

The son also rises

With his own sound and vision,
Ravi Coltrane lives up to no one else's expectations.

By Larry Blumenfeld

"Blending Times" is a fascinating three-minute track in the middle of saxophonist Ravi Coltrane's latest CD, *In Flux*. It opens with Luisito Quintero's hand percussion, then broadens to include piano, bass, drums, and Coltrane overdubbed on tenor and soprano saxophone. Somewhere in the middle of all this, there's a moment when Coltrane, blowing tenor, clearly quotes "Resolution," from *A Love Supreme*, among the most celebrated recordings by his late father, John Coltrane. It's a fleeting yet unmistakable thing that ends up sounding unobtrusive, even appropriate.

I remember being struck earlier this year while listening to *Translinear Light*, the first recording in 24 years by Ravi's mother, Alice Coltrane. A minute into the title track, Ravi plays a soprano sax figure that strongly suggests John Coltrane's classic take on "My Favorite Things." He repeats the figure, emphasizing it. And he makes it fit.


Ravi never ran from his father's legacy but came to it gradually and has, by now, internalized it on his way to deeper growth. These days he's his own man, with a wife, a young son, and an active career as a player, bandleader, and producer.

In interviews, the subject of John Coltrane comes up far too frequently for Ravi's comfort, perhaps. But it can't be ignored — especially as the 40-year-old saxophonist sits on the living-room couch of his Brooklyn brownstone, underneath a framed Francis Wolff photograph of his dad. The resemblance is unmistakable.

As a boy growing up in the Woodland Hills suburb of Los Angeles, Ravi says he was "just another kid." He was nearly 2 when his father died of liver cancer, in 1967, and the family moved from Long Island to the San Fernando Valley, where he lived with his mother and three siblings. "My mother wanted us to grow up on the West Coast, away from a lot of the energy around that music," he says, referring to a then-nascent free-jazz scene. "For a long time I just rode my bike, watched television, listened to the same music as my friends. I had only a very small awareness of my father and my mother's music. I don't know that there was really a defining moment where I said, "Oh my God, my father is *this* guy, who everyone talks about."

Alice — whose work with and apart from John Coltrane made her a force in late-'60s and early-'70s free jazz — never stopped playing, but she did alter her focus. John had become entranced by Indian music during the early 1960s. After visiting India for the first time, in 1970, Alice got deeply involved with Indian culture. In 1975, she founded an ashram, the Vedantic Center, on a 50-acre plot in Agoura Hills, west of Los Angeles. She played Wurlitzer organ and piano at home and often recorded music for meditation, which the center distributed on cassettes to its devotees. Meanwhile, Ravi began playing the clarinet in junior high school but displayed little more than a modest interest in music.

"I was on my way to a recording studio one evening," Alice recalls from her home. "I was going to record a devotional tape.



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And I remember Ravi asked, ‘Can I go?’ He did, and he played beautifully on a couple of selections. It was nice to know that he had been listening to this music, that he cared about it, and could play along.” Not long after, Alice bought Ravi a soprano saxophone.

Still, it was the death of Ravi’s older brother, John Jr., in a 1982 car accident that eventually led to his immersion in music. “I was wandering,” he says of the year or so after his brother’s death. “For a while, I felt like I was drifting.” Coltrane worked a variety of odd jobs during that time — at supermarkets, a pizza place, a movie theater. Although his mother never really pressured him, he does remember one moment when she asked: “Do you want to be a ticket-ripper all your life?” As Coltrane processed the emotions surrounding his brother’s passing, he began to reprioritize his life. And he began to listen closely to his father’s music.

“I’d heard all that music from a young age,” he says, “and it had a surface-level effect on me. At that point, I started to hear it differently. It started to have a different effect on me. I really started to connect with the music in a way that I hadn’t in my whole life. I stopped listening to most of the music I was listening to at the time — Prince and all kinds of stuff. I got way into jazz. I started finding other musicians to listen to — Sonny Rollins and Charlie Parker. I just got obsessed with it.”

After enrolling at California Institute of the Arts, Coltrane encountered students who knew his father’s music far better

than he did. And, for the first time, he began thinking about and struggling with not just what to do with this legacy, but what it means to be an improvising musician.

Coltrane initially resisted an invitation to join the band of drummer Elvin Jones, who had anchored his father’s classic quartet. But he eventually said yes, largely at the urging of an early supporter, trumpeter Wallace Roney. Coltrane left school and toured with Jones for two years. After moving to New York in 1991, his musical opportunities expanded. He played with pianists Geri Allen, Joanne Brackeen, and Kenny Barron; he formed a two-tenor group with Antoine Roney; and he began performing and recording with saxophonist Steve Coleman, with whom he formed a close bond.

Coltrane was in no hurry to record as a leader, although, he says, his last name was certainly “a door opener.” He had appeared on 29 albums as a sideman before making his debut in 1998 with *Moving Pictures* (RCA/BMG), which Coleman produced. The album showcased Coltrane’s warm, streamlined tone and his penchant for sharp, little motifs and stretches of silence.

“Ravi does not *evoke* John Coltrane,” Coleman says. “No one does that for me, not even those cats who are obviously copying Trane. When I first met Ravi we had pretty different views in terms of how we related to Trane’s music, but as we have gotten to know each other over the years we have come to see things from a similar perspective.”

Coltrane recorded a promising follow-up CD, 2000's *From the Round Box* (RCA Victor). But at about that time, the jazz department at BMG began to dissolve. Coltrane would soon find himself without a label just as his musical identity was taking shape.

Some of the most dramatic public moments in Coltrane's musical career have quite naturally stemmed from his family legacy. There was a 1998 concert at Manhattan's Town Hall at which his mom sat in with his band to perform John Coltrane's "Crescent" and "Resolution." (Indian sitarist Ravi

Shankar, for whom the saxophonist is named, performed on the same bill.) After another performance with his mother at Joe's Pub in New York in 2002, executives at Verve wanted to know if Alice would be interested in recording an album.

As it turned out, Alice had already been recording with her son and drummer Jack DeJohnette. Although those sessions were never released, they anticipated some of what would be heard on Alice's *Translinear Light* (Verve): Alice on piano and organ, playing John Coltrane compositions, an African-American

spiritual, Hindi devotional hymns, blues, and free improvisation — all the music she'd exposed Ravi to at a young age.

Alice's CD is one of several her son has produced. He founded his own RKM label largely to provide a platform for musicians he enjoys working with — saxophonist Michael McGinnis, trumpeter Ralph Alessi, and pianist Luis Perdomo, among others. "And it's a way for me to play on recordings," he says, "without the baggage of my name involved."

Coltrane's freewheeling and lyrical 2002 CD, *Mad 6*, was released on the Japanese label Eighty Eights. The relationship sprang up out of nowhere ("They just sent me a fax," Coltrane says) after his contract with BMG expired. His new CD, *In Flux* finds Coltrane on the Savoy Jazz label. It's first and foremost a document of Coltrane's quartet with pianist Perdomo, bassist Drew Gress, and drummer E.J. Strickland. There's a wide range of moods and tempos on the disc, and an athletic elasticity to the band's rhythmic sense. Coltrane's sound, on both tenor and soprano horns, bears a clarity and confidence that may, once and for all, end comparisons to his father.

Coltrane admits that composing doesn't come easy to him. Currently he's focusing on the group dynamic: what they can do collectively with even the tiniest idea. "Coincide," an uptempo tune, sounds tightly composed. Actually, the track is based on a few fragments of free improvisation that Coltrane had recorded and stored on his computer. He wrote them out for the band the day they entered the studio.

"Ravi doesn't tell you what or how to play a lot of the time," says Perdomo. "But he's always very clear about what he wants to hear. It's hard to describe, really — you sort of have to be there."

"The music I'm making with this band is not so much song-specific or tune-specific," Coltrane says. "It's more like vibe-specific. If you work closely enough with other musicians, you can develop this method that you can apply. That's what I'm thinking about most of all right now."

It once asked Coltrane what, most of all, he wanted his own young son, William, to know about his legendary grandfather. "That he was real," he said. "That he was genuine. That he was a searching and compassionate person."

More through those qualities — and far less through the sound of his horn — Ravi Coltrane extends his father's legacy. ▲

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