

surreal mccoymc

In the club

they're asking, "Who piano player?" But Philip Watson has some questions of his own in this rare talk with the rarely talkative keyboard master, who has a new album ready and a British visit in the offing. Life, Coltrane and everything . . . Photo by Nick White.

MCCOY TYNER doesn't like interviews. Even his New York booking agents, Paul and Abbie Hofer, don't like interviews. You're not encouraged; McCoy cannot be contacted; he's not to be hassled. When you do get a date, Tyner cancels. Then he cancels again, leaving a cursory and unapologetic, "Something came up". And when he finally arrives 45 minutes late for our lunch appointment in Greenwich Village, he is polite but profoundly saturnine; a man ill at ease with the situation and himself. He is either unfathomable behind dark glasses, or he looks away two feet to your left. For an imposing, big-faced man, his expressions give very little away. And he keeps his hands clasped tight in front of his mouth, further stifling the introverted gruffness in his voice.

It leads you to believe the Hofers know something about Tyner that most don't. A man who describes himself as "a very private person", and whose responses to questions about his music often run along the lines of "it's difficult to articulate, difficult to put into words", the reason McCoy Tyner doesn't like interviews might be that McCoy Tyner doesn't have much to say.

ON THE bandstand, of course, Tyner is somewhat more expansive. The first night of a week at Sweet Basil with his current trio of Avery Sharpe on bass and Aaron Scott on drums sees him demonstrate all the volcanic power and ringing authority that have made Tyner one of the jazz world's most influential and revered pianists. Presenting compositions as diverse as his rhythmically power-driven opener "The Greet-





ing” to McCartney’s “Here, There And Everywhere”, Tyner’s physical dexterity is still awesome.

Hunched broad-shouldered over the keyboard, he drops huge, open block chords in from shoulder height like a potter throwing clay. While his left hand anchors the music around his distinctive, thunderous pedal points or explores dense harmonic extensions, Tyner’s right hand is free to dart remorselessly in and out of the modes or to embrace another Tyner trademark – two-handed compositional improvising which leads to endless reinventions of the theme.

There are also new elements in his playing – from stride sections that recall Art Tatum and even James P Johnson, to a quieter lyricism that surfaces on the ballads. Yet, at other times, he opens up the piano more characteristically with the sustain pedal further unleashing the full punch and percussive power of his playing. Hearing him live, like this, is not only a reaffirmation that no other pianist sounds like McCoy Tyner, but that no one else sounds so colossal.

It’s a virtuosity carried through to Tyner’s new Blue Note album, *Things Ain’t What They Used To Be* – an album of solo and duet recordings, the latter with John Scofield and George Adams. With compositions ranging from Tyner signatures such as “Blues On The Corner” and “Song For My Lady” to the Coltrane classic “Naima” and interpretations of “Here’s That Rainy Day” and Clifford Brown’s “Joy Spring” – two tunes Tyner has never recorded before – it’s an album of standards

that is very much an overview, a summation of an already prodigious musical career. An album that sees him move from blues to ballads to a grand symphonic sensibility, it shows Tyner now as the masterly, compleat pianist.

For all this there remains an enigma in his music that cannot be simply explained away by the legacy of him still, in some quarters, being Coltrane’s pianist first, McCoy Tyner second; or put down to the fact that very occasionally he has released a dud record – the lamentable ‘superstar’ 1986 Blue Note session *It’s About Time*, with Jackie McLean, being as good an example as any. The dilemma is that for a pianist so protean, McCoy Tyner is at best taken for granted, at worst overlooked. It’s a fact that helps to explain why one perplexed Japanese jazzer turned to me half-way through the Sweet Basil set and asked, “Who piano player?”

Tyner’s reaction to this situation is more one of resignation than resentment and a question about it catapults him into his most insouciant mood of our talk. “Yes, overlooked and underpaid,” he laughs. “Maybe I’ve been overlooked in the past because some people just don’t fancy me or have a misconception that because I’m a serious artist I want some sort of campaign or that I’m extremely political, when all I want to do is play music. Oh well, you sort of do what you have to do in life – do it the best you can, and hope for the best.”

This could of course be taken as a man seriously lacking in

the ambition department but Tyner is quick to point out that he's not been scarce of opportunities to cross over in the way a Herbie Hancock or a Horace Silver did. "The only way you can gain acceptance and get exposure to the general public is if you do something that compromises you in some way. In the late 60s, pop, rock and roll and country & western took over the radio station formats. It wasn't just me who suffered."

Certainly Tyner has not so much remained just a mainstream jazz pianist, he has built a solid reputation as an *acoustic* jazz pianist. Once describing electric music as "bad for your soul", he has mellowed a little of late but still rejects electric keyboards as a serious option. "I'm not into that. It's important for me to maintain my status as an acoustic player – that's where my sound is coming from. Electronic sounds are not as natural. You can't identify somebody who plays a synthesiser as easily."

BORN IN Philadelphia in 1938, Tyner took up the piano at 13 after encouragement from his music-loving mother, a beautician who supplemented the household income enough for the family to be able to afford a piano. Inspired by the role models of Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk, and an ever-healthy Philly music scene which at the time included such players as Lee Morgan, Archie Shepp and Reggie Workman, Tyner first met and played with John Coltrane when aged 17. Even then Tyner says he could tell the saxophonist was developing a new concept and approach. "He had something on his mind," he says.

Following a brief spell with the Art Farmer/Benny Golson Jazztet in 1959, three years after first meeting him, Tyner was playing full-time with Coltrane in the Classic Quartet which for the next five-and-a-half years would see his modal style and quartal approach to harmonisation blossom and expand. Discussing those years in a variety of ways from his supportive role as subsidiary to how he has not "experienced an intensity like that since", I ask him how *A Love Supreme*, the monumental climax of Tyner's period with the band, was put together in the studio. Silence. Have I asked one Coltrane question too many? Is he about to get up and leave in a flurry of "I'm my own man now, Coltrane's dead, man?" Does he even remember the session? Just as I'm about to chip in with "You know, McCoy, the one with all that chanting on it", he's there.

"Well, it was all very loose. John had the melody for himself, he gave me chord changes, and that would be it. What happened after that was a matter of whatever you heard."

But did he realise how historic and significant the album would be or was it just another recording?

"I knew how great the group was and that we had something special, but the thing about it was that was what we would do nightly. There was nothing abnormal about the session – it was a very, very involved thing every night. I didn't realise till after I left the group that that wasn't the norm."

Leaving at the end of 1965 because, when Coltrane hired a second drummer, Rashied Ali, "it became physically impossible to hear the piano", the next five years were lean times for Tyner. Apart from the occasional Blue Note recording such as the everybody-should-have-in-their-collection *The Real McCoy*, with Joe Henderson, Ron Carter and Elvin Jones, Tyner was unable to find regular work as a jazz player and he began playing in soul and R&B bands with the likes of Ike and Tina Turner and Jimmy Witherspoon. Almost resorting to cab driving at one stage, it was not until he signed to the Californian Milestone label in 1971 that his career really took off again. Albums such as *Enlightenment*, *Atlantis* and *Trident* followed shortly after, recordings on which not only did Tyner's newly-found spirituality surface (he converted to Islam and took the name Sulaimon Saud), but his levels of intensity and muscularity took on cathedral-like dimensions. An assault such as "Rebirth" from the 1972 *down beat* record of the year, *Sahara*, has Tyner stretching his polyphonic style to its ultimate limit.

And the eighteen Milestone years that followed displayed Tyner in a wide variety of contexts, from the 1972 solo tribute to Coltrane, *Echoes Of A Friend*, to trio and quartets with Sonny Fortune and Gary Bartz on reeds and John Blake on violin, the Supertrio sessions with Ron Carter/Tony Williams and Eddie Gomez/Jack DeJohnette and larger ensembles culminating in the live 1989 big band album *Uptown/Downtown*, a forum for the compositions and arrangements Tyner increasingly devoted himself to in the 80s.

All-star tours with Sonny Rollins and George Benson have also followed, but it wasn't until 1985 that he was approached again by Blue Note to record the session with Jackie McLean. It's a renewed association that led, in 1987, to his second solo recording *Revelations*, a setting which in many ways is the perfect one for the mature, sonorous, entirely self-sufficient Tyner style.

This album, and the Grammy-award winning *Blues For Coltrane* with David Murray, Pharoah Sanders, Cecil McBee and Roy Haynes, put together by Coltrane and Tyner's original Impulse producer Bob Thiele (a recording that sent *Wire* reviewer Steve Lake into ecstasies of *wows*), has placed Tyner more firmly back in the front ranks. There's also the accompanying recognition of his impact on generations of players ranging from Hal Galper and Hilton Ruiz to Mulgrew Miller and Michel Petrucciani.

As confident and versatile as Tyner's playing is these days – "I don't need to practise, I spend a lot of time practising on the bandstand" – and although he has approached the percussive power and dramatic intensity of Cecil Taylor at times, Tyner has always rejected free playing. I ask him if that is not his final challenge.

"In the last period with John we played free, and up until the early 70s I was still strongly influenced by the quartet and it took me a little while to settle down," he says. "But I don't need that any more – I have my solo recordings. You can't get any freer than playing by yourself."