a while. We watched music. We always talked about it, discussed what was being done down through the years, because we love music. What we're doing now was started a few years ago.

"A few months ago Eric was in New York, where the group was working, and he felt like playing, wanted to come down and sit in. So I told him to come on down and play, and he did-and turned us all around. I'd felt at ease with just a quartet till then, but he came in, and it was like having another member of the family. He'd found another way to express the same thing we had found one way to do.

"After he sat in, we decided to see what it would grow into. We began to play some of the things we had only talked about before. Since he's been in the band, he's had a broadening effect on us. There are a lot of things we try now that we never tried before. This helped me, because I've started to write-it's necessary that we have things written so that we can play together."