

Eric Nemeyer's Jazz Inside

The John Coltrane Quintet

So Many Things – The European Tour 1961 – Acrobat COCD 7085 – www.acrobatmusic.net Blue Train; I Want To Talk About You Impressions; My Favorite Things; Blue Train; I Want To Talk About You; My Favorite Things Delilah; Everytime We Say Goodbye; Impressions; Naima; My Favorite Things; Blue Train; I Want To Talk About You; Impressions; My Favorite Things; Blue Train; Naima; Impressions; My Favorite Things; My Favorite Things

PERSONNEL: John Coltrane, tenor, soprano; Eric Dolphy, alto, bass clarinet, flute; McCoy Tyner, piano; Reggie Workman, bass; Elvin Jones, drums

By Scott Yanow

The remarkable John Coltrane's musical career can be divided into five periods. From 1946 (when he made his earliest private recordings as an altoist) through 1954 is a now-shadowy period where he was only barely documented. 1955-56 found Coltrane gaining visibility as a member of the Miles Davis Quintet and struggling to find his own sound. 1957-60, which covers his period with Thelonious Monk, his return to Miles Davis and such superb solo recordings as "Blue Train" and "Giant Steps," had Coltrane becoming a giant who was the master of chordal improvisation with his sheets of sound style. He often played clusters of notes and extended bebop to its breaking point. As the leader of his classic quartet from mid-1960 through 1965, Coltrane was the main pacesetter in jazz. Some of his solos could be endless but fascinating improvisations over two-chord vamps (such as on "My Favorite Things") and showed that there was jazz way beyond bebop. During his last period, 1966-67, his solos were largely atonal sound explorations as he continued to search for the next breakthrough.

Last year the British Acrobat label put out All Of You: The Final Tour 1960. The four-CD set collected together all of the radio broadcasts that exist from the European tour that Miles Davis had in 1960 when John Coltrane, pianist Wynton Kelly, bassist Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb were in his quintet. Coltrane had been persuaded to go on this final tour before finally breaking away to form his own quartet. While audiences generally loved Davis and the rhythm section, Coltrane's long explorative solos got mixed reviews at the time although ironically they are now the main reason that that box is so essential.

So Many Things – The European Tour 1961 is the logical follow-up. This four-CD set has virtually all of the existing performances from John Coltrane's first European tour as a leader. All that is missing is the soundtrack of a television performance in Germany from Nov. 24.

Eric Dolphy, an innovator who had developed his own highly individual voice on three different instruments (alto, bass clarinet and flute), had first recorded with Coltrane on the Africa Brass sessions in May-June 1961. He was also featured with Coltrane on the Ole album and appeared on a few selections from Coltrane's famed Village Vanguard sessions from Nov. 1-5 that directly preceded the tour. The inclusion of Dolphy in Coltrane's group was considered controversial. While some of John Coltrane's fans did not appreciate 'Trane having to share solo space with Dolphy, more conservative critics felt that both Coltrane and Dolphy were playing music that was not even worthy of being called jazz. In fact writer John Wilson, reviewing some of their performances at the Village Vanguard, called their music "anti-jazz." Time has proven the detractors wrong.

While they played different from each other, Coltrane admired Dolphy's musicianship, originality and musical courage. He was enthusiastic about having Dolphy be part of his group during his European tour, joining pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Elvin Jones in what was arguably the most important group in jazz.

So Many Things has all of the music from Nov. 18 (two concerts in Paris), 20 (Copenhagen), 22 (Helsinki, Finland) and 23 (two sets from Stockholm). There is a lot of repetition of titles (six versions of "My Favorite Things" plus a false start, four apiece of "Blue Train" and "Impression," three of "I Want To Talk About You," two versions of "Naima," and one version of "Delilah" and "Everytime We Say Goodbye") although obviously each rendition has different solos. While most of these performances had been out before on bootlegs, this is the first time that all of the music has been released in complete and in chronological order. With the exception of the first Paris session, the recording quality is pretty good for live sessions from the time period.

The box begins with the most poorly recorded date, the initial Paris concert. Elvin Jones' drums are often quite loud and the sound is a bit distorted. However as can be heard on the opening "Blue Train," the intensity of Coltrane's playing definitely comes through. He takes a ten-minute solo on the medium-tempo blues, preceding much briefer statements from Dolphy and Tyner. "I Want To Talk About You" would by 1963 in its classic Birdland recording have a superb closing cadenza by Coltrane. But in 1961, that section had not been added yet, so this version is more conventional and taken a little faster than expected.

"Impressions" has roaring solos by Coltrane and Dolphy (who takes solo honors on this piece) and a strong statement from Tyner. This version of "My Favorite Things" is the only one on the box without Dolphy and gives Coltrane an opportunity to really stretch out.

The recording quality definitely improves with the second Paris concert which was performed later the same night. "Blue Train" has a more concise statement from Coltrane and an exciting Dolphy alto solo. "I Want To Talk About You" is taken a little slower than the first version with a more thoughtful Coltrane solo that builds up slowly. However the highpoint of the Paris concerts is the second version of "My Favorite Things." Dolphy has a typically atmospheric flute solo, Tyner comes across well and Coltrane's long improvisation is full of fresh ideas and thoughtful fire.

The Copenhagen concert begins with a real rarity, the only time that John Coltrane ever recorded "Delilah." His soprano solo and Dolphy's improvisation on bass clarinet are both memorable. Coltrane plays quite melodically on "Everytime We Say Goodbye," he and Dolphy create passionate statements on "Impressions" and "Naima," and "My Favorite Things" is given a stirring treatment with Dolphy's birdlike flute showing just how original he was on that instrument..

The Helsinki concert duplicates the songs from the first Paris concert but the recording quality is much better and Dolphy sounds more integrated with the group than he did four days earlier. "Impressions," which has a powerful Dolphy alto solo sandwiched by two ferocious tenor improvisations by Coltrane, is the highlight. The first Stockholm concert has more fresh variations on "Blue Train," "Naima" and "Impressions," concluding with "My Favorite Things." Yet another version of "My Favorite Things," a previously unknown version from the second Stockholm concert, concludes this box with one of the most stirring versions.

After his return to the United States, John Coltrane replaced bassist Reggie Workman with Jimmy Garrison. Eric Dolphy, who was captured playing three songs with Coltrane at Birdland on Feb. 9, 1962, soon left to form his own band. So Many Things, which has lengthy, very well-written and definitive liner notes by Simon Spillett in its 44-page booklet, not only perfectly documents the John Coltrane Quintet, but has to be considered one of the top jazz releases of 2015.