

Chasing Trane 3: For the Love of Jazz

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So last night I was in bed with The Lovely Mrs. JC and as is our usual custom we were listening to a random playlist of ballads as we went to sleep. The shuffle landed on Stan Getz playing “Body and Soul.” We were listening and it was just sheer beauty and at the end of the second verse Getz goes into this run that is absolute genius, and I don’t use that term loosely, but, with Getz, I know that it applies. I don’t have the language, either in words or music, to describe what it is that Getz does, but, to me, I think of a figure skater taking off in full flight, doing three turns and three axels with pure grace and beauty and then landing on her feet as if it were all perfectly natural. You can listen to it here and perhaps you will hear what I heard.

<http://jazzcollector.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/06-Body-And-Soul.m4a>

I listened to this passage and I started laughing because I hadn’t heard it in a long time and I was flabbergasted and in awe at what just came out of the speaker.

The Lovely Mrs. JC rose from a slumber and asked: “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied.

“Why were you laughing?”

“Did you hear that?” I replied.

“Hear what.”

“That,” I said. “That thing Getz just played. It was unbelievable.”

But I knew that even though The Lovely Mrs. JC appreciates jazz after all these years of living with me, and that we were listening to the exact same thing, she did not hear what I heard. I knew that when I heard it, I heard it in a completely different way. Even though I can’t play jazz myself, even though I don’t have great musical ears or chops on any instrument, I know that I can listen to that passage by Getz and understand with deep passion and utter conviction the art and craftsmanship and brilliance that went into

it and what it is about that particular passage in that particular moment in that particular song that brings a smile to my face and a chuckle to my soul. A bit later I was still laying there in bed, and by now The Lovely Mrs. JC had fallen asleep, and my mind was racing uncontrollably in a flash of stream of consciousness, sifting through other jazz moments that move me. And I got out of bed at 2 in the morning and I went to my computer and in a haze the following poured out of me onto the screen:

Oscar Peterson playing as if his hands are going to fly off his wrists in I Feel Pretty; Dexter Gordon playing obbligato behind Bobby Hutcherson on Who Can I Turn To; Benny Golson picking up Lee Morgan's last phrase on Moanin'; anything by Clifford Brown; Vic Feldman's piano solo on Sack o' Woe; Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane trading choruses on Tenor Madness; Sonny Rollins playing Paul's Pal on the same album where you could swear he has a huge smile on his face; Roland Kirk's entire live performance on Volunteered Slavery; Joe Henderson's entire sax solo on Song for My Father; Ella and Louis; Eric Dolphy's bass clarinet vamp intro to On Green Dolphin Street; Mingus' opening notes on Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting; Bird Lover Man; Bird doing three takes of Embraceable You, each one more beautiful than the one before it; Duke Ellington's piano vamp on In a Sentimental Mood with Coltrane; Art Tatum; Lester Young's sadness on almost any ballad in his later years; Lester Young's joy on the Sound of Jazz with Billie Holiday; Wayne Shorter on Contemplation; Tal Farlow and Eddie Costa playing as if they were of a single mind on Taking a Chance on Love; Bill Evans My Foolish Heart; Monk, anything; Stan Getz on Getz/Gilberto playing Bossa Nova as if he had been playing it all his life; Paul Desmond, anything; Horace Silver Quintet, Filthy McNasty live, five men in perfect unison; Giant Steps, the song, the entire album; Sarah Vaughan, Jim Doesn't Ever Bring Me Pretty Flowers; Herbie Hancock's piano on Cristo Redentor.

I was sitting at the computer at 2 in the morning and I realized I could go on and on and on. Dozens, hundreds, thousands of jazz moments for me, writ large and small. I'm sure each of you has his or her own list that is entirely different than mine, and, of course, I would certainly encourage you to share yours on the comments section of this post.

As I was sitting there typing this I felt what I have known since the moment I realized that I loved and understood and appreciated this music we call jazz: That I have been blessed with a rare gift. For those of you, or us, who believe in God, say it comes from God. I don't know myself where it comes from. I know it is not inherited, yet I also know that if it had not been for my father, playing jazz around the house from the time I was in my mother's womb, I would not have this blessing. I also know that it has little to do with my musical ability or my capacity to actually play this music, because if it did I would not have this gift. In this aspect, I have always compared myself to my best friend Dan Axelrod, whom I have mentioned here often at Jazz Collector as my lifelong partner in sharing this passion for jazz and, at one point, the passion for collecting jazz records.

Dan grew up a block away from me in Bayside Queens and, while I had no obvious musical gifts, Dan was just the opposite. He was born with perfect pitch and from the time he was 3 or 4 years old, his parents would have him do these weird tricks. The phone would ring and they would ask him what key it was in. Stuff like that. I know he never felt like this gift was anything special, it was completely natural to him, and he often resented being treated like a trained monkey, as he called it.

Dan and I always shared a passion for music, starting with the Beatles. It was one of the things that bonded us together early. Dan could hear a Beatles song the first time it was on the radio and play it perfectly. He started studying guitar and it was obvious to his teachers that he was a prodigy. Eventually his teachers guided him to jazz and once he discovered that he had the gift to appreciate and play jazz there was no turning back. I remember in high school, we were all listening to Alvin Lee of Ten Years After, who was terrific, BTW, and Dan was also listening to Charlie Parker playing "Scrapple from the Apple."

My house, with my Dad's collection of great jazz records, became something of a haven for Dan and, of course, my Dad was thrilled to have one of his son's friends share his passion for the music. For myself, I was into Cream and Ten Years After and other bands and, while I understood that jazz was a different and probably superior form of music, I didn't get it. Until, one night, I did. I have told this story before in the memoir [Song for](#)

My Father, but I will retell it here briefly. I was home alone with no music other than my father's jazz collection. I smoked a joint and put on a record my father had always loved, *The Cannonball Adderley Quintet Live at the Lighthouse*. The first song "Sack o' Woe." Something stirred inside me. I got it. I don't know how; I don't know why. I just know I actually heard the music for the first time. I spent the rest of the night poring through my father's records, putting one record after another on the turntable. I never looked back. I knew from that night on that jazz would be the only music that would ever touch my soul in that manner.

Dan and I explored our passion together. He did so musically, becoming a protégé of Tal Farlow, and he also did so with records, much more than me. He was already playing professionally at 16 so he had more money. But he also had a more obsessive personality, no offense, and he began amassing an amazing collection of records. I did the same, but on a smaller scale. We would drive out to Sam Goody's in Valley Stream together and sift through the dollar bins, looking for that rare Lester Young or Stan Getz record that would occasionally be sitting there. We would go to Red Carraro's house together. We would spend hours upon hours listening to jazz, talking about jazz, playing jazz, going to record stores, going to concerts.

When Sonny Rollins would play a week at the Half Note, we would go every single night. Dan doesn't remember this story, but I do. One week at the Half Note the guitarist Attila Zoller was on the bill as an opening act. Dan brought his guitar one night. I don't recall if he knew Attila or if he just talked his way into the backstage area. I just know that on this night, early in the gig, Dan and I were backstage and Attila had his axe and Dan had his. And Dan starting playing chords and Attila took a solo. Then Attila started playing chords and Dan took a solo. Dan was maybe one or two choruses into his solo when Attila abruptly stopped playing, looked directly into Dan's eyes and shouted these two words: "TAL FARLOW!"

The very next set Dan was on stage with Attila. When the night was over, or the next night, and we said hello to Sonny, as we always tried to do because by now he knew we were regulars in the audience, Sonny turned to Dan and said in his typically modest and understated way. "I saw you up there. Very good." I stood next to Dan beaming like a proud father. What

could possibly be better than this, having your idol give you his blessing.

Through the years, this bond between Dan and myself has been one of the constants in both of our lives. I remember sitting in my little room in Bayside when we were still teenagers and we went into my father's closet and pulled out the record *Sarah Vaughan at the London House* for the first time and when she started singing "Like Someone in Love" we both started cracking up, just the way I cracked up last night listening to Stan Getz playing "Body and Soul." When Dan decided to sell his record collection, I bought it to keep it in the family, borrowing the money from my very generous father-in-law. When there would be a new discovery of missing tapes by Clifford Brown or Charlie Parker or John Coltrane, we would often sit together and listen for the first time, smiling at the same passages, chuckling at the same riffs. When I would have a record score, such as in [Baltimore](#), I would call him on the way home. I still do.

It seems incongruous to me on some level that Dan, who can play this music in any setting with musicians of any caliber, who has studied this music his entire life and has a deep understanding of what the musicians are doing on a technical level, and me, who can't follow chord changes and can't even hear if I am playing in the right key, can listen to this music and hear it the same way, can laugh at the same passages, smile at the same flashes of brilliance, can hear it is if we are listening with a single set of ears. I don't understand it, but I know it is true, because I've experienced it over the course of thousands of hours of listening to music with Dan.

And that is why I think of it as a blessing, this gift I have been given to understand and appreciate jazz. I truly don't understand it, I truly do not know where it comes from, but I do know it that it is etched somewhere in my DNA and has been such an integral part of my life. Among many other things, it has led me on this wonderful journey here at Jazz Collector, where I have been able to share my passion for jazz with all of you other lucky men and women who have been blessed with the same gift. I was reminded of all this several times over the past few weeks, as I attempted to share my personal essay triggered by the documentary [Chasing Trane](#) with people outside the jazz world, people who don't share this same appreciation for jazz and who don't hear the

music as we do, who aren't among the .0000001 percent of the population who can really understand the nuance and brilliance of Stan Getz playing a particular passage in "Body and Soul."

First there was my 25-year-niece Ariel, whom I love and adore in part because she is always so genuine and enthusiastic. She read the Coltrane article and one of the first things she said was. "I can't wait to listen to Coltrane now!" Then there was my 50-something-year-old cousin Caroline in England, who decided to listen to *A Love Supreme* before reading my article. She loved the article and said the next time she sees me I will have to explain why *A Love Supreme* is considered great. She listened to it, but didn't get it, not in the same way we get it. And there were many other friends and family members who said they needed to go listen to Coltrane after reading my article.

I don't know what to tell these friends and family. Can you really listen to *Giant Steps* and understand what it's about without understanding the context? If you don't hear the music the way we hear it, those of us who have been given the gift, can you relate in any to Coltrane's pain and anguish in "Alabama," or the beauty of "I Wish I Knew," or the passion and fury of "Afro Blue?" In my experience, it is very hard, nearly impossible, for people who don't have the gift, who don't know the history, who haven't followed Coltrane's path, to really, really get what is different about him versus any other jazz musician. The same could be said for Charlie Parker or Sonny Rollins or Monk or any of the musicians we all know to be geniuses of this music. With Trane it is particularly difficult because, on tenor, before Trane nobody played like him; after Trane everyone played like him. Before Trane there was no such thing as a soprano sax in modern jazz; after Trane a guy like Kenny G is known all around the world.

My answer to these friends and family is to listen to *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman* or *Ballads*. With these records, they may not get the nuance, but they will clearly hear the beauty. And, perhaps one day up in The Berkshires, when we are all sitting around a fire, I will put on a Coltrane record and someone will hear something that will set off a spark and he or she will be set off on a path of discovery and exploration that will turn into a blessing like the one shared by each of us here in the Jazz Collector

community.

And I thought I was done with that line of thinking and had kind of figured things out and wrote this essay as yet another stream of consciousness as soon as I got out of bed this morning. And then I recalled this beautiful comment by Brian Anderson on my previous post [Chasing Trane 2: A Love Supreme Trumps Hate](#), which I will repeat in part here:

“It is so wonderful to be able to feel connected to a network of Jazz lovers. I have lost every dear friend I had who could share Jazz with me, and most of my listening these days is done in solitary. But with great people like you, Al, and all the wonderful folks who are part of this super network you have brought to us all, I do not feel alone.”

Thank you Brian for saying so eloquently in a few simple words what it has taken me more than 2,500 words to say here. And thank you all, once again, for being part of this very fortunate community of the blessed people who are able to love and appreciate this music that is so special to us all.

Amen.