My Favorite World #3



Welcome back to MFW, a weekly feature that highlights the things that make this My. Favorite. World.

The Music Supreme

On Tuesday, December 9, 1964, the John Coltrane Quartet set up in Rudy Van Gelder's recording studio in Englewood Cliffs, NJ. The music of that night stands with the greatest achievements of human creativity. A safe bet: if someone tells you they only own one or a couple or a few jazz recordings, *A Love Supreme* will be on her shelf. The album is emblematic of a transitional period in jazz from the be-bop/post-bop phase to the eruption of free jazz. It is an utterly radical departure from most of what came before and is also, incredibly, completely accessible to anyone willing to listen.<fn>Challenging, yes, but not forbiddingly so.</fn>

You probably know all this already. Writing about *A Love Supreme* is akin to writing about Bach, *The Great Gatsby*, Shakespeare. It's so famous, and so much has been said/written about it…I doubt that I have much to add. Ashley Kahn's 2002 book, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album*, provides deep detail about the sessions, the preparation, and Trane's personal philosophy that drove the conception and composition. Go there for the history. Stay here for reflection of how this album, perhaps more than any other, made me realize that this is My. Favorite. World.

I grew up on rock and roll, especially the blues based stuff. My early ambition as a hustling neighborhood lawn mower man was completely spurred by my desire to buy every album ever made. Clapton. Hendrix. Duane. One day, I bought an album by Carlos Santana with some guy named John McLaughlin. “Hey, Carlos is cool, maybe a little weirdly exotic<fn>What with all that Latin rhythm stuff.</fn>, but basically a blues cat,” thought my 14 year old self. The opening track was this, a “cover version” of *Acknowledgement*, the first section of *A Love Supreme*.

Jesus H. Christ staring down Satan in the desert!

This was the first time I had heard of Coltrane, and I had no fking idea what to make of it. I had no frame of reference, nothing that helped me understand if it was good, bad, or utterly ridiculous.<fn>I felt all three ways about it on any given day.</fn> But I couldn’t stop listening to it, whatever it was.

Still, even with the occasional jazz-ish oddity like Mahavishnu Orchestra or Al Dimeola or Jeff Beck’s *Blow by Blow* in my collection, I was a rocking dude. Jazz remained not-too-vaguely-otherish, if not downright musty.<fn>Props paid here to my old man, who dragged me off to such like as Count Basie at Carnegie Hall and made me listen to Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton and such, thereby laying a foundation. But still…jazz was geezer fart music. Shit, the guitars weren’t even distorted. Lame.</fn>

A few years post-Watergate, I went off to college at the University of Georgia, where I fell in with a notably disreputable crowd: the volunteers at the campus radio station. WUOG-FM’s programming then was a polyglot, a defiant holdover from the earlier days of alternative/pirate/underground radio. You could hear Hendrix into Flatt &Scruggs into Velvet Underground into John Cage

into Cecil Taylor into Scott Joplin. There were a few fellow students there who really knew their jazz, and I fell into their fiendish grip.<fn>Visualize a segment from *Reefer Madness* here.</fn> Pretty soon, I had stopped listening to rock and pop almost completely.<fn>This was the peak of the punk/new wave era, which I basically missed in a cloud of jazz and world music. So much for your Narrator as a eagle-eyed surveyor of prevailing *zeitgeist.*</fn>

One night, in a haze of some sort of uber-substantially-altered-mindfulnesslessness<fn>And we can just leave it at that, thank you.</fn>, I was draped across a filthy sofa in a candlelit room when a pal dropped the needle on *A Love Supreme*. From the opening stroke of the gong to the end of the opening saxophone phrase<fn>All of fifteen seconds.</fn>, my world changed. And then shit really got real.

I was unprepared, still without a useful frame of reference for what was going on, but here's the great thing: it didn't matter. This was music so pure, so honest, so skilled, that I think a herd of donkeys or a field of sunflowers would understand. Mind, this was about 35 years ago, and I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday.

The album consists of 4 parts, totaling about 33 minutes. During this half hour, I alternated between disbelief, fear, tears, terror, and laughter. But the predominant lingering feeling was overwhelming joy that I lived in a world where something like *A Love Supreme* could exist.

Over the years, I've probably listened to this album more than any other. Times come where I put it aside<fn>Been there, done that….</fn>, only to have it pop up on the radio and hit me across the side of the head one more time. Just this evening, I've listened through the entire piece twice, and then played specific segments another half-dozen times. There are elements that send a jolt up my spine every time. The gong and opening

sax statement. The four note bass theme, as instantly recognizable as the opening to Grumpy Ludwig's 5th. Jimmy Garrison's bass solo between the first and second parts (and again ¾ of the way through part 3 to bring in the elegiac and somewhat terrifying final movement). The explosion of Trane's sax as the second part, *Resolution*, begins. Elvin Jones' drum solo that opens *Pursuance*. McCoy Tyner's relentless block chord comping and butterfly runs. The chanting. Oh, the chanting. But mostly, the overwhelming power and beauty of John Coltrane's tenor sax, and his uncompromising pursuit of that *something* that neither he nor we could quite get at directly, but that we knew/know is there. If only….and still.

I learned more in that half hour twenty-some years ago than I had in the 18 years prior. This is music that contains multitudes: the blues, hymns, religious chants, ancient polyrhythms designed to entrance. The lessons learned from *A Love Supreme* resonate every day I'm in this world: our human potential, the possibilities, the payoff for relentless striving. But more than anything, this…

Music has the power to change the world. And that's the main reason that this world is my favorite. Any world that can produce a Coltrane is a world worth living in.

My Favorite World #1



Two articles for the debut of My Favorite World. What can I say? I’m enthusiastic.

Room
Nels Cline and Julian Lage
Mack Avenue Records
www.nelscline.com

Nels Cline is a 58 year old, self-described “fake jazz” guitarist known most widely for his membership in the band Wilco. Julian Lage is a 26 year old jazz phenom, the heir apparent to Jim Hall, with unmatched technique and harmonic sophistication. “Room” is their first recording together; if we’re lucky, it won’t be the last.

Straight up: this is music by and for guitarists. Anybody who loves quirky and beautiful music will like it too, but anyone with an addiction to the 6-string beast will listen to this over and over with head shaking ‘how the hell did they do that?’ amazement.

While Cline has a reputation for extreme sonic manipulations, the game here is pure guitar tone. Cline (in the right channel) alternates between a pair of Gibsons – a 965 Barney Kessel archtop and a 1962 J-200 acoustic. On the left side, Lage plays his Linda Manzer archtop and 1939 000-18 acoustic (the latter featured in the recent Lage-Eldridge performance in Tallahassee). No overdubs, no pedals or effects – just a couple of guys having a wide-ranging conversation with guitars.

It’s hard to predict how ‘normal’<fn>i.e., non-guitargeek people</fn> people will respond to this music. At times it is aggressive and dissonant; other passages are melodic, lyrical, and soothing. Crimson-esque angularity gives way to a ballad that Pat Metheny could have written, and here comes something that sounds like Ornette’s harmolodics before we hear the ghost of Jim Hall. The tone and interaction also recall the great duets of John Abercrombie and Ralph Towner. The guitar chops are astounding throughout, but it’s their ears that really do the work here. Lage and Cline are on their toes, keyed into each other’s comments and asides in a way that often makes their free passages sound pre-arranged, with clusters and flurries mounting atop one another and relieved by sparse bell rings at just the right moment. And though their styles are distinctive, there are moments when the sum of the parts makes it impossible to tell who is doing what, moments when they sound like one instrument, one player.

In a recent interview with Premier Guitar, Cline described a compositional approach based on “squibs”, “…tiny written areas of music to be connected with free improv. I would play an idea, Julian would harmonize on the spot, and we’d take it from there before going completely free.”

Lage: “The squibs are distinctive in nature. Even if only four or eight bars long, they’re very directive and can sustain long improvisations. Nels writes in such a way that leaves so much room for spontaneous composition. It’s so cool that, in this setting, nothing is off-limits—a strong backbeat groove is given equal consideration to something more fluid. It’s really a shared concept, as Nels says—a tip of the hat to Jimmy Giuffre and that whole scene.”

OK, superb playing *and* a shout out to the monumentally great Jimmy Giuffre.<fn>You can bet Giuffre will show up in a future MFW post.</fn> I am a happy boy.

Recordings like *Room* make life worth living. Check out the

Premier Guitar interview for more on these guys. Here's a video clip of the boys in action to brighten your day.

Tatsuya Nakatani
Live at Ruby Fruit Manor
Tallahassee, FL
11/24/14

Why is this my favorite world? Because you never know when a stray Facebook post from one of the world's great improvising musicians announces that he will perform in your little town in about an hour. So never mind the torrential rain or the fact that you only have an iffy address in Railroad Square, no contact number, no verification. Get up and go.

And sure enough, there was percussionist/acoustic sound artist Tatsuya Nakatani with a miniaturized version of his percussion array set up in the corner of a 12×12 foot bare room. Tatsuya has performed and recorded with a who's who catalog of free improv heavyweights, including Joe McPhee, Peter Brotzman, Billy Bang, Eyvind Kang, Ken Vandermark, Mary Halvorson, Shane Perlowin, Kaoru Watanabe, Eugene Chadbourne, and Barre Phillps. I suspect most people will not recognize any of those names, but trust me, this guy is the real deal.

When I arrived, a local artist was kicking off the evening with a solo keyboard performance heavily influenced by Terry Riley. Sustained harmonic spreads alternated with denser drone clusters. Nothing moved fast; this was music for people with patience. The reward – typical of the so-called minimalist movement ushered in by folks like Riley, Charlemagne Palestine, and La Monte Young – comes with the release offered by subtle shifts in tonality at unexpected moments. I'd never heard of Chantelle Dorsey (the artist known as Black Sun Black

Moon) before this evening. It was a welcome discovery.

Tatsuya began by chatting up the crowd of 20 or so, talking about touring, sleeping and cooking in the van, good gigs and bad gigs, how he sometimes wonders whether it's all worth it. (The tour began on September 4; he will finally return home to Pennsylvania in late December. He travels alone.) He's a very personable guy, with a warm smile and easy laugh. Too often, the improv scene suffers a grim demeanor and heavy mood. Tatsuya is serious about his work, but never somber, and his amiability invites listeners into a compatible collaboration that recognizes the audience as an equal partner to the music and musician. This is no small thing, especially when the music is "challenging".

Settled in behind a snare/kick/floor tom kit, a rototom, a medium-sized gong, and a pile of cymbals at his feet, Tatsuya began by gently vibrating the gong with one of his handmade bows. It's hard to believe the range of sounds available from this simple gesture; the buildup of overtones can trick the ear into believing there are violins, a church organ, people singing, a synthesizer. He brought his kick drum in a slow fade-in until a distinct pulse emerged. While his playing is not typically rhythmic in a traditional sense, it frequently features a prominent pulse that provides an anchor for listeners. Always free form and generally abstract, his improvisation displayed an internal formal logic that framed the entire piece.

He moved through a range of sonic manipulations – handheld cymbals and kitchen whisks scraping drum heads; temple bells rubbed against one another or against a cymbal laid across a drum, multiple cymbals rubbed, tapped, and bent against one another. The effect ranged from a stiff wind through a bamboo forest to angelic choirs to a metalworks in full roar. This gave way to a Krupa-esque drum flurry, exactly what it might sound like if someone shoved old Gene down a flight of stairs in mid-solo. And then the bit that really grabbed me – he held

a small cymbal to his mouth and blew through the mount hole, treating the metal disc like a horn mouthpiece. This gesture culminated in his blowing through the cymbal as it lay flat on the snare drum to create a roomful of saxophones replicating a pack of whinnying puppies and hounds. The original kickdrum pulse returned, and then back to the bowed gong to bring the entire piece full circle. As the last vibrations faded away, the audience provided a sustained communal silence to bring the piece to a close.

Tatsuya Nakatani's music is available through his website. I particularly recommend his duo album with guitarist Shane Perlowin. You can also order his handmade bows and conduct your own sonic manipulations in the privacy of your own home. (Gongs and cymbals sold separately.) Wherever you are, keep an ear out and grab any opportunity to see him perform live.

Here's a pretty good video of Tatsuya solo in 2013.