

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

REVIEWS OF LIVE PERFORMANCES

John Coltrane-Cecil Taylor-Art Blakey

Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Center,
New York City

Personnel: John Coltrane Quartet with Eric Dolphy—Coltrane, tenor, soprano saxophones; Dolphy, alto saxophone, bass clarinet, flute; McCoy Tyner, piano; Jimmy Garrison, bass; Elvin Jones, drums. Cecil Taylor Jazz Unit—Jimmy Lyons, alto saxophone; Albert Ayler, tenor saxophone; Taylor, piano; Henry Grimes, bass; Sonny Murray, drums. Art Blakey Jazz Messengers—Freddie Hubbard, trumpet; Curtis Fuller, trombone; Wayne Shorter, tenor saxophone; Cedar Walton, piano; Reggie Workman, bass; Art Blakey, drums; Wellington Blakey, vocal.

There was a lot of good music at this New Year's Eve concert, and it set right all night through the long parties that followed. Unfortunately, the hall was only half-filled, which was odd considering the amount of talent offered; tickets, however, were scaled mighty high. (The lowest-priced seat was well above \$3. But Lincoln Center is a drag generally when it comes to its prices.) That's part of the reason why the hall wasn't filled, because I'm sure many of the people who like Coltrane and Taylor just don't have that kind of money. But, too, the concert wasn't too well publicized.

Anyway, half-full or not, almost all the musicians involved played hard, and at least two-thirds of the evening was actually inspirational. Coltrane's regular quartet, augmented by alto saxophonist-bass clarinetist-flutist Eric Dolphy, began the strangely organized program. I say strangely organized because I wonder why Coltrane's group came first and the Messengers last, with the Taylor unit sandwiched in between. As it turned out—pretty much as I had expected—the Blakey group proved a distinct anticlimax after the vision-producing music that preceded it.

Coltrane and company, even though they went through what by now must be their standard concert repertoire (which includes the soprano treatment of *My Favorite Things*), still managed to get up on a couple of tunes—especially on their last tune of the evening, *Impressions*. Coltrane started squatting and tooting on this number and got into that hysterically exciting thing he can do with such singular expressiveness. He can still do magical things with his horn, or rather, horns, because half the numbers were done with the soprano (though I, for one, would still rather hear this fantastic tenor player play tenor). Dolphy also played a very wild alto solo—in fact, I think it was probably the most completely satisfying effort of his I've ever heard. He sounded so much better than he has on recent recordings. And Garrison is one of the strongest and most swinging bass players on the scene today.

One beautiful thing about the Coltrane group is that it sounds like its members

have been playing together for a while: they really sound like a group. But I'm always amazed at hearing drummer Elvin Jones play his solos straight through any tune. I mean, no matter what the group is playing, Jones sounds as if he's soloing, but he's got his playing together so well that he almost never interferes with what anyone else is doing; he just provides a constant driving solo voice. Even on a ballad like *Alabama*, which had the rest of the group slow and subdued, Elvin was bombing and rolling on the sidetrack like a beautiful war picture.

The Taylor unit maintained, and even surpassed, the high tension excitement that Coltrane's last solo provided. Stringing most of his compositions end to end, with no appreciable pause between them, Taylor almost beat the massive Steinway into submission. Sometimes, when he was railing swiftly and percussively up and down the keys, he actually beat on the wood of the instrument, and his intent was so completely musical that it seemed like another instrument had been added to the group.

And Taylor, as I have said many times, is a magnificent soloist. He rages and strikes the piano with a very useful malice, his hands sometimes seeming to move almost completely independently of each other. The rapid staccato of his attack transforms the piano into a percussion instrument of the highest order. Many of his chords are struck as much for a rhythmic insistence as for a harmonic one. But the instrument sings and roars and screams. One cannot help but be moved.

Lyons and Ayler played very lovely unison passages on Taylor's *In Fields*, *Octagonal Skirt*, and *Fancy Pants*. Lyons has now gotten pretty much away from his heavy Bird orientation and is beginning, I think, to make his own music on the horn. He has the same sweet stridency that Parker had but is making it over into something for himself.

Ayler, on the other hand, just recently out of Cleveland, is already playing himself completely, and the music he is trying to get together is among the most exciting—even frightening—music I have ever heard. He uses, I am told, a thick plastic reed and blows with a great deal of pressure. The sound is fantastic. It leaps at you, actually assails you, and the tenorist never lets up for a second. The timbre of his horn is so broad and gritty it sometimes sounds like an electronic foghorn. But he swings and swings, and when he gets his consonants together (as A. B. Spellman suggested), then everybody playing tenor had better watch out.

The rest of the Taylor group played hard too. Bassist Grimes is known, even among the hippies, as one of the best young bassists around, if only for his strong, even beat. But he is stretching out much further than mere time-keeping. Drummer Murray, too, has all but deserted the metronome business in favor of an intensely personal expression. He has even started using metal knitting needles in an effort to get a more singular sound. No one should have missed this group.

The last group on the bill, as I said, was a letdown compared with what had already been heard. Blakey's soul formula,

if one has heard it a few times, is not very interesting, even though he's got two young musicians playing with him, Shorter and Hubbard, who should have been important. As it is now, however, both men play as if they have forgotten what honest emotion is like. Shorter's tunes, which are really very good and full of all kinds of exciting musical possibilities, were transformed into banal Messenger specials. And each of the soloists was as formal as any marching band in his attempts at expression.

Blakey, however, is still Blakey, and even if he's not trying to do anything really startling, he can still beat the hell out of those drums.

His cousin, Wellington Blakey, stood in with the band as a vocalist on two numbers. One of them was *Old Black Magic*. Someone asked me if the tune was symbolic. I couldn't say. —LeRoi Jones

Thelonious Monk

Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Center
New York City

Personnel: Thad Jones, cornet; Nick Travis, trumpet; Eddie Bert, trombone; Steve Lacy, soprano saxophone; Phil Woods, alto saxophone, clarinet; Charlie Rouse, tenor saxophone; Gene Allen, baritone saxophone, bass clarinet, clarinet; Monk, piano; Butch Warren, bass; Frankie Dunlop, drums.

If there had been a Philharmonic Hall at 64th and Broadway 30 years ago, Monk would have grown up in its shadow. Monk, by now, casts a pretty substantial shadow himself. By remaining in residence on W. 63rd St. these many years, this mohammed was ready when the mountain came to him. It was only a two-block walk for him to visit the mountain. With him, he brought nine other musicians, including the members of his regular quartet.

This was the first appearance of Monk's orchestra since early in 1959. There were only three returnees from that Town Hall concert: Woods, Rouse, and Bert. A fourth, unseen, yet well represented, was arranger Hall Overton.

Four years ago, the sound emphasis was on a brassy bottom with French horn and tuba in the ensemble. This time clarinets and soprano saxophone were utilized along with muted brass for a different texture and quality. Again, Overton translated Monk for the band context. Many of the arranged passages were replete with figures that Monk uses pianistically when accompanying soloists.

The orchestra played the first and third segments of the concert, while the middle section was given over to a Monk solo and two quartet selections. In the first set, the ensemble's sound did not come over too well. Dunlop, although he was not playing louder than normal, seemed to be carrying the lead. Jones' solos were barely audible. It would be easy to blame those infamous Philharmonic Hall acoustics (and surely they are still far from blameless), but it seemed more like poor microphone placement was the culprit. Columbia was recording the proceedings, and this may have had something to do with it. In any event, the quartet's sound was all right, and the second orchestra set was in much