

The Once and Future King?

Ravi Coltrane Quartet

In Flux

Savoy Jazz SVY 17444 (2005)

Last year the editors of *Jazz Times* yielded to temptation and ran the eye-catching headline “COLTRANE RETURNS!” to cover the new release by keyboardist Alice Coltrane. Several thousand readers groaned. So it usually goes with the heirs and scions of the jazz world: A marketing dream becomes a musical disappointment. As befits a quintessentially democratic art, jazz “dynasties” are few and of relatively modest distinction (no offense meant to, for example, Mtume James Heath, Ellis Marsalis or Von Freeman). The birth-children of Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Charlie Parker steered away from musical pursuits. A decade ago if asked to point to a jazz family with a truly influential parent and child we might have started and ended with Dewey and Joshua Redman (and even that may be a stretch).

John Coltrane’s living example was not what influenced his son to take up jazz: John died when Ravi was wearing diapers. Nor was the son’s embrace of the father’s chosen tools, the tenor and soprano saxophone, pre-ordained; the younger Coltrane did not succumb to the horns’ siren songs until he was in his late teens. Ravi Coltrane consciously chose, as a young adult, to walk the path which his father blazed for so many. While he certainly benefitted as a young artist from the goodwill which his family brought with such early employers as Jack DeJohnette, Pharoah Sanders and particularly Elvin Jones, Mr. Coltrane made the most of the opportunities presented to him. He was recorded as a sideman over thirty times before releasing his first album as a leader in 1998.

All this underscores how remarkable it is to witness Mr. Coltrane’s ascent to the status of fully-realized jazz artist. With *In Flux*, he succeeds on every level – as saxophonist, composer, bandleader and producer. This disc is a rich, mature piece of work and a sterling depiction of the state of the American jazz art at this moment.

The set begins on an introspective note with the leader in duet with his pianist Luis Perdomo on The Message Part I. (Interestingly, there is no “Part II” on the record.) Click: Here comes Coincide, a tricky-as-the-devil mixed-meter piece on soprano, anchored by Mr. Perdomo’s block-chords and showcasing the jaw-dropping rhythmic command of the double-bassist Drew Gress. Drumming phenom EJ Strickland and the bandleader close the piece over a vamp, and the soprano saxophone work is breathtaking both for its control and release. Mr. Coltrane’s soprano sound is lush throughout, never quacky, and he just as likely to let a note float at length as he is to rip with his drummer.

In Flux covers nearly all the ground available to modern mainstream jazz artists. There are mixed-meter escapades (Coincide, the brief Scram Vamp and the aptly-named Angular Realms). There are three-four, fairly straight-ahead compositions (up-tempo with Untitled and at medium tempo on Away). Leaving Avignon is atmospheric with a Latin influence emerging, and Blending Times features guest *conguero* Luisito Quintero and a challenging Latin-in-mixed-meter setting. Variation III and Variation I are brief, nearly-free works.

One of the disc's highlights is Drew Gress' gorgeous composition, the medium-tempo waltz Away. The quartet stretches rhythmically and harmonically but leaves handholds for the listener at every turn. Backing the piano solo, Mr. Gress lays a foundation of fairly straight tempo, but as the tenor saxophone enters the bassist moves immediately to rhythmic commentary, with drums acting as the group's keel. The bassist then plays a solo which (without any hint of purposeful imitation) raises the specter of the legendary innovator Scott LaFaro. This piece shows contemporary "inside" playing at its finest, and in doing so, it displays no marked connection to John Coltrane's work.

But Ravi Coltrane is as unafraid to embrace his father's musical legacy as he is to stand aside from it. On this set the elder Coltrane's influence is most clearly found on the slower compositions. Dear Alice is a piece Ravi Coltrane has carried in his "bag of tricks" for nearly twenty years without recording. For Zöe, the album's closer, is recent. Both are in the timeless, declamatory ballad style which John Coltrane favored in the later years of his career and which too few players have explored since. When the band opens For Zöe with mallets, bowed bass and the sound of a Selmer Balanced Action tenor in the lower register, there is no doubt about which classic quartet's shadow is being evoked. The same is true near the song's end when the saxophonist briefly repeats a rhythmic motif. Yet through it all the younger Coltrane's playing remains distinct and current, and his compositions go to rhythmic and metric places that his father's never visited.

It is noteworthy that Ravi Coltrane's first work for the Savoy label is also the first time he has chosen to feature an extant working band. The *In Flux* quartet has been his primary working unit since 2003 with roots going back at least a year before that. (Interested readers can review the group's development via concert-tapes available for download at RaviColtrane.com.) Playing music this challenging this well requires a rapport that can neither be faked nor hurried. This new Coltrane Quartet appears to have the combination of experience and vigor to continue seeking out new musical territory without falling out into the swamp of relentless dissonance for its own sake. It will be a pleasure to see what they look for, and find, next.