



MILES AHEAD, TRANE TO A HIGHER PLANE

Recognizing two centennials—and their links and lessons—during Jazz Appreciation Month

1926 saw the first successful launch of a liquid-fueled rocket and noted development in directional antennas, among other significant advancements. Each proved important in one way or another as time would show. But if we're considering that year's landmark arrivals bound to the subjects of soaring heights and guiding principles, it wouldn't be inaccurate to say that two literal births — those of Miles Davis and John Coltrane — were of far greater import. Together and apart, the trailblazing trumpeter and game-changing saxophonist would go on to alter the course of not just jazz, but music and the art of expression in general.

Davis, born in May of that year, and Coltrane, arriving in September, were two forces converged and diverged, a pair destined for greatness, first in established territories and, later, through realms of their own creation and/or promotion. In the lead-up to their meet up, the former left his East St. Louis upbringing for Juilliard and departed those classrooms for the clubs on 52nd Street (and uptown and elsewhere). He quickly found his way within bebop's elite before becoming a stylistic pioneer with his nonet (as immortalized on *Birth of the Cool*), signing with Prestige Records and conquering some of his demons. The latter, raised in North Carolina, relocating to Philadelphia, serving in the Navy, and cutting his touring teeth in bands led, respectively, by King Kolax, Eddie Vinson, Dizzy Gillespie, and Johnny Hodges, was a relative unknown when Davis, far more experienced by their mid '50s merging, hired him as the tenor saxophonist for a band that would come to be known as the trumpeter's First Great Quintet.

That combo, with those two icons-to-be as the front line, showed great promise and recorded what would become a series of classic albums, closing out Davis's Prestige contract and bridging into his fame-making Columbia era. But the

trumpeter had to let Coltrane go in 1957 because of the newcomer's struggles with substance abuse. That firing was the ultimate blessing in disguise — a major turning point, the impetus for Coltrane to change his ways and dedicate himself fully to the pursuit of a higher power through music.

After his dismissal, Coltrane cleaned himself up, developed an obsessive practice routine (leading to his "Sheets of Sound" phase), took to the studio as a leader and recorded the classic *Blue Train*, hit another growth spurt through work with pianist Thelonious Monk during a legendary run at the Five Spot, and, as a different, evolved man, rejoined

Davis about eight months later.

With Trane back in the fold, in full questing mode, and the quintet turned into a sextet with the addition of altoist Cannonball Adderley, Davis literally marked *Milestones* in 1958.

Then, in 1959 — the same year

that Coltrane turned jazz harmony on its head with his *Giant Steps* — Davis's sextet created *the* modal jazz touchstone, the immortal *Kind of Blue*. Roughly a year later, absolutely ready to take the mantle of leadership out in the wide world, Coltrane left Davis's employ, closing the entwined story of two of jazz's greatest figures.

In the time that followed, each man would go on to continually reinvent himself, broadening belief systems and understanding in the process. Coltrane had only seven short years left, succumbing to liver cancer in 1967, but he made the most of them. He brought Eric Dolphy into front-line focus, established new ways forward with his classic quartet, recorded collaborative projects with Duke Ellington and Johnny Hartman (respectively), breathed new life into the soprano saxophone, delivered and defined *A Love Supreme*, walked along worldly aural pathways with his wife/bandmate Alice Coltrane, and embraced avant-garde aesthetics of different sorts with younger voices in the music.

Davis and Coltrane demonstrated that the search is never over



Davis, on the other hand, had decades left to stretch the bounds of what was known and possible, finding different ways to transform the landscape. He codified the openness and markers of what's subsequently been termed post-bop and free-bop with his Second Great Quintet, operated at the forefront of the fusion movement from multiple angles, and brought electric funk and pop elements to the masses prior to his passing in 1991.

This quick synopsis or snapshot doesn't even scratch the surface on these subjects; there are plenty of books out there worth checking out to dig *considerably* deeper. But it does get to the core of the "before," "during" and "after" for the Miles Davis-John Coltrane connection.

As for the lessons/takeaways here, they are many and varied. First, there's the matter of respect. While Coltrane could've been bitter about having initially been fired, and Davis could've downplayed Coltrane's gifts and work ethic, they were above all of that. In a 1961 interview, Coltrane offered nothing but praise: "It was Miles who made me want to be a much better musician. He gave me some of the most listenable moments I've had in music, and he also gave me an appreciation for simplicity. He influenced me quite a bit in music in every way."

Davis, in his colorful autobiography, called Coltrane an "innovator" and noted how he was a changed, determined man upon his late 1957 return: "He had always been serious about music and always practiced a lot. But now it was almost like he was on some kind of mission. He used to tell me that he had messed up enough, had wasted too much time and not given enough attention to his own personal life, his family, and, most of all, to his playing."

Beyond that mutual regard, Davis and Coltrane taught by example. They demonstrated that the search is never over — there's always a new frontier to explore; surrounding yourself with younger people brings new energy and ideas, creating substance through synergy; just because others don't fully understand a fresh concept or direction doesn't invalidate the new or mean it should be abandoned; vision can only become reality through great effort; and music has its own inherent worth *and* incalculable value for how it connects to something more powerful in the universe.

Regardless of whether or not you teach any jazz practice or history in your classroom(s), these lessons — applicable to all music, education, and life in general — are worth considering. While honoring these two musical giants during Jazz Appreciation Month in their centennial year, don't lose sight of what they shared. ||

