***Evenings at the Village Gate: John Coltrane Quintet, 1961* – Liner notes**

Anyone who has heard the Coltrane group in person in such a situation knows the almost hypnotic effect the group can have on the audience and the audience's almost surging involvement in the music. But sometimes, it is said, the striving for excitement per se within the group leads to nonmusical effects.

—Don DeMichael, *Downbeat*

There is no scripture in which contradiction does not exist. It is the contradiction which makes the music of the message.

—Hazrat Inayat Khan

Midsummer 1961: the height of the Camelot Era, John F. Kennedy's first year in office—America's youngest president ever. After a brief recession, the post-war economy is thriving. Despite the Berlin Wall being erected and Cuba embracing communism, much seems aglow with hope and a halcyon ambience. The Peace Corps is launched. The Freedom Riders begin to journey to the South to join the Civil Rights struggle. In the air and at the top of the charts are fresh new songs: Henry Mancini's "Moon River"; the Shirelles singing "Will You Love Me Tomorrow."

That summer, John Coltrane was a year into being his own man, free and clear of a career-launching stint in the Miles Davis Quintet. He was 34 years old and leading a quintet of his own, the five-man lineup serving as his preferred configuration for most of that year. He had tried out a number of sidemen and band ideas through the second half of '60, finally settling on a lineup that included McCoy Tyner on piano, Reggie Workman on bass and Elvin Jones on drums. By late spring, multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy, who often rehearsed with Coltrane and shared a charged, experimental edge in his playing, became a regular member of the band as well, switching between flute, alto saxophone and bass clarinet.

Things were gaining momentum and moving fast: in March of '61, Coltrane hit the jackpot with "My Favorite Things" on Atlantic Records, a popular single that, for a moment, broke out of the jazz world to a mainstream audience, boosted both by being a familiar melody from a recent musical and by standing out with the distinctive, nasal tone of the soprano saxophone. The shortened 45rpm version became a radio staple even as Coltrane was switching labels, entering the studio to record *Africa/Brass*, his debut for Impulse Records. Within a few months, a glut of inspired Coltrane albums filled the record stores, many drawn from stockpiled session tapes, released simultaneously by various labels looking to capitalize on his mushrooming popularity. Imagine the effect today of a musician releasing the equivalent of *Coltrane Jazz*, *My Favorite Things*, *Ole Coltrane*, *Africa/Brass*, and—from his Prestige days—*Lush Life*, all in the same year!

Something else to consider: to those in '61 not living in or near New York City or other cities that Coltrane toured through, the experience of his ever-evolving sound was limited to studio recordings and published reviews that swung widely between ecstatic support to extreme displeasure. The sheer intensity and innovative charge of his onstage performances—along with the rapid rate of his musical development—was an unknown quantity. Confusion ensued, and eventually, controversy. Too many were unfamiliar with the path. Too many were unable to connect the dots.

*Evenings at the Village Gate* abounds with historical value, another dot to help tell the story of Coltrane's singular path. They are performances from August or September of 1961, when John Coltrane performed for an entire month with his quintet (with other musicians sitting in at times) at the Village Gate, a relatively new venue on New York City's vibrant music scene. The tunes reflect Coltrane's setlists of that year including those that stuck with him for a long time—"My Favorite Things," "Impressions"—and those that didn't, like "Greensleeves" and "Africa," the last which has never been released as a live performance. A true *rara avis* is "When Lights Are Low," a Benny Carter composition that serves as a feature for Dolphy on bass clarinet.

Speaking of Dolphy: *Evenings at the Village Gate* tributes a poignant, brief relationship. Coltrane first met Dolphy in Los Angeles and when Dolphy moved to New York in 1959, they renewed their friendship. They recognized many of the same analytic and driving qualities in each other. Both came of age at the height of bebop, both determined students of harmony and emotive expression, both reliant on vocal-like effects and generous emotional range in their playing. The combination of their signature sounds—Dolphy's distinctively bright, sharply stated voice set against Coltrane's darker, slurred phrasing—flavored most of 1961, including their historic run at the Village Gate.

Not long after these recordings were made, Coltrane told *Downbeat* magazine, "Eric and I have been talking music for quite a few years, since about 1954," adding:

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.

*Evenings at the Village Gate* captures that spirit of creative development. It is also a visceral reminder of how tenuous our relationship with some music can be. The recordings on this album—recorded as an afterthought by a house soundman to test the club's new sound system—were lost, then found, and then disappeared again into the sound archives of the New York Public Library... until recently. The backstory of these performances, and of the reel-to-reel tapes preserving them, follows. After this essay are four others, with valuable insight and information from two participants on those evenings at the Gate—bassist **Reggie Workman** and recording engineer **Rich Alderson**—and two saxophonists who have studied and celebrated Coltrane: **Branford Marsalis** and **Lakecia Benjamin**.

**The Village Gate**

In July and August of 1961, Coltrane first appeared at the Village Gate—at that time, a large, basement room in the heart of Greenwich Village that was growing in popularity and dimension. The Gate would eventually house three performance spaces, presenting jazz as well as comedy, folk, rock and R&B performers. It was opened in 1958 by Art D'Lugoff, a native New Yorker whose experience as a journalist and union organizer preceded his best-known role as an impresario. He would attain legendary status in New York for championing new talent of all stripes and styles, for hosting tributes and fundraisers for left-wing causes, for producing edgy, groundbreaking theater (like the all-nude musical *Let My People Come* in 1974), and for cross-genre bookings such as his long-running "Salsa Meets Jazz" series from the '70s to '90s.

The Gate was enjoying a breakthrough year in '61, boasting an innovative lighting and sound system and landing major talent like Nina Simone, Horace Silver, Les McCann and Stan Getz—all of whom were recorded there that year for commercial release. A wave of albums followed, the words "Live at the Village Gate" on LP covers adding to the venue's status.

D'Lugoff had a penchant for presenting evenings that challenged audience expectations: eclectic, multi-genre bills with an initial focus on folk and jazz. "We were in competition with other clubs like the [Village] Vanguard," D'Lugoff said. "At the time Birdland, which was in midtown, was sort of ending its run... and there was a place called the [Jazz] Gallery." He added:

But we combined jazz with comedy and with folk and dance... we had the Israeli Hadassah [dance] troupe with the Clancy Brothers. We had the Haitian dance group Bakala... There were a lot of mixtures. I always liked a lot of variety. We'd have two or three groups on a bill, and oh my God, we'd charge two, three dollars to get in in those days... [I]t was a time of experimentation and combining elements. That's what I like to do, is to broaden my audience when I could.

"Once in a while it didn't work so well," D'Lugoff admitted. "When I put Odetta with John Coltrane, I mean the audiences didn't exactly mix, they didn't appreciate it. But you learn from that."

Coltrane would headline the Village Gate a handful of times during his career—in 1962, sharing the bill with bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins; in 1965, playing opposite Carmen McRae; and a couple of special, fund-raising evenings. And back in mid-July of '61, D'Lugoff booked the John Coltrane Quintet for the first time, pairing the group with the 19-year-old Aretha Franklin, whose eponymous debut album, accompanied by the Ray Bryant piano trio, had been released by Columbia Records the previous February. ("Biggest Jazz Show in Town," the ad for that week promised. This seems to be the sole instance when Coltrane and Franklin performed on the same stage in the same evenings.)

Happy with Coltrane's debut, D'Lugoff brought back the quintet a few weeks later for a generous four-week run, August 8 to September 3. Coltrane headlined a jazz-centric triple-bill, along with quintets led by Horace Silver and Art Blakey. D'Lugoff was willing to invest in creating a mini-festival with the hopes of overcoming late summer doldrums when attendance tends to dip; "First Time Together In One Club—3 of Jazzdom's Greatest Groups," read the club's advertisement in *The Village Voice* weekly.

Through the residency, the Coltrane quintet grew and shrunk. On some nights, a second bassist—Art Davis was added. In the last week of August, Dolphy was not present, as he had ventured to Europe to perform under his own name. Luckily, the performances on *Evenings at the Village Gate* come from two evenings before Dolphy's departure, including one when Davis was present. As fortunate is the fact that Herb Snitzer, a leading photojournalist of the day, was present at several of the dates, preserving the experience with a number of iconic images, including the Gate's awning and signage and a side-angle shot of the quintet in mid-performance, with the second bassist sitting in.

Years later, Snitzer looked back on the experience, recalling the attendance left him unimpressed. "That evening at the Gate, in addition to Coltrane and Eric Dolphy, the Horace Silver Quintet and Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers were also appearing. Throughout, the club was half-empty... so how much was John making? Five bucks? Maybe ten?"

Then again, Snitzer may have been describing a Wednesday late set or a Sunday night. Or perhaps the Gate's unusually large room made "half-empty" seem mostly that. The August dates nonetheless inspired mostly enthusiastic reports from reviewers. *Metronome* stepped up with outright praise. In a review that complimented the Gate for its ambitious triple-bill and name-checked Chip Monck for the lighting, A.B. Spellman described the evening as "the scene of one of the strongest bookings in modern jazz. Coltrane added Eric Dolphy to his two-bass quintet to re-enforce the avant-garde. One rendition of "My Favorite Things" was clocked at 35:15—the length of an average LP... [T]here were few ballads and less conversation, but nobody seemed to get tired."

In the same magazine a month later, Amiri Baraka shared his take, noting the club's cavernous feel.

Coltrane recently had a rather extended engagement at the Village Gate (alias, The Cave of the Winds)... His performances there outstripped anything heard on his records... On some of the soprano solos Coltrane begins one of his long lines and without decreasing the power or drive of the solo the line suddenly seems to spread itself into two or three separate lines... The rest of the group, especially Elvin Jones and McCoy Tyner, can scare you to death.

**The Music**

The shadow of both "My Favorite Things" and *Africa/Brass* can, unsurprisingly, be felt on *Evenings at the Village Gate*. Coltrane had moved on from the standards and blues of his "sheets of sound" period of '57 to '59, as well as the "Coltrane Changes" cycle of the previous two years. Though he retained elements of both in his playing, the technically precise runs of the recent past were tempered by freely lyrical solos in extended modal structures. His original tunes began to favor a trance-like aspect, employing scales from foreign music sources emphasizing an increasingly spiritual feel in his music. In an interview with jazz journalist Ralph Gleason that year, Coltrane spoke of his research into melodies, scales and rhythmic ideas had led him to discover a fundamental, human connection.

Most recently I've been listening to folk tunes and been trying to find some meaning in that. I feel that basically the music should be dedicated to the goodness in people, the good things in life... folk tunes usually spring from these simple things... [M]aybe I can work on this, listen to them and learn to combine what's done around the world with what I feel here.

"Coltrane was very interested in the international quality of scales," Coltrane biographer Lewis Porter states, but adds that "he was also interested in the power of folk music—he thought that by using folk music, he could get closer to the elemental source of music."

Coltrane used LPs to search globally and applied what he found to his music. He told Gleason: "I have an African record at home—they're singing these rhythms, some of that native rhythm, so I took part of it and gave it to the bass and Elvin plays the part. McCoy managed to find some kind of chords... I had to make the melody as I went along."

"Africa" was the cornerstone of *Africa/Brass*, the big band date that matched the core of his quartet (himself, Tyner, Jones) with a host of New York's top brass players and a few of his regular rehearsal partners, like multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy. The sessions relied heavily on Tyner's arrangements and orchestration input from Dolphy. The compositions—originals by Coltrane ("Africa" and "Blues Minor") and trumpeter Cal Massey ("The Damned Don't Cry") and adapted traditional numbers (Greensleeves", "Song of the Underground Railroad")—reflected the bandleader's increasing attraction to long-form work. "I like extended jazz works and written compositions," he commented. "I'm studying and learning about longer constructions."

Using aspects of "My Favorite Things"—the vamp-oriented middle-section, the then-unusual 3/4 time signature—as his model, Coltrane stretched the formula to allow more room for solos. "We play 'Greensleeves'... sort of like 'Favorite Things,'" he said. "It doesn't have as much contrast because we're not going from a major vamp to a minor, but it does have a good mood if it's in the right tempo."

Notably, *Evenings at the Village Gate* features "Africa" with dual bassists, an idea he was exploring at the time, which came from his informal get-togethers formalized on *Africa/Brass*, and inspired by the exotic music he listened to at home. "I've been listening more and more to Indian music—I've been trying to use some of their methods in some of the things we're doing," Coltrane told a Dutch reporter that year. "I wanted the band to have a drone [sound, so] we used two basses," he explained in the liner notes to *Africa/Brass*. "Reggie [Workman] and Art [Davis] have worked together, and they know how to give and take."

"Coltrane wanted me to play sort of in a solo capacity—that would drive him. Then another bassist would play the regular bass parts, having a drone sound, like in Indian music," confirmed Art Davis, who was no relation to Coltrane's first steady bassist Steve Davis, who departed the group the preceding February and returned to Philadelphia. Art Davis was destined to take over the bass in Coltrane's band had he not been gainfully employed by the NBC-TV orchestra. Davis added: "I did a few two-bass things with Coltrane when Steve [Davis] was playing bass, but those were never recorded."

**The Controversy**

True to the spirit of 1961, there's a palpable mix of optimism and experimentalism in this music. And true to a peculiar pattern in Coltrane's timeline, every three to four years of progress culminated with a starkly gear-shifting, and ear-challenging, period. Two examples: the "sheets of sound" sorties of 1957 and '58, and the expanded lineups and avant-garde ventures of '65. By this schedule, the creative upending of '61 made sense.

Coltrane said as much in a *Newsweek* article in July '61. "There are still quite a few avenues open for jazz and they're all going to be explored. I know that I'm going to try everything." But there would be a price to pay. Before the year was out, the sounds he was working on with his oft expanded quintet tested certain staid and stalwart voices in the jazz scene. A wave of harshly critical reviews in *Downbeat* magazine and other publications attacked the music as being counter to the values and standards, labeling it "anti-jazz", "nihilistic" and "nonsense."

In spring of the following year, *Downbeat* published a double interview titled, "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics." Coltrane matter-of-factly answered such charges as the extended length of his solos—"I'll try to build things to the point where this inspiration is happening again, where things are spontaneous and not contrived"—as well as Dolphy's input. "He's had a broadening effect on us... [W]e're playing things that are freer than before."

Coltrane asked for patience and promised satisfactory results, adding:

Quite possibly a lot of things about the band need to be done. But everything has to be done in its own time. There are some things that you just grow into... when they come, they'll be things that will be built out of just what the group is. They will be unique to the group, and *of* the group.

That Coltrane was pivoting from one period of his musical journey to another in the summer of '61 is without question. He was performing stress-tests on structural and harmonic limits, with a lineup that could hold things together even as they pulled up anchor. What is most remarkable about the performances on *Evenings at the Village Gate* is that we now have evidence from the *start* of this major shift—on one side of the fulcrum—whereas, from the other side, we have long had the recordings of the same group at the Village Vanguard two months later, and from the European tour that followed through to December.

In the closing week of 1961, Coltrane recruited bassist Jimmy Garrison—fresh from his stint with Ornette Coleman—to replace Workman. Two short months later, Dolphy departed the lineup, and the fabled Classic Quartet fell into place, ready to accompany Coltrane as he created music destined to redefine the sound and spirit of modern jazz. Promise made, promise fulfilled.

—Ashley Kahn, 2023