

Phil Treloar / *Feeling to Thought*

Recollections - Two

dedicated with humble respect

to

Rashied Ali

(born Robert Patterson, July 1, 1935,
passed, August 12, 2009)

It would have been late '68 or early '69 that I first heard Rashied Ali. *Expression*, recorded just a couple of months before John Coltrane passed on. A friend introduced me, though, at the time, I was somewhat bewildered. And as is so often the case with things of spiritual depth, they take a while to find home. I guess it was in the early '70s that I began to *listen* to Rashied Ali. I'd been pretty hell-bent on the 'New Thing' for some time by then but there was something about *Coltrane Live at the Village Vanguard, Again!* that had me listening and re-listening, time and again. I loved the photo on the front cover, too. These guys, and this gal, all looked really at ease, still young; and Jimmy, looking almost like a little schoolboy in his shorts, white socks, and with his hand being tightly held by the taller, fairly serious-faced, Alice ... glancin' over at Pharoah. Some kind'a conversation. Photos! This is beautiful! And, to state the obvious, what a beautiful band of truly great musicians. *Again!* could be repeated ad infinitum. I guess that, in a sense, it will be. Because the spirit and inspiration in others that these people have generated knows no bounds.

And Rashied Ali ... There were others, of course. Also great. The thing about *that* period is that, primarily, it was new territory. Actually, *new* territory. Coltrane, Ornette, Cecil, Albert, Archie; this was essentially NYC. Though, for some of them, lots of travellin' and outside input. Then around the same time, Muhal Richard Abrams and that whole, wonderful, Chicago-based new music emerged. Sun Ra, kind-of strangely, intriguingly, idiosyncratically, bridged the two. But to my mind, the thing that stands out in all this *newness* is that there were so many rich takes ... on the 'new'. And while straight down the centerline-groove provided for, and has remained to this day, a popular, well paved road, all the byways created by these amazing musicians not only required courage and enormous creative commitment, but their byways were anything but sealed. For most of them it was rough going ... all the way. Theirs was the kind of dedication that was, in the words of McCoy Tyner, literally, "as serious as your life."

If *A Love Supreme* had, for Coltrane, consolidated while welcoming a wider spiritual perspective, *Sun Ship* had, by mid-1965, reached the outer limits of the 'classic' Quartet's galaxy. Perhaps it was *Ascension* that had made manifest the decisive factor. That was June '65 and by August the *Sun Ship* journey had been taken. But for Coltrane, it seems, there was still more terrain to cover. What appears to be a crucial watershed, *Meditations*, was recorded November 23, ushering in the way to, among other far reaching places, Mars, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn. Pharoah Sanders was by this time a regular contributor to Coltrane's vision. The newer voice however is that of Rashied Ali. According to Coltrane, he felt "the need for more time, more rhythm all around. And with more than one drummer, the

rhythm can be more multi-directional.” “The way he [Rashied] plays allows the soloist maximum freedom.” But it wasn’t only the outer reaches Coltrane was in search of. He was absolutely intent on inner purity; on making this pure feeling available to others, “so that we can see more and more clearly what we are. In that way we can give to those who listen the essence, the best of what we are. But to do that at each stage, we have to keep on cleaning the mirror.” And as Nat Hentoff commented, “... going as far through the looking glass as is possible each time. Making music as naked as the self can be brought to be.”

Alice Coltrane, it seems to me, was the perfect partner for both Jimmy Garrison and Rashied. Her inclusion in the band began round the end of ’65 after McCoy Tyner’s withdrawal. The music was now embracing a freedom of expression hitherto unheard. The harmonic palette was open to wider horizons and less bound to resolution. But an equally contributing factor to these wider horizons was the rhythmic domain. And this included matters of structure. The music had become more open to organic structuring. No longer dependent on stated, equi-spaced divisions of time, phrases and larger chunks of musical structure took shape in the hands of all participants; with development leaning further towards the open ground of the thematic; of alternating textural and melodic events; of phrases extended by repetition and alternation; and of sequences transposed &/or transformed by chromaticism, rather than being bound by *pre-structure*. The general texture, too, though not necessarily ‘thicker’, had become considerably more complex. Refined manifestations of this didn’t happen overnight. But nonetheless, it was in process right from the beginning and by May ’66 an exquisite version of *Naima*, replete with passion expressed in subtle, delicate tones, was recorded on *Coltrane Live at the Village Vanguard, Again!* The extended rendering of *My Favorite Things* on the same recording is ample testimony to the enormous creativity these musicians had uncovered on this new terrain – a huge canvas on which several hands were at work, side-by-side.

Certainly, for Trane, it was never a question of better or worse. But it *was*, inevitably, new expressive territory. And just as Pharoah was the perfect foil for John, the partnership of Alice, Jimmy, and Rashied was the perfect foil for them. Traditional ‘roles’ had all but disappeared. In their place were the swirling rhythmic and harmonic colours that constantly suggested multiple directions and from which the horns would make their choice, adding to their focus or shinning light elsewhere. Altogether, this band ranged across some very diverse emotive ground. My initially bewildered response to *Expression* had been completely turned around. I was, by ’72, listening to most of ‘the late period’ recordings, now utterly fascinated and inspired.

If one’s only exposure were to be the recordings of July, 1966, *Live in Japan*, or *The Olatunji Concert*, recorded April 23, 1967, one might, understandably, be taken aback or, alternatively, be absolutely astounded by the sheer consistency and power in the music-making. In contrast to this are the very delicate renderings. And there are a surprising number of these. But here, ‘delicate’ more refers to the way intensity is imbued rather than any lack of it. Though recorded February 15, 1967, *Stellar Regions* wasn’t issued until 1995. It’s the quartet, *sans* Pharaoh. To my mind the eight pieces form a suite in much the same way that a formal dots-on-paper composition might. This recording exhibits, in condensed form, the new language that had been developing since Rashied’s and Alice’s active participation. While the essence may have been rooted in Trane’s vision, languages evolve in communities. Where the *Live in Japan* takes are extended explorations, the eight pieces that comprise this suite are, by comparison, cameos. And what gems they are too. This music is truly extraordinary. Much of the time ensemble means four voices, as in counterpoint, contributing to the whole as the sum of its parts. Whether ballad-like

or fiery, the creative flow is utterly unconstrained, yet, paradoxically, contained without any sense of imposition; a journey on known terrain yet, nonetheless, full of discovery. I fall prey here to temptation and cite a passage I feel to be absolutely appropriate. It refers to the world premiere of Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du Temp* which took place on January 15, 1941 in Hut 27B, Stalag VIIIA, Görlitz, Germany. "There are certain works which are like a bridge thrown towards the absolute, an attempt to go beyond time. ... this music honors everyone." *Interstellar Space*, recorded just one week after *Stellar Regions*, is, of course, legendary. Those four distant cosmic lands reveal an intimacy of communication and delicacy of exchange that is, absolutely, 'astonishing'. Two travelers, bound for the outer reaches of time and space and the inner reaches of soul's purity – Trane and Rashied.

The palette from which Rashied Ali draws emotive colour is broad, his brush strokes many and varied. But the touch always instills more than one possibility. His strokes flow, merge, and emerge in a constant stream; a stream that undulates. And deep within the rise and fall of his creative topography is a heart and a spirit abundant in life-giving energy. At times, as on *The Olatunji Concert*, this is right up front, almost overwhelmingly so. But even here his spirit is power to the music; to the people; and to the feeling that nothing is insurmountable; that no mountain is too high. Here his voice seems to be that of a preacher; a true voice of hope. Belief in the beyond. And at times, when he looks upon the mirror Trane so incisively referred to, we find ourselves hearing a kind of intensity painted with the same immediacy, the same life-giving energy, yet with delicate hues and strokes so light as to hear the instrument as if it plays itself; sympathetic resonances of heart and spirit. These resonant insights are abundant on Alice Coltrane's 1968 album dedicated to her late husband, *A Monastic Trio*. They are also deeply felt on the very beautiful 1970 recording, *Journey in Satchidananda*. Or, particularly, on *The Ankh of Amen-Ra*, recorded June '71 for another of Alice's albums, *Universal Consciousness*. And from the same source, *Battle at Armageddon*, where Rashied plays a brief solo that foretells victory. A victory of spirit. This music, as with that of Trane's late period, has touched me to the very depths of my soul. The territory these wonderful musicians crossed, at times guided by sheer instinct alone, is inspiration enough. They have left me with my own heart, yet, at the same time, filled it with the truth gained from their own journey taken. This is not about survival. It's too forwards looking for that. It's a view beyond the mundane. It's the kind of inspiration that leads one to themselves, and this, via a pathway that encourages. *Listen. Again!* These are spiritual energies destined for eternity.

Recollections Two - Rashied Ali © Phil Treloar. August 18, 2009

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