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Bright Moments With George Coleman

The tenor titan remembers historic sessions and performances

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

George Coleman (Courtesy of Smoke Sessions)

George Coleman's discography is a de facto compendium on jazz history from hard bop to the present. Looking it over, it's easy to see why the National Endowment for the Arts named the tenor sax icon an NEA Jazz Master in 2015. Along with his extraordinary work on highly influential albums by Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock, Coleman has appeared on dozens of sessions that, while not as famous, were truly significant in the creative evolution of modern jazz. His own recordings, and participation in bands such as Cedar Walton's Eastern Rebellion, have left a lasting imprint on the music as well.

Coleman began his journey in Memphis, Tenn., in 1935. He took up alto and was already gigging as a teenager with B.B. King in the early '50s. He learned basic music theory in high school but was essentially self-taught; for knowledge, he turned to Memphis musicians such as arranger Onzie Horne, piano modernist Bob Talley and stride pianist Eugene Barlow, among others. "The stuff that guys were learning at Berklee," says Coleman, "I knew when I was about 17 or 18 years old."

In 1956 Coleman moved to Chicago, part of a migratory Memphis wave that included friends Harold Mabern, Frank Strozier and Booker Little. Though Coleman did very well in the Windy City, he moved to New York in 1958 to join Max Roach and has lived there ever since. Sitting in the Greenwich Village apartment he's called home for over 30 years, the 81-year-old has no lack of vivid memories.

"I try to stay as retired as I can," Coleman laughs, and yet a tenor stands at the ready next to the couch (he's breaking in a new mouthpiece). He casually points to a tenor case nearby; inside is the instrument that he played on Davis' Seven Steps to Heaven and other landmarks of 20th-century culture. His newest recording, A Master Speaks (Smoke Sessions), features pianist Mike LeDonne and drummer George Coleman Jr. (or simply "Junior," as his dad calls him), along with veteran bassist and longtime friend Bob Cranshaw, who worked with Coleman in drummer Walter Perkins' MJT+3 back in the Chicago days. Though A Master Speaks prompts some self-criticism-"I put it together pretty quick, and probably would've wanted more time with it," he comments-it stands as a worthy and satisfying entry in a long and illustrious career.

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The following words are Coleman's own, edited for flow as needed.

Lee Morgan
City Lights (Blue Note, 1957)
Morgan, trumpet; Coleman, tenor and alto saxophones; Curtis Fuller, trombone; Ray Bryant, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Arthur Taylor, drums.

That was [my first jazz recording]. Benny Golson did the arrangements. Lee came through Chicago when I was there and he heard me play. I was probably playing with Walter Perkins during that time, the MJT+3. So Lee told Alfred Lion and they sent me a plane ticket and I came to New York with my alto and tenor, and I did the date. And then I wound up playing with Jimmy Smith on *House Party*, which everybody liked.

Lee Morgan was a fantastic player and musician. He'd be in the studio, and if he needed a tune he'd write it right away. He'd get his pencil out and write it out. I was with Lee about a year. All the people I've been with, strangely, I've only been there a year, or maybe a little over.

Max Roach
Deeds, Not Words (Riverside, 1958)
Roach, drums; Coleman, tenor saxophone; Booker Little, trumpet; Ray Draper, tuba; Art Davis, bass.

"Deeds, Not Words" is the song that Bill Lee wrote, Spike Lee's father, a fantastic bassist and musician. [Ed. note: The album includes two pieces by Lee.] Art Davis played bass. I always enjoyed Art, because he was brilliant. One time we were getting ready to record at Newport with Max [for Max Roach + 4 at Newport, 1958], and Art was getting out of a taxi and the door slammed on his finger-split it open, man. He taped it up, man, and all that fast stuff you hear on the record? He's playing the bass with his fingers taped up. And this is his plucking finger, too.

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It was unusual for us to be playing all of that brisk music [with] Ray Draper there with the tuba, but he managed to get through it pretty good. Ray was a good musician; he wrote too. He had a problem, though, like a lot of guys during that era.

Man, you talkin' about playing fast, and you had to know your harmony to be in Max's band, if you want to play changes without hearing them, because there's nothing but a bass. We were playing changes. Ray would play outside sometimes, but Booker and I were playing changes: "Love for Sale," "Cherokee," "Lover." We only had about one ballad, and we played "Valse Hot," a slow three. But all the other stuff was breakneck tempo. And it worked. I would play maybe 10 choruses, Booker would play maybe 15 or 20 and Max would play another 40 or 50. This was live at the clubs.

The Slide Hampton Octet
Somethin' Sanctified (Atlantic, 1960)
Hampton, trombone, euphonium, arranger; Coleman, tenor saxophone; Charles Greenlee, trombone, euphonium; Richard Williams, Hobart Dotson, trumpets; Jay Cameron, baritone saxophone, bass clarinet; Larry Ridley, bass; Pete La Roca, drums.

Slide is just phenomenal. In the octet I had the opportunity to write, and I hadn't been writing for trombone-the bass clef was a little bit away from me. So in the octet I had an opportunity to really get with that bass clef. I arranged "Minority," "Star Eyes," might have been something else. [Ed. note: Coleman is referring to the octet's work in general, as those tunes do not appear on *Somethin' Sanctified*.]

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Charles Greenlee was playing euphonium, and Slide played it also. It's written just like a trombone, with the same sound but with valves. It's one of those marginal kind of instruments. It's got that French horn-type thing.

Hobart Dotson was a great trumpet player. Real lead player, you know. I encouraged him to start soloing, because he would never solo. He would sit back there and play those parts, good sight-reader, had a good sound. So on "Star Eyes," I said, "Man, when you gonna take a solo?" He was so happy. Played good changes on it. Everybody in the band would always applaud him, and he would take his bow. Good guy. [Everyone save for Hampton and Ridley] is gone, man, but they were there during that time and they really made a statement.

Booker Little
Victory and Sorrow a.k.a. Booker Little and Friend (Bethlehem, 1960)
Little, trumpet; Coleman, tenor saxophone; Julian Priester, trombone; Don Friedman, piano; Reggie Workman, bass; Pete La Roca, drums.

That was one of Booker's classics. He had a lot of compositions on there too. Very interesting voicings and things. He was just a young guy! He would sit at the piano and put this stuff together. Twenty-three years old, man! [Ed. note: Little died at age 23, in October 1961.] And he was playing like that when he was 16 or 17. I remember the first time I heard him play he had transcribed Miles' trumpet solo on "Star Eyes" with Bird. So I was playing the changes on piano and he played the solo note for note. This was back in Memphis. It was that early.

Miles Davis
The Complete Concert 1964: My Funny Valentine + 'Four' & More (Columbia/Legacy, 1992)
Davis, trumpet; Coleman, tenor saxophone; Herbie Hancock, piano; Ron Carter, bass; Tony Williams, drums.

We always felt, all of us, that it was not our best [performance] that particular night. But the rest is history and people have embraced it. The things we were doing, the tempo changes and all of that stuff, that was unrehearsed. Tony, Herbie and Ron would come in and do that just out of the clear; they had their thing together and I would put certain harmonic things into the songs that we played. I would introduce the harmonics and Herbie would hear it. His ears were so sharp, if you hit one note he could put a chord under there and you'd say, "What kind of chord was that?" But it'd be right on the money.

I was a change player, and Miles liked that in me too; he'd say, "You like to play that perfect stuff." That was my concept. I'd always try to put some harmonic direction in whatever I played. But I went out a little bit, and they really wanted me to go out.

There's a "Bye Bye Blackbird" from the Juan-les-Pins concert in France-I kind of like that one myself! [Ed. note: This track was left off the original Miles in Europe but is available on Columbia/Legacy's *Seven Steps* box set from 2004.] A lot of things I wasn't crazy about, but I liked that because you don't hear it too much. You don't hear the "Blackbird" thing. And "Joshua," too: I probably played better "Joshua" on that than I ever played, because "Joshua" is kind of … that was one of those complex things, somewhat. It was a nice atmosphere down in the French Riviera-sun is shining bright, the water's there, you go out on the paddle boats, a lot of romance in the air. It was a really great setting for Miles' band.

Herbie Hancock
Maiden Voyage (Blue Note, 1965)
Hancock, piano; Coleman, tenor saxophone; Freddie Hubbard, trumpet; Ron Carter, bass; Tony Williams, drums.

The Alfred Lion series of Blue Note recordings did not entail a lot of rehearsal. We went to a place on Broadway called Lynn Oliver Studios. Back in the '50s and '60s, that's where everybody would go for Blue Note. We'd have a two-hour rehearsal. Next day we'd meet at the Empire Hotel on 63rd Street and Broadway and he'd have a taxi waiting for us, and we would go to Rudy Van Gelder's [in New Jersey] and record.

We didn't have time to really absorb [Hancock's compositions], to analyze the harmonic structures. "Maiden Voyage" was simple but unusual somewhat, minor thirds, sus-four chords-and we just had to play a solo right away. "Dolphin Dance" was another song, a lot of changes and a lot of suspended changes too, so you had to analyze that. Freddie played great on all those things.

In retrospect there were some tempo issues [with this rhythm section], but they had such a groove and a feeling that it didn't matter. Jimmy Heath asked me, "Man, how could you play behind that scrambled stuff?" I said that I had to lay back and wait sometimes. They were missing the beat on some of that fast stuff. It wasn't precise choruses but it came off. Most laymen would never know that-probably even some musicians wouldn't. But Jimmy, he knew it.

Chet Baker
Boppin' With the Chet Baker Quintet (Prestige, 1965)
Baker, trumpet; Coleman, tenor saxophone; Kirk Lightsey, piano; Herman Wright, bass; Roy Brooks, drums.

That was a wonderful date. We did five of those LPs [including *Smokin'*, *Groovin'*, *Comin' On, Cool Burnin'*]. Chet's chops were not the greatest and, of course, he was dealing with his affliction. We would record for maybe an hour or two, and then Chet would have to cut out, get his stuff taken care of.

It was quite a revelation for me, because I had never played with him and I didn't know he could play that great. When he put that trumpet to his mouth, man, some stuff came out of there-some real, *real* bebop. And he was sick, you know.

Richard Carpenter brought me on; he was the producer. Jimmy Mundy was doing the arrangements. We had some charts for most of that stuff, all the Tadd Dameron tunes. I played counterlines off the top of my head on things like "Fine and Dandy." I never worked with Chet after that. People thought we had a band together! But it was really significant and very inspirational.

Elvin Jones
Live at the Village Vanguard (Enja, 1968)
Jones, drums; Coleman, tenor saxophone; Wilbur Little, bass.

I wound up in a lot of piano-less bands, and I wasn't crazy about no piano-even now I still like a keyboard. But I developed a new perspective and a new way of playing with that kind of setup.

Elvin was a tremendous experience. That was a great date but there were some economic issues-I think I might have got about $150 for that, if that. They put it out but the money got lost somewhere, or my portion of the money.

But it was cool. The record was so good, it was spontaneous; we played a ballad ["Laura"] with no piano. And then when [fellow saxophonist] Frank Foster came in [on *Coalition*, 1970], it was even better. Frank and I had extrasensory perception: He played something and I put harmony to it; I played something and he put harmony to it. We were creating arrangements just right from the top. And of course playing with Elvin, who would swing you to death-I mean nobody could play that kind of swing.

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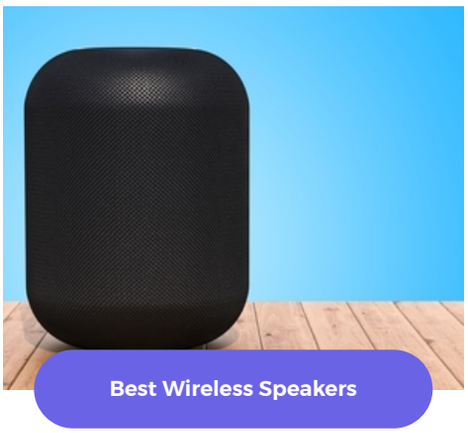

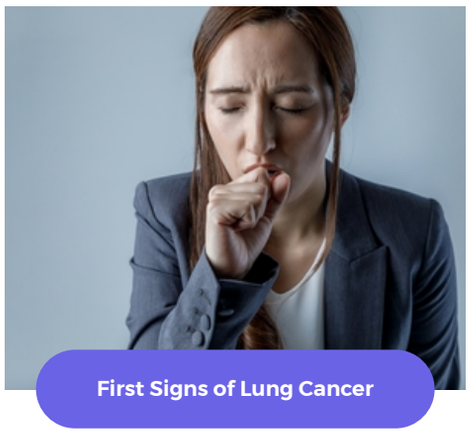

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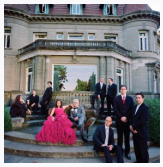

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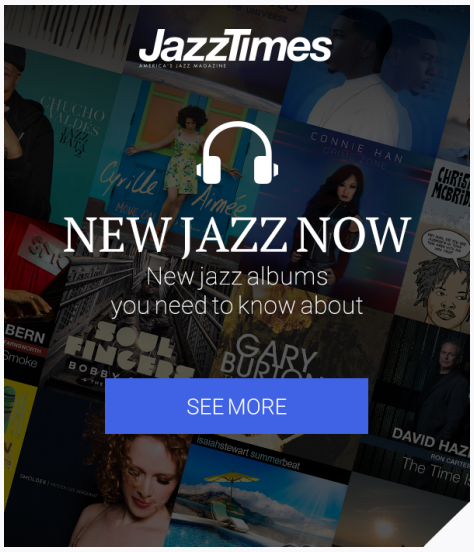

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