

The Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

1967

JOHN COLTRANE LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD AGAIN! (Impulse 9124) just might be the greatest work of art ever produced in this country -not to mention the greatest selection of jazz music ever to get set down on wax.

Regardless of what you have read, regardless of what anyone has told you, you must give this new music a chance to speak for itself; only you will be the loser if you fail to do so. The place to begin is with this album. Not a day has gone by since I first heard it that I don't play it at least once, and sometimes twice or even three times. If I were in charge at Impulse, I would sell the record on a money-back-if-not-satisfied basis—it's simply that good, and that policy would insure that it was heard as widely as it deserves to be.

As with the best of the new music, straight prose is inadequate to analyze or describe the majestic sweep of human emotions that the artists convey. Only poetry can approximate, from a distance, what you will discover in this epochal work—and I make no bones about the fact that I am no poet.

For that matter, I sometimes suspect that criticism of the conventional type has been made obsolete by the new music, which is why I have become so reluctant to write "reviews" in a strictly musical frame of reference. What is good, I feel, should be immediately recognizable, without the say-so of authority; what is bad . Well, what is bad can best be charitably buried in silence, with the hope for eventual improvement.

If I were being consistent with my beliefs, then, I suppose I should not be making even these comments. But my eagerness to talk about the exalted music of the Coltrane group far exceeds any reservations I might hold on the subject of consistency. So having ventured this far, I want to offer a couple of additional points.

It is claimed by the enemies of the new music -and even by some alleged friends—that in destroying the previously established procedures the gates have been opened to a wave of chaos and anarchy; that without the old forms there is no way to distinguish genius from charlatanism. Nonsense. Everyone to whom I have spoken about this record has shared my enthusiasm; some have even begun to wear out their first copy. And this just a month after the album's release!

One therefore concludes that there are ground rules and criteria for this new music, just as there were for the old, the only difference being that the new rules have not yet (thank heaven!) been formalized and made explicit. If you doubt that rules and criteria do exist, however, you might try the following experiment: play this record, then follow it with any of the standardized new music releases from the Blue Note stable (not, of course, Don Cherry or Cecil Taylor), or even some of the lighter-weight ESPs (no need to mention any names). If you can't hear the difference at once, I would say you're seriously in need of help.

Finally, this. A number of the two dozen or so artists involved in the new music whom I interviewed last summer told me that they viewed their work as a means of arousing people to realize the necessity for social change. (Not surprisingly, John Coltrane was one of these. In his own words, he wants himself and his music to be "a force for good." I hope to be able to publish all of his comments in the near future; they should provide a host of revelations for those who believe the music can be divorced from its environment.) At the time, I accepted this notion, but I cannot honestly say that I understood it. Now, after this record, I think perhaps I do.

It seems to me that what these men and women are showing us is the heights to which the human spirit can soar when selfish egoism is subordinated to the goal of a common good. Hence, by implication, their statements pose a critique of capitalist class society, which puts supreme emphasis on acquisitiveness and disregard for the welfare of one's fellow man (witness the indifference to American genocide in Vietnam).

The music is in effect telling us about a future existence in which love and cooperation have replaced strife and oppression. Once we have achieved a glimpse of that future state, our present mode of life becomes increasingly intolerable: who could be satisfied with prison after having breathed the sweet air of true freedom? That is what John Coltrane and his family (a relationship depicted on the cover of this album) are asking us.

How much longer are we going to wait before we begin working on the answer?



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