

John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics

JOHN COLTRANE has been the center of critical controversy ever since he unfurled his sheets of sound in his days with Miles Davis. At first disparaged for his sometimes involved, multi-noted solos, Coltrane paid little heed and continued exploring music. In time, his harmonic approach—for the sheets were really rapid chord running, in the main—was accepted, even praised, by most jazz critics.

By the time critics had caught up with Coltrane, the tenor saxophonist had gone on to another way of playing. Coltrane II, if you will, was much concerned with linear theme development that seemed sculptured or torn from great blocks of granite. Little critical carping was heard of this second, architectural, Coltrane.

But Coltrane, an inquisitive-minded, probing musician, seemingly has left architecture for less concrete, more abstract means of expression. This third and present Coltrane has encountered an evergrowing block of criticism, much of it marked by a holy-war fervor. Criticism of Coltrane III is almost always tied in with Coltrane's cohort Eric Dolphy, a member of that group of musicians who play what has been dubbed the "new thing."

Dolphy's playing has been praised and damned since his national jazz-scene arrival about two years ago. Last summer Dolphy joined Coltrane's group for a tour. It was on this tour that Coltrane and Dolphy came under the withering fire of DownBeat associate editor John Tynan, the first critic to take a strong—and public—stand against what Coltrane and Dolphy were playing.

In the Nov. 23, 1961, DownBeat, Tynan wrote, "At Hollywood's Renaissance Club recently, I listened to a horrifying demonstration of what appears to be a growing anti-jazz trend exemplified by these foremost proponents [Coltrane and Dolphy] of what is termed avant-garde music.

"I heard a good rhythm section... go to waste behind the nihilistic exercises of the two horns.... Coltrane and Dolphy seem intent on deliberately destroying [swing].... They seem bent on pursuing an anarchistic course in their music that can but be termed anti-jazz."

The anti-jazz term was picked up by Leonard Feather and used as a basis for critical essays of Coltrane, Dolphy, Ornette Coleman and the "new thing" in general in DownBeat and Show. The reaction from readers to both Tynan's and Feather's remarks was immediate, heated and about evenly divided.

Recently, Coltrane and Dolphy agreed to sit down and discuss their music and the criticism leveled at it.

One of the recurring charges is that their performances are stretched out over too long a time, that Coltrane and Dolphy play on and on, past inspiration and into monotony.

Coltrane answered, "They're long because all the soloists try to explore all the avenues that the tune offers. They try to use all their resources in their solos. Everybody has quite a bit to work on. Like when I'm playing, there are certain things I try to get done and so does Eric and McCoy Tyner [Coltrane's pianist]. By the time we finish, the song is spread out over a pretty long time.

"It's not planned that way; it just happens. The performances get longer and longer. It's sort of growing that way."

But, goes the criticism, there must be editing, just as a writer must edit his work so that it keeps to the point and does not ramble and become boring. Coltrane agreed that editing must be done—but for essentially a different reason from what might be expected.

“There are times,” he said, “when we play places opposite another group, and in order to play a certain number of sets a night, you can’t play an hour-and-a-half at one time. You’ve got to play 45 or 55 minutes and rotate sets with the other band. And for those reasons, for a necessity such as that, I think it’s quite in order that you edit and shorten things.

“But when your set is unlimited, timewise, and everything is really together musically— if there’s continuity—it really doesn’t make any difference how long you play.

“On the other hand, if there’re dead spots, then it’s really not good to play anything too long.”

One of the tunes that Coltrane’s group plays at length is “My Favorite Things,” a song, as played by the group, that can exert an intriguingly hypnotic effect, though sometimes it seems too long. Upon listening closely to him play “Things” on the night before the interview, it seemed that he actually played two solos. He finished one, went back to the theme a bit, and then went into another improvisation.

“That’s the way the song is constructed,” Coltrane said. “It’s divided into parts. We play both parts. There’s a minor and a major part. We improvise in the minor, and we improvise in the major modes.”

Is there a certain length to the two modes?

“It’s entirely up to the artist—his choice,” he answered. “We were playing it at one time with minor, then major, then minor modes, but it was really getting too long—it was about the only tune we had time to play in an average-length set.”

But in playing extended solos, isn’t there ever present the risk of running out of ideas? What happens when you’ve played all your ideas?

“It’s easy to stop then,” Coltrane said, grinning. “If I feel like I’m just playing notes... maybe I don’t feel the rhythm or I’m not in the best shape that I should be in when this happens. When I become aware of it in the middle of a solo, I’ll try to build things to the point where this inspiration is happening again, where things are spontaneous and not contrived. If it reaches that point again, I feel it can continue—it’s alive again. But if it doesn’t happen, I’ll just quit, bow out.”

Dolphy, who had been sitting pixelike as Coltrane spoke, was in complete agreement about stopping when inspiration had flown.

Last fall at the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Coltrane-Dolphy group was featured opening night. In his playing that night Dolphy at times sounded as if he were imitating birds. On the night before the interview some of Dolphy’s flute solos brought Monterey to mind. Did he do this on purpose?

Dolphy smiled and said it was purposeful and that he had always liked birds. Is bird imitation valid in jazz?

“I don’t know if it’s valid in jazz,” he said, “but I enjoy it. It somehow comes in as part of the development of what I’m doing. Sometimes I can’t do it.

“At home [in California] I used to play, and the birds always used to whistle with me. I would stop what I was working on and play with the birds.”

He described how bird calls had been recorded and then slowed down in playback; the bird calls had a timbre similar to that of a flute. Conversely, he said, a symphony flutist recorded these bird

calls, and when the recording was played at a fast speed, it sounded like birds. Having made his point about the connection of bird whistles and flute playing, Dolphy explained his use of quarter tones when playing flute. "That's the way birds do," he said. "Birds have notes in between our notes—you try to imitate something they do and, like, maybe it's between F and F-sharp, and you'll have to go up or come down on the pitch. It's really something! And so, when you get playing, this comes.

You try to do some things on it. Indian music has something of the same quality— different scales and quarter tones. I don't know how you label it, but it's pretty."

The question in many critics' minds, though they don't often verbalize it, is: What are John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy trying to do? Or: What are they doing?

Following the question, a 30-second silence was unbroken except by Dolphy's, "That's a good question."

Dolphy was first to try to voice his aims in music:

"What I'm trying to do I find enjoyable. Inspiring—what it makes me do. It helps me play, this feel. It's like you have no idea what you're going to do next. You have an idea, but there's always that spontaneous thing that happens. This feeling, to me, leads the whole group. When John plays, it might lead into something you had no idea could be done. Or McCoy does something. Or the way Elvin [Jones, drummer with the group] or Jimmy [Garrison, the bassist] play; they solo, they do something. Or when the rhythm section is sitting on something a different way. I feel that is what it does for me."

Coltrane, who had sat in frowned contemplation while Dolphy elaborated, dug into the past for his answer: "Eric and I have been talking music for quite a few years, since about 1954. We've been close for quite a while. We watched music. We always talked about it, discussed what was being done down through the years, because we love music. What we're doing now was started a few years ago.

"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. We began to play some of the things we had only talked about before. Since he's been in the band, he's had a broadening effect on us. There are a lot of things we try now that we never tried before. This helped me, because I've started to write—it's necessary that we have things written so that we can play together. We're playing things that are freer than before.

"I would like for him to feel at home in the group and find a place to develop what he wants to do as an individualist and as a soloist—just as I hope everybody in the band will. And while we are doing this, I would also like the listener to be able to receive some of these good things—some of this beauty."

Coltrane paused, deep in thought. No one said anything. Finally he went on:

"It's more than beauty that I feel in music—that I think musicians feel in music. What we know we feel we'd like to convey to the listener. We hope that this can be shared by all. I think, basically, that's about what it is we're trying to do. We never talked about just what we were trying to do. If

you ask me that question, I might say this today and tomorrow say something entirely different, because there are many things to do in music.

“But, overall, I think the main thing a musician would like to do is to give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things he knows of and senses in the universe. That’s what music is to me—it’s just another way of saying this is a big, beautiful universe we live in, that’s been given to us, and here’s an example of just how magnificent and encompassing it is. That’s what I would like to do. I think that’s one of the greatest things you can do in life, and we all try to do it in some way. The musician’s is through his music.”

This philosophy about music, life and the universe, Coltrane said, is “so important to music, and music is important. Some realize it young and early in their careers. I didn’t realize it as early as I should have, as early as I wish I had. Sometimes you have to take a thing when it comes and be glad.”

When did he first begin to feel this way?

“I guess I was on my way in ’57, when I started to get myself together musically, although at the time I was working academically and technically. It’s just recently that I’ve tried to become even more aware of this other side, the life side of music. I feel I’m just beginning again. Which goes back to the group and what we’re trying to do. I’m fortunate to be in the company I’m in now, because anything I’d like to do, I have a place to try. They respond so well that it’s very easy to try new things.” Dolphy broke in with, “Music is a reflection of everything. And it’s universal. Like, you can hear somebody from across the world, another country. You don’t even know them, but they’re in your backyard, you know?”

“It’s a reflection of the universe,” Coltrane said. “Like having life in miniature. You just take a situation in life or an emotion you know and put it into music. You take a scene you’ve seen, for instance, and put it to music.”

Had he ever succeeded in re-creating a situation or scene?

“I was getting into it,” he said, “but I haven’t made it yet. But I’m beginning to see how to do it. I know a lot of musicians who have done it. It’s just happening to me now. Actually, while a guy is soloing, there

The 1960s are many things that happen. Probably he himself doesn’t know how many moods or themes he’s created. But I think it really ends up with the listener. You know, you hear different people say, ‘Man, I felt this while he was playing,’ or, ‘I thought about this.’ There’s no telling what people are thinking. They take in what they have experienced. It’s a sharing process—playing—for people.”

“You can feel vibrations from the people,” Dolphy added. “The people can give you something, too,” Coltrane said. “If you play in a place where they really like you, like your group, they can make you play like you’ve never felt like playing before.”

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. It was effects such as these that have led to the “anti-jazz” term. Such a term is bound to arouse reaction in musicians like Coltrane and Dolphy.

Without a smile—or rancor—Coltrane said he would like the critics who have used the term in connection with him to tell him exactly what they mean. Then, he said, he could answer them.

One of the charges is that what Coltrane and Dolphy play doesn't swing.

"I don't know what to say about that," Dolphy said.

"Maybe it doesn't swing," Coltrane offered. "I can't say that they're wrong." Dolphy said. "But I'm still playing." Well, don't you feel that it swings? he was asked.

"Of course I do," Dolphy answered.

"In fact, it swings so much I don't know what to do—it moves me so much. I'm with John; I'd like to know how they explain 'anti-jazz.' Maybe they can tell us something."

"There are various types of swing," Coltrane said. "There's straight 4/4, with heavy bass drum accents. Then there's the kind of thing that goes on in Count Basie's band. In fact, every group of individuals assembled has a different feeling—a different swing. It's the same with this band. It's a different feeling than in any other band. It's hard to answer a man who says it doesn't swing."

Later, when the first flush of defense had subsided, Coltrane allowed: "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. Back to speaking about editing—things like that. Dolphy and Trane.

I've felt a need for this, and I've felt a need for ensemble work—throughout the songs, a little cement between this block, a pillar here, some more cement there, etc. But as yet I don't know just how I would like to do it. So rather than make a move just because I know it needs to be done, a move that I've not arrived at through work, from what I naturally feel, I won't do it.

"There may be a lot of things missing from the music that are coming, if we stay together that long. 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."

Coltrane said he felt that what he had said still did not answer his critics adequately, that in order to do so he would have to meet them and discuss what has been said so that he could see just what they mean. Dolphy interjected that the critic should consult the musician when there is something the critic does not fully understand.

"It's kind of alarming to the musician," he said, "When someone has written something bad about what the musician plays but never asks the musician anything about it. At least, the musician feels bad.

But he doesn't feel so bad that he quits playing. The critic influences a lot of people. If something new has happened, something nobody knows what the musician is doing, he should ask the musician about it.

Because somebody may like it; they might want to know something about it. Sometimes it really hurts, because a musician not only loves his work but depends on it for a living. If somebody writes something bad about musicians, people stay away. Not because the guys don't sound good but because somebody said something that has influence over a lot of people. They say, 'I read this, and I don't think he's so hot because so-and-so said so.'"

Dolphy had brought up a point that bothers most jazz critics: readers sometime forget that criticism is what one man thinks. A critic is telling how he feels about, how he reacts to, what he hears in, a performance or a piece of music.

“The best thing a critic can do,” Coltrane said, “is to thoroughly understand what he is writing about and then jump in. That’s all he can do. I have even seen favorable criticism which revealed a lack of profound analysis, causing it to be little more than superficial.

“Understanding is what is needed. That is all you can do. Get all the understanding for what you’re speaking of that you can get. That way you have done your best. It’s the same with a musician who is trying to understand music as well as he can. Undoubtedly, none of us are going to be 100 percent in either criticism or music. No percent near that, but we’ve all got to try.

“Understanding is the whole thing. In talking to a critic try to understand him, and he can try to understand the part of the game you are in. With this understanding, there’s no telling what could be accomplished. Everybody would benefit.”

Though he said he failed to answer his critics, John Coltrane perhaps had succeeded more than he thought. **DB**