**Branford Marsalis**

***Evenings at the Village* Gate - Transcribed Interview**

When John Coltrane died, a doctor named Cuthbert Simpkins temporarily packed up his practice and drove to New York City and walked around asking musicians and everyone in the community about Coltrane, then wrote a book about him. The tapes of those interviews ended up at Duke University’s library. I looked them up and heard one with Ornette Coleman, who told Simpkins that when he and Coltrane got together, Coltrane told him that if he was going to develop further, he had to stop playing those Tin Pan Alley songs because, the way his brain worked, every time he played them he was going to play a specific way. I think that’s the way anybody’s brain works. If I were to go onstage with a band and play “You Don’t Know What Love Is,” my solo would sound like Sonny Rollins. If I played “In A Mellow Tone,” I would sound like Ben Webster. And if I were to play “The Night Has a Thousand Eyes,” I would sound like Coltrane.

I think Ornette had a lot to do with how Coltrane was going musically in ’61. I think it started with that album *The Avant-Garde* that he recorded with members of Ornette’s band—they’re playing all that free style stuff, a very nonlinear way of playing yet Coltrane was still as linear as it gets. It’s not that these recordings remind me of Ornette’s music. It’s that I can hear how Coltrane’s forays into that sound brought him to this place. Ornette’s influence was just part of it.

There’s that singular mindset that if you want to play like Trane, you buy every Coltrane record and a transcription book and beat it to death. When I was in Blakey’s band I really started getting into Coltrane. Art heard me doing that and said, “You’re never going to learn how to do it that way.” I said, “Oh, so if I want to play like Coltrane I should listen to somebody else?” To which he responded, “What I’m saying is that when Coltrane was your age, what the fuck do you think he was listening to—tapes of himself in the future?” It was what I needed to hear at the time. I talked to Benny Golson and he said, “Young man, have you listened much to Johnny Hodges? I think you should do that. Then Coltrane will make a lot more sense.”

Coltrane was like the Borg in *Star Trek*, the civilization that searches and finds what’s best in other species and brings it into their collective consciousness. He was the sum total of all his experiences—his forays into playing R&B, and being in Earl Bostic’s band and with Johnny Hodges. Being in Miles’s band and then with Monk, absorbing more and more information. Coming out of the Pentecostal Church. Coltrane might play some abstract things but the reason that it feels good is because of all those other things that he did.

Coltrane in 1961? I just looked up the *Billboard* charts from that year. Here’s who was on the Hot 100 Singles from that year: Bobby Lewis, Patsy Cline, The Highwaymen, Roy Orbison, Del Shannon, The Jive Five, Chubby Checker, The String-a-Longs, Dee Clark, Joe Dowell, and Lawrence Welk. That’s something that was really special about that time—people from the 1930s and ‘40s could still get work. Also: Connie Francis, Ray Charles, Ernie K-Doe from New Orleans, The Dovells, Ricky Nelson, The Miracles. I don’t see Trane in that list, I don’t see Miles there. I don’t see any of our guys there. There are no sonic references to Coltrane’s sound in the music that was considered popular at the time. But this is the thing Coltrane wanted to do—play this music and play it in clubs and rooms like the Village Gate. Take people who play baroque music, they’re not naïve about what that means. It means they’re going to be playing in churches and small venues for the rest of their lives. You love the music so this is what you’ll do. I admire that. Same with Coltrane. You can hear it on these recordings. This is his path—he’s going to do what he has to do, and will not be affected by comments or criticisms from other people, even if it means there’s only ten people there.

I’ve done master classes at the college level, and I’ll talk about musicians who are either aspirational or transactional. I know there’s clearly more levels and complexities to it, but I’ll go there when the questions are, “How am I going to get a gig? How am I going to make money?” and not, “How am I going to get better?” I tell them they should be learning how to do both.

Coltrane was fearless and had this amazing ability to bring things out of his group on the bandstand. They were all great musicians doing what great musicians do: changing colors to match the person during their solos. To my ear, Coltrane and his group are still trying to sort it out: "When do the horn parts come in, when do they not come in?” It’s evolving. It’s one of those—“Hmmm. Maybe. This might work…wait, nope, it doesn’t work.” I’m not opposed to that. That’s generally what my band and I do all the time, developing our arrangements on the bandstand.

This music is right at the beginning of a major change for Coltrane. He was starting to stretch in a new direction. In terms of the intensity that’s traditionally associated with the classic Coltrane Quartet, this is the precursor. He had just come out of the success of *Giant Steps*, figuring out a whole new, modern approach with the tunes on that album: “Countdown”, “26-2.” Most musicians would have rested right there, for the rest of their careers. But Coltrane walked away from it after about a year and a half—“Well, that’s enough of that”—and went right back into the crucible.

How many musicians today have the courage or trust themselves to do something like that, to go against the grain of their own thinking? Most would be too afraid of the unknown, or of getting bad reviews. That was essentially how the John Coltrane Quartet developed into one of the greatest small groups in the history of jazz.