

The Distinctive Jazz Piano Styles Of McCoy Tyner

Contributed by Webmaster

By Duane Shinn

Alfred McCoy Tyrner, better known by the last two words of his full name - McCoy Tyner, was both on the 11th of December, 1938. His mother pushed him towards his love for the piano, by sending him for piano classes when he was 13 years old. The piano classes got him hooked to the instrument in a couple of years by the time he turned 15. His early inspiration came from the playing of Bud Powell with whom he was neighbors. His playing was distinguished from the other sounds that people have drawn out of the piano.

He had a very distinctive way of playing the bass notes with his left hand, which he positioned higher than the normal posture of piano playing allowed him to so that he could lay heavy emphasis on the notes that he played with that hand. His right hand's style of playing too had a similar catch -the staccatos and arpeggios that he played with his right hand contributed to this unique sound of playing. These two factors and his method of chord voicing, which has a heavy usage of fourth notes, set him apart from many jazz pianists during his career of 46 and running years.

He got his first steady gig with Jazztet in 1960 in which he played with Benny Golson. He left that group the same year and joined John Coltrane's group. But this was not the first time that he was associated with Coltrane. He and Coltrane both played together earlier on McCoy's original composition - The Believer. He was a part of the group's release - My Favorite Things.

The following four years, he toured with the John Coltrane Quartet which featured Coltrane himself on tenor saxophone, Jimmy Garrison on bass and Elvin Jones on the drums in addition to McCoy himself in piano. The band had a lot of success and has a number of releases which did very well including Ballads, Life at The Village Vanguard, Crescent, The Jon Coltrane Quartet Plays, and Live at Birdland which they recorded for Impulse! Records.

Apart from playing for the John Coltrane Quartet, he also has a solo career on with a number of piano trio releases under the same label - the first of which was the 1962 release Inception. He was sideman on quite a few albums under the Blue Note Records. After leaving the John Coltrane Quartet, he had a three year stint with Blue Note Records for whom he recorded a number of post bop albums - The Real McCoy, Tender Moments, Expansions and Extensions - during the four years (67' - 70') that he was with Blue Note.

His next label was Milestone Records with whom he recorded a number of albums that he recorded with flute player Hubert Laws and Billy Colham on the drums. Some of their albums that this period of recording produced were Sahara, Enlightenment and Fly With The Wind. The shift in music that he made was a very obvious to the ear move to include music influenced by African and Asian forms of music in his compositions. This warranted for a wider variety of instruments that McCoy used and which he played himself - the koto (a 13th Japanese string instrument), the flute and percussion.

This was one of the first movements in jazz music to move towards a new freer form. This was not categorized as free jazz or fusion jazz. It was something else in the making. One of McCoy's 1975 releases had him play two other instruments that were used very rarely in jazz music to date - the harpsichord and the celeste. The 80's and the 90's saw him touring and recording extensively with bass player Avery Sharpe and Aaron Scott who played the drums.

He had an extended run with Blue Note Records for which he recorded more albums for in the late 80's and early 90's. McCoy is still active recording and touring with different musicians recording for Telarc Records.

He was made a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2002. He has had two releases in 2007 - Quarter and Afro Blue.

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