

Momentous 1957 Monk–Coltrane Carnegie Concert ‘Discovered,’ Released

One of T.S. Monk’s earliest memories was seeing musicians gathering around his father, Thelonious. Later on, as he became an accomplished drummer himself, the monumental impact of these visits became apparent. But nothing prepared him for the discovery of a recently unearthed recording of Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane performing together at Carnegie Hall in 1957.

Monk becomes so animated when he talks about the tape, it’s clear that listening to it was a life-altering experience. No doubt, when Thelonious Monk Quartet With John Coltrane *At Carnegie Hall* (Blue Note) is released in September, many widespread perceptions will change just as much.

“This recording is connecting the historical dots,” Monk said. “Scholars, historians and listeners from around the world are going to be analyzing this recording for years and years and years to come. It’s rare that you get two guys who move the music so profoundly together with each at the top of their game.”

A key reason why these 51 minutes of music are so illuminating is that the recording is an exceptionally rare snapshot of these icons during their own period of transformation. In the spring of 1957, Coltrane’s personal demons triggered his dismissal from Miles Davis’ band. After a few introspective months, the saxophonist sought the daring new ideas that Monk was presenting through workshops at his home. That summer, Coltrane began appearing with the pianist’s group at New York’s Five Spot.

For Monk, this year was also crucial. Although he had inspired bop musicians since the 1940s, it was not until 10 years later when he started to reach a wider audience. But in the mid 1950s, Monk was not allowed to perform in New York because of cabaret-card restrictions. The Five Spot gigs marked his officially permitted return to the stage.

After a few months of working, rehearsing and exchanging ideas, Monk’s group with Coltrane, bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik and

drummer Shadow Wilson appeared at Carnegie Hall on Nov. 29 for two sets. The quartet’s leader was able to perform on the concert grand piano that he had always deserved. And, as the tape would prove, the sound quality is at a higher professional level than on the few other Monk–Coltrane recordings that have been released. That night’s bill (a benefit for Harlem’s Morningside Community Center) also featured a startling array of icons: Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, Chet Baker with Zoot Sims and, as a “special attraction,” Ray Charles.

Considering this stellar lineup, T.S. Monk

was taken aback to hear his father’s group begin with the seemingly delicate “Monk’s Mood.”

“When have I ever had the courage to start a major concert in a major hall with a ballad?” Monk said. “That’s so scary. What it did was, instead of compete with Ray Charles’ big band and Dizzy’s, allow them to set their own tone. That he had the confidence to do that with a 31-year-old John Coltrane is absolutely stunning.”

As if the sound of these jazz legends was not stunning enough, the story of this tape’s discovery is almost equally fascinating. The Cold War, federal agencies, determined researchers and conscientious archivists all play crucial parts.

Jazz was significant in promoting this country’s international agenda, primarily during the 1950s and 1960s. Penny Von Eschen’s recent book, *Satchmo Blows Up The World*, details the music’s role in State Department tours and radio broadcasts abroad. The Voice of America (VOA) regularly transmitted jazz programs worldwide as a means of expressing the ideals of freedom and community. Many jazz fans today—especially in Eastern Europe—recall how they first heard the music through VOA on-air activist Willis Conover, who began hosting “Music USA” in 1955.

The VOA also taped thousands of hours of jazz performances. Most of the sets at the 1957 Carnegie Hall concert were also recorded for the agency (except for Holiday), and Conover was the night’s emcee. Michael Gray, VOA librarian, says that all the participants gave their permission for the broadcasts and recordings without compensation because the agency had a higher purpose than commercialism.

“It was a donation to your country and people trusted us,” Gray said. “The musicians were patriots, too.”

With so many reels straining the VOA’s storage facilities, the Library of Congress agreed to acquire the sprawling collection in the mid 1960s. There, the 1957 Carnegie Hall concert recordings became a few reels lost among an acetate sea that included jazz and classical music as well as field recordings and

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About 30 years later, jazz scholar/pianist Lewis Porter was researching his book *John Coltrane: His Life And Music* and saw references to the Carnegie concert in a 1957 issue of *DownBeat* and in newspaper advertisements from that time. So, in the mid 1990s, Porter contacted Larry Applebaum, senior studio engineer and jazz specialist at the Library of Congress. Applebaum searched the archives, but could find no sign of a VOA recording of that event. The concert was probably never broadcast either, since no bootleg tapes are known to exist. Porter checked back with Applebaum periodically, but gave up hope last December.

Meanwhile, Applebaum had been diligently cataloging and digitizing the VOA tapes as part of the library's preservation programs. Earlier this year, he opened a box and just happened upon eight 10-inch tapes that were labeled, "Sp Event Carnegie Hall Jazz."

"Since I have a special interest in jazz, I examined these tapes more closely and found that one tape box had handwritten notes that said, 'T. Monk' with some song titles," Applebaum said. "When we listened to the tapes, I recognized John Coltrane's saxophone with Monk's quartet. The announcement on the tapes [from Conover] confirmed the identity of the players."

Applebaum also marveled at the tape's sonic quality. "A good—so far, unknown—engineer was working that night to record these shows," Applebaum said. "Rather than simply using an overhead mic at Carnegie Hall, it sounds like someone set up separate mics on each instrument, and the recording levels are good without fluctuation or distortion."

Porter says he "absolutely flipped out" when Applebaum let him hear the Monk and Coltrane recording and reported its existence to producer Michael Cuscuna.

"It was an unusual experience," Cuscuna said. "After scrounging around the vaults for 30 years, you often find that things that you're looking for that are unissued can look great on paper, but not when you first hear it. This was going to be an important document one way or the other, but when we heard it, it was so much greater than any of us had a right to expect."

Such a discovery could not be kept secret, and Ben Ratliff reported on it in the April 25 edition of *The New York Times*. Blue Note President Bruce Lundvall became aware of the tape through reading Ratliff's article. Yet despite the historic magnitude of the music and quality of the recording, releasing it on CD was not a simple process.

Cuscuna says he doubted that they could even take government property outside of its Washington, D.C., facility. To his surprise, Applebaum was allowed to bring the tape out of the library to a New York studio so they

could make a digital copy (as well as an audiophile vinyl version).

Another key issue was the question of ownership rights. The VOA will only allow music from its archives to be sold if the participating musicians (or their estates) agree.

"There is a lot of legal work in terms of clearances," Cuscuna said. "That might stifle a lot of this stuff from coming to light—that there's not enough money for lawyers, clearances, estates and all the time and legwork that has to go into these things."

But for this disc, T.S. Monk and Ravi Coltrane were happy to be involved in its release. Monk also took part in the final producing and mastering. "Ravi and Alice [Coltrane] have trusted me to see to it that this thing is done right," Monk said. "All of this is a profound privilege. Everything I've done in my life led me to this point. It's so much bigger than me or Ravi."

From the first notes of the album, it's easy to hear why there's such excitement. On "Monk's Mood," the pianist steps away from his famous tricky intervals and hesitations to play with the superb arpeggios usually associated with Art Tatum. More revelations follow throughout the eight other tracks on the disc (including two versions of "Epistrophy," the second of which is incomplete, as the tape ran out). The number of times these musicians spent together becomes especially vivid as Monk gently draws Coltrane in on "Crepuscule With Nellie."

Coltrane demonstrates his bold new harmonic ideas through an extensive, yet clearly organized, solo on "Blue Monk." Here, Coltrane's double-time tempo fits in with a group that's playing deliberately slower than he is. And it sounds like the saxophonist also brings his sense of humor to his response to Monk on "Nutty."

"That's a movement in the music," T.S. Monk said. "John Coltrane, more than any other tenor saxophonist, was the one who could translate Monk on the tenor saxophone. I'm listening to these whole-tone scales, pentatonic runs, and all of these things that my father always did, and Coltrane's interpreting that. And the recording becomes unbelievable."

Along with offering more light on Monk and Coltrane, the disc should also enhance the reputation of the underrated Wilson, who died in 1959. Drummer Kenny Washington has been vociferous in promoting Wilson's legacy.

"Most young drummers say Shadow's just playing time," Washington said. "But there's much more than that. He had a big, wide, cymbal beat. Just with that cymbal beat, he could swing you into bad health."

Lundvall says that the disc will receive all of Blue Note's marketing muscle. "It's a major, major piece of music," he said. "This is not to be treated lightly." —Aaron Cohen