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CONTROL ROOM

RAVI COLTRANE STEPS OUT FROM HIS FATHER'S SHADOW AS A SAXOPHONIST, PRODUCER AND LABEL HEAD

"I'm not interested in jazz history," Ravi Coltrane proclaims.

Those are provocative words coming from the son of one of jazz's most towering figures. By itself, the statement strikes a jarring chord, considering his pedigree. "Let me say that again," he reiterates. "I'm not interested in the idea of holding up the banner—'Keep jazz alive!'—because it's not dying.

"We don't need to play that music with the idea of keeping it alive," continues the 39-year-old saxophonist. When he says "that music," he refers to the heavy reliance on old jazz standards and stock licks. "Having knowledge and love for jazz is enough. We don't need replacements for Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. Jazz is more about summing up all the knowledge and the things that you've been exposed to in life, and finding some way to make it personal in your approach."

That explains a lot about why Coltrane's music explicitly conveys that he's not trying to replace his father. And in person, he doesn't play up the "John Coltrane's Son/Mystical Negro" shtick that could guarantee some marketability edge over less identifiable jazz personalities. When he talks, you don't imagine mystical auras surrounding his body or a halo hovering above his head. He's a regular cat, cordial and un-

saming, but with a wry sense of humor.

Musically, he's a modernist, someone who has absorbed a wealth of jazz saxophone knowledge, ranging from his father and Sonny Rollins to contemporary icon figures such as Steve Coleman and Wayne Shorter. But all those influences are couched so well, resulting in a unique sound, best described as "elusive beauty."

But what's not elusive to Coltrane is a vision as to the direction he's going as a saxophonist, producer and label head. Over the past several years he has undergone the process of taking control of his career. In the late '90s, while signed with BMG, Coltrane witnessed major labels suddenly shutting down their jazz departments, forcing a lot of creative jazz artists to fend for themselves. "These companies are so big and don't care about your record that's going to sell 5,000 copies," he says with a wry laugh. "They don't care if you sell 20,000 or 50,000. It's not going to help them pay their rents in Times Square. You're an extremely low priority."

In response, he launched his own label, RKM. Since the release of two discs by trumpeter Ralph Alessi and one by saxophonist Michael McGinnis, RKM has already become a noteworthy label. Scheduled for release in 2005 are albums by guitarist David Gilmore and Coltrane's pianist, Luis Perdomo. "I had many offers to make a record," Perdomo says. "But every offer wanted me to play Latin jazz piano. Ravi was the only one that just said, 'Let's just make a record of whatever you like.' He gave me all of the freedom to do that."

Interestingly, though, RKM has not been the outlet for his own music. A couple of years ago, Coltrane released *Mad 6* (Eighty-Eights/Columbia), which showed him recording with a working band that had disbanded just prior to the session. Featuring drummer Steve Haas, pianists Andy Milne and George Colligan, and bassists James Genus and Darryl Hall, the album contained mostly standards; and to the delight of many, Coltrane finally featured a couple of his father's tunes: "26-2" and "Fifth House."

But as well-received as *Mad 6* was, it does not stand out as one of Coltrane's favorites, since he lacked creative control of the final product. "I never felt that it was my project," he says. "I couldn't choose where it was going to be recorded or who the engineer was. The simple things that any artist would be able to choose weren't a part of that deal."

Perhaps too much of a perfectionist for his own good, Coltrane was particularly perturbed when he wasn't allowed to choose the takes or clean up flubbed notes. "This is record making, not a live gig," he says. "If you do something unintentionally, you make some means of cor-

recting it. After the sessions were over, it was difficult for me to hear the things I wanted. The best part of that experience is that I learned that I never want to do this again."

Coltrane has learned from his mistakes. For his gorgeous new disc, *In Flux*, his February debut on the Savoy label, he's in control, having produced an album that reaches a new creative plateau in terms of composing, playing and bandleading. His lustrous tenor transmits a quiet yet sinewy lyricism, especially on ballads like "Leaving Avignon" and his heartfelt tribute to his mother, "Dear Alice," on which he animates his groping improvisations with upper-register cries and hushed, inward melodies.

Coltrane isn't all about navel-gazing introspection, though. There's a capricious joy in his playing, too, most noticeably in the uptempo compositions featuring him on soprano. He peeks out a soft percussive melody on the restive "Coincide" before barreling through the song's thorny rhythmic figures and shifting harmonies. Here, as well as on his splendid rendering of Shorter's "Untitled," Coltrane's soprano takes on the characteristics of a prized competitor.

The compositions on *In Flux* often crest and fall, operatically, with sweeping melodies, intriguing harmonies and episodic motifs. They're also deceptively intrepid rhythmically. "I wanted to work with some rhythmic concepts—layering things rhythmically, using different time signatures against each other," Coltrane says. Surprisingly, the compositions exude a tranquil quality that's hardly frantic. "Sometimes, it takes a minute to make this kind of music sound comfortable. Technically, you may be able to pull it off but it doesn't always feel comfortable. If it doesn't feel comfortable for the player, it's definitely not going to feel comfortable for the listener."

Coltrane recorded this music with his touring band, composed of Perdomo, drummer E.J. Strickland and bassist Drew Gress, which spent a year ironing out the kinks before entering the studio. "We had to play it for a long time for it to sound just like the music we were playing in 4/4," Coltrane says. "They don't have this metric feel to them; it's more of a relaxed flow."

Perdomo agrees: "All of those tunes were hard for me in the beginning. Sometimes I wasn't even taking any solos; I would just play the accompaniments. I would go home and dissect the music, measure per measure. Playing every night makes the songs much easier."

"I've been putting these records out at long intervals," Coltrane says. "I like to have some new ideas with each album. I don't want to make the same record over and over. So the

fact that I'm trying to take my time and I'm not anxious, I hopefully can get into situations that are more relaxed. If I can't do a record how I want it, then it's not that important. Fortunately, with this Savoy record, I did it exactly the way I wanted to do it." Coltrane emphasizes, obviously still reflecting on the *Mad 6* fiasco.



A relaxed freedom of expression marked the *In Flux* sessions, which Coltrane patterned after *Translinear Light* (Impulse!), his mother Alice Coltrane's 2004 comeback disc. "My mother doesn't like being in the studio very long," Ravi says. "We'll take three days, and maybe try to get three songs. And if we get on a roll and want to try get a couple more, great. When the musicians are at ease and aware of how the process is going to be, it yields a lot musically, not necessarily in the amount of tunes but in the quality of music. It gives you time to reflect upon what you're doing. For *In Flux*, that's how I wanted to do it: only record about two songs a day and book shorter, four-hour days."

Last year, Coltrane's life was filled with recording his own disc, producing for RKM and producing *Translinear Light*. After his mother's 26-year hiatus from the studio, Coltrane had to cajole her to record again. He says that he didn't want either he or his mother to leave this planet without collaborating musically as adults. When he first started playing saxophone, however, the two did play a few European gigs together. "It was unbelievably premature," he says. "I didn't want that to be the last memory of me collaborating with my mother."

Understandably, coming out of a 20-plus-year studio retirement can be tough. Also, the



Diane Delin
violin
&
Dennis Luxion
piano
Duality

"...completely engaging enjoyable."
John Kelman, All About Jazz



Bob Acri
with
Lew Soloff
Frank Wess
George Mraz
Ed Thigpen
Diane Delin

"...excellent recording,"
Paula Edelsten, All Music Guide



Janice Borla
AGENTS OF CHANGE
Agents of Change

"Knocked me out!"
Gary Walker, WBGO Radio New York



The Mike Frost Project
Nothing Smooth About It

Charted on NPR Jazz Week, CMJ,
Canadian Earshot & Chart Attack



Melody Breyer-Grell
The Right Time

Rated -Top 5 Jazz Vocals of 2004
All About Jazz, New York City

shift in roles from mother/son to artist/producer can be complicated when it comes down to disciplinary aspects. "My mother had been retired from the music and isn't going to work in the same manner as, say, Jack DeJohnette. She's not going to have that same type of working style," Coltrane says. "For someone older, who doesn't do this type of work, there needs to be room for her to say, 'I'm not coming in until 6 p.m.' But it's noon and everyone's waiting. We needed to have that freedom and let the music happen on its time."

"The musical portion of it was normal," says Alice on having her son produce her sessions. "The mother portion was pretty interesting, because he had an idea that I should maybe take the reins. Being a producer is a natural part of his growth as a musician. A lot of times I let him proceed without trying to interfere."

Both mother and son describe Ravi's childhood in Woodland Hills, Calif., as "pressure-free." Well, almost, considering that his mother was checking out Eastern philosophy, making yearly pilgrimages to India and had formed her Vedantic Center in California for her spiritual activities. Nevertheless, growing up in the '70s with older brother John Coltrane Jr., younger brother Oran and sister Michelle, life for the Coltranes wasn't hectic because the world of jazz had shifted so drastically.

Born in 1965, two years before his father's death, Ravi grew up in a decade when there wasn't a Wynton Marsalis or Ken Burns to make certain that iconic figures like Charlie Parker or John Coltrane became American household names. "I grew up anonymously," he says. "Years would go by and someone would say, 'Coltrane? That sounds familiar. Isn't he a blues singer?'"

Music ranging from jazz to r&b to classical and pop filled the house. But it was never forced upon them. It's almost by happenstance that Coltrane gravitated toward the saxophone. During junior high school, he casually chose clarinet over football and metal shop. "It was something to do. My mother was like, 'If you're going to play this, you're going to have to be serious.' She got me a private instructor and a good instrument."

A significant turning point came in 1982 when his brother John was killed in a car accident. Coltrane stopped playing for four years until he switched to saxophone in high school and began to take note of his family's legacy. "I needed something to pull me out of the depressed space that I was in," he says. "The saxophone and jazz did that for me."

After high school graduation Coltrane continued his musical education at California Institute of the Arts (Cal-Arts). Taking up jazz improvisation, he was also beginning to con-

sciously focus on his father's music. "I started listening to my father's records because I was getting older," he explains. "People were coming up to me asking, 'What was the name of the second song on the second side of this particular John Coltrane album?' I didn't know these details. You can get away with that when you're 13, but when you're 20 it's embarrassing. I started putting these records on to get a better idea of who he was historically."

Coltrane wasn't technically ready for Cal-Arts. "I went there to learn how to play. That wasn't the smartest thing for me to do," he says. "That school is set up for post-graduate type of work. You don't go there to learn how to play bebop. I couldn't play at all when I got there."

His tenure at Cal-Arts also marked the first time he was hit with the "John Coltrane's son" thing. "I had grown up my whole life just being Ravi. And within an instant, I became John Coltrane's son," he recalls. During his first year's summer registration, Coltrane remembers that one of the school's employees thought that his name was bogus. "He thought my name was a joke, like Pablo Stravinsky or some shit. Here's this guy whose name is Coltrane and he plays saxophone? Come on. It took a minute for them to see that I was just another guy trying to figure out how to play."

Nevertheless, Coltrane persevered at Cal-Arts, eventually moving to New York City in the '90s to map out a professional career by doing sideman work, first with Elvin Jones' Jazz Machine and later with the likes of Geri Allen, Joanne Brackeen and Kenny Barron. While other young jazz artists were quickly gobbling major label deals, Coltrane allowed his musicality to blossom slowly, if humbly, straying away from corporate hype and engaging in more fulfilling endeavors like linking up with Steve Coleman and the M-Base crew.

Although he briefly co-lead a group with fellow tenor saxophonist Antoine Roney, it wasn't until 1998 that Coltrane released *Moving Pictures* (RCA), an intriguing debut produced by Coleman. Coltrane's playing was tentative and his compositions hadn't yet become compelling, but the disc was noteworthy in witnessing his desire to be his own musician, not merely John Coltrane's son. Its 2000 follow-up, *From The Round Box*, saw him advance as a composer and improviser, as did *Mad 6*.

But now, with *In Flux*, Coltrane has finally arrived, sounding comfortable with his own skin. "When I decided to pick up the saxophone, it was because I was falling in love with the music," he reiterates. "It wasn't because I felt that I needed to do this or because of other people's expectations. Or that it'll be cool, because my name is Coltrane." **DB**