

Music review

McCoy Tyner with Stanley Clarke and Al Foster —piano trio in the spirit of Coltrane

By Philip Sprake
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John Coltrane, the masterful jazz saxophonist, gathered around him some wonderfully talented musicians between 1960 and 1965, his most creative period. Elvin Jones on drums, Jimmy Garrison on bass and pianist McCoy Tyner made up what was arguably his greatest quartet, producing such classic albums as *Impressions*, *Crescent* and *A Love Supreme*.

The work of McCoy Tyner, who built a stellar reputation post-Coltrane, is worthy of some examination in the light of his excellent latest album. The CD, released on Telarc Jazz (83488) with the rather pedestrian title *McCoy Tyner with Stanley Clarke and Al Foster*, is an excellent interpretation of the classic piano trio form—a form that Tyner has not explored in recent times, his previous release being Afro/Cuban influenced jazz recorded with the *Latin All Stars*—and a prime example of what can happen when three jazz musicians of this calibre come together.

(Alfred) McCoy Tyner was born on December 13, 1938 in Philadelphia. Growing up in Philadelphia, for anyone interested in music, particularly jazz, would have been quite an experience. The city was home to some of the most outstanding jazz musicians of the time: Coltrane himself, pianists Red Garland and Bud Powell, drummer Philly Joe Jones, bassist Percy Heath and many others. McCoy Tyner studied piano from the age of 13 at the Granoff School of Music and after graduating from high school was hired by saxophonist Benny Golson. In 1959 the young jazz pianist moved to New York and joined The Jazztet, co-led by Golson and trumpeter Art Farmer. Six months later Tyner joined Coltrane's band and over the next five years won much deserved recognition.

After leaving the Coltrane quartet in 1965 Tyner was

signed by Blue Note records, where he produced some of his most sophisticated and accomplished compositions, in particular *The Real McCoy* album. He recorded with various artists during this time, including saxophonists Gary Bartz, Joe Henderson and Wayne Shorter, trumpeter Lee Morgan, vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson and Coltrane's second wife Alice until 1970. In 1972 he signed a contract with Milestone Records where he developed as a bandleader and solo acoustic pianist, winning two Grammy Award nominations. Throughout the 1970s he formed several groups made up of Philadelphia-based artists and took part in *The Milestone Jazz Star*, a concept album featuring Sonny Rollins, Ron Carter and Al Foster.

Tyner cites pianists Art Tatum, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk as his main influences but it was during his membership of the Coltrane quartet that he developed his own individual style, one of the most original and instantly recognisable in jazz.

Before his untimely death in 1967, Coltrane commented that Tyner had been able to create “a very personal *sound* from his instrument.... [B]ecause of the clusters he uses and the way he voices them that sound is brighter than what would normally be expected from most of the chord patterns he plays. In addition, McCoy has an exceptionally well-developed sense of form, both as a soloist and accompanist. Invariably in our group he will take a tune and build his own structure for it.”

Bassist Stanley Clarke and drummer Al Foster—the other two musicians on McCoy Tyner's latest CD—are outstanding.

Foster, a highly respected and versatile drummer began playing drums at the age of 10 and by 16 was

playing professionally around New York jazz clubs. He played with Miles Davis from 1972 to 1975 and from 1980 to 1985.

Clarke, who is acclaimed for making the electric bass a lead and solo instrument, is also from Philadelphia. Born in 1951 he started playing violin and progressed through cello, double bass and then the electric bass guitar. Clarke developed an early interest in jazz and played with pianist Horace Silver and acoustic bass with saxophonists Joe Henderson and Pharaoh Sanders. He later joined pianist Chick Corea's fusion group *Return to Forever*. While Clarke's speed and virtuosity on electric bass is legendary, on the McCoy Tyner album he mainly plays the acoustic instrument.

All 10 tracks on the album—seven originals (six penned by Tyner and one by Clarke) and three standards—are worthy of mentioning individually, but I will limit my comments to just a few standouts.

The opening track, entitled “Trane-like”, with Tyner's percussive style and beautifully flowing solos, brings to mind the spirit of the Coltrane quartet. The close rapport of Clarke, Foster and Tyner is clearly evident, each able to bring the best out of the others.

The Stanley Clarke original “In the Tradition Of” has Clarke playing some marvelously mellow and understated electric bass lines with Tyner's melodic piano flowing effortlessly across the top of the rhythm section.

“Carriba”, a rollicking Afro-Cuban style track written by Tyner, shows the pianist in dynamic form with his side men creating a groove that is up-tempo and almost danceable—not something that you can say about all contemporary jazz!

Another Tyner original, and the CD carries two versions, is “I Want to Tell You 'Bout That”. The first has Clarke leading with thunderous electric bass runs, coupled with Tyner's percussive lines flowing through and around the bass. Solid drumming from Foster completes the picture. In the second version, Tyner lays down a wonderfully rich tone, accompanied this time by Clarke on acoustic bass, creating a completely different mood than the first.

Describing his musical approach Tyner once said: “To me living and music are all the same thing. And I keep finding out more about music as I learn more about myself, my environment, about all kinds of different things in life. I play what I live. Therefore,

just as I can't predict what kinds of experiences I'm going to have, I can't predict the directions in which my music will go. I just want to write and play my instrument as I feel.”

At the age of 62, McCoy Tyner can certainly be regarded as a “Jazz Giant” and his contribution to modern jazz since the heady days of the John Coltrane Quartet should, at the very least, be regarded as significant. His latest album demonstrates that he still has much more to offer.

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