

George Coleman: This Gentleman can PLAY

By R.J. DeLuke

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The tenor sax is one of the great emblems of jazz. From Coleman Hawkins to Lester Young, Byas and Ben Webster. Dexter, Trane. Getz and Sonny Rollins, on and on. And today's practitioners like Branford and Brecker, Joshua Redman and James Carter. Hundreds in between, and there among the many lies the immensely talented George Coleman.

We've all enjoyed his fine work, but for some reason, George Coleman sits in a quiet place. Grand publicity has avoided him, but like fine wine, he's aged nicely. He was wonderful and full-bodied going back to the 1950s and has tasted just great over the years. Despite a great career and consistently fine playing, he's one of those guys who doesn't seem to get the acclaim he deserves. Like Clifford Jordan or Von Freeman. But it's Coleman's bright and burnishing tenor that graces Miles Davis' *Four & More* and *My Funny Valentine* the live 1964 concert that stands as a jazz classic. Thought that was Wayne Shorter with Ron and Herbie and Tony? Nope. Look again. How about Hancock's classic *Maiden Voyage*? That was Wayne, right? Wrong. George Coleman.

Coleman's tenure with Miles was very important and influential, though relatively brief. Perhaps if there had been a really good New York Yankees centerfielder between DiMaggio and Mantle, his name wouldn't readily jump to mind in barroom sports discussions. Coleman is the best who served between Coltrane and Shorter in Miles' revered bands. So be it.

Coleman isn't bitter about it at all or disappointed. A self-taught player, writer and arranger, he's proud of his accomplishments. But in his guy-next-door, laid-back manner he does find it curious sometimes that his name isn't featured more prominently. Perhaps history will be kinder in that regard.

Unfortunately, that history may be coming soon, because Coleman is ready to retire, he says. Tried to do it this year, but there was a lot of good work and he delayed it. In 2003, people are likely to see very little, if anything, of Coleman. Our loss, but Coleman's earned a time of relaxation, having tired of the rigors of the road. At 67 (born March 8, 1935 in Memphis) Coleman hopes to step aside, if his axe doesn't call him from the closet from time to time.

Before his departure, Coleman's left us with more good work, linking back to his ties with Miles, he plays tenor on the new *4 Generations of Miles*, a live disc in which he joins fellow Miles alumni Ron Carter, Jimmy Cobb and Mike Stern on a series of tunes well known from the Davis book. It's a very solid CD of covers, and Coleman manipulates the numbers in fine fashion. "All Blues," "Green Dolphin Street," "Freddie Freeloader," "Blue in Green," "My Funny Valentine" and more from the mainstream Miles (even though Stern played in the electronic 1980s) are all performed with a nice edge. It's a good statement by all, with typically fine rhythms from the ageless Cobb, rock solid support and sweet tone from Carter's bass and edgy and angular guitar from Stern.

"This is just one of the so-called concept albums," he said matter-of-factly. "But apparently, it's worked into a pretty good idea, from the acclaim that it's getting. Jimmy and I have played together. Ron and I played together in a band. I hadn't played with Mike Stern. I didn't really know the young man until they started mentioning his name. Then I had the opportunity to actually meet him and he's a nice guy. His forte is really rock. Considering that, I thought he did a real good job with us. That was basically what we did, Miles repertoire through the years, the things that he's recorded. So this is what we were trying to get across, convey this thought on the album. It came out pretty good actually."

His biggest break as a young man was touring with blues legend B.B. King, which got him out of Memphis. In addition to his wide exposure with Miles, in 1958 Max Roach asked Coleman, then living in Chicago, to join his band, which included Kenny Dorham at the time and later Booker Little. He moved to New York later in the year, through his career has worked with Gene Ammons and Johnny Griffin, Slide Hampton's octet, Lionel Hampton, Lee Morgan, Charles Mingus, Chet Baker, Ahmad Jamal and Betty Carter and many more. He's got several quality albums to his own name and is the recipient of a New York Jazz Award presented by New Jazz Audiences and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Jazz Foundation of America. It's a full musical life.

"I'm looking at semi-retirement," Coleman said. "I announced my retirement last year. But the beginning of this year, there was so much work coming in, and lucrative work, that I couldn't turn it down. I had to un-retire myself. We never like to think of ourselves as being mercenary, but it's a fact of life. Money's what we have to deal with to live."

"I feel like my contributions, from records, teaching experiences with various people I've taught through the years that have gone on to become really great players — that's enough gratification, whether I get any acclaim from the media or the powers that be in the industry," he says quite calmly. Coleman is just a guy who likes to get along. He's modest and comfortable with where he stands.

"There are certain people that are well publicized. Me, I've always been in the background. I've never been bitter about it. I've had people say, as a matter of fact it sounds like a broken record, 'Man, you should be this...Why don't they give you what you deserve,' and all that. I feel I've done enough. I look at myself and I say I've accomplished enough. I've played with some of the great players in the business. Didn't sound too bad. Made a few records of my own. With all these things, I feel like I can retire and be happy."

Coleman said people are always interested in his time with Miles, which brought him great exposure and experience and put him in with the Young Lions of the day, Hancock, Carter and Williams. Pressures and erratic paydays contributed to him leaving, but he made his mark before he left, and has continued to make his mark ever since.

"He had somebody call me and said he wanted me to get in touch with him," said Coleman of Miles, who in *Miles, the Autobiography* calls Coleman a great musician. "Time went by and I never responded, because I didn't know what that was all about. Then finally he called me in person and told me he wanted me to join the band and I accepted. This was in 1963. Immediately after that, we went out to the west coast. During that time it was a sextet with Harold Mabern, Frank Strozier and myself and the other elements, Ron Carter and Jimmy Cobb and Miles Davis. However, we never did record with the sextet. That would have been interesting if we had, though, I think."

"It was hardly even two years. It was really only a year and a few months. But it was quite a rewarding experience for me. I learned a lot. I became a lot freer in my playing during that time than I had previously been. Because I had a chance to stretch out and experiment a little bit. The environment that I was in was fertile ground for me to be able to do this," said Coleman, who acknowledged the legendary rhythm section Miles had put together could have been intimidating to some. "They were young bucks and I was the old man and in some instances I was sort of ridiculed because of that, but it was all in a playful way."

"People even today ask me about these records and they say, 'I wake up in the morning with your solo,' and 'This is some of the greatest stuff.' And it makes me feel good when I hear this," he said. "Especially because ... They had a documentary on Miles, on TV. They were talking about all of his bands. Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter. Do you know through this whole entire thing, of about two hours, my name was not mentioned once? It was unbelievable. It was

almost like someone completely deleted me out of the band. And it was strange, because they said, 'the 1963 band with Tony Williams, Ron Carter and Herbie Hancock.' No word of my name was mentioned. Those were the times I recorded with the band, '63-64. How could they miss? It was very strange. I wasn't perturbed about it, but it made me start wondering. This must have been deliberate. It had to be. I don't know why. I really don't know why."

Coleman said he's often asked why he left that Davis band. He respond with amusement, his voice rising up high as he tells the tale as one might do chatting at barbershop on a Saturday morning. "I say well listen: Because I would be up on the stand some nights when he was not there and the people would think I was Miles Davis. Isn't that bizarre? People had never seen this man! They didn't know whether he played tenor or trumpet or nothin'. They just knew it was Miles Davis. And on several occasions, I had people come up to me and say, 'Oh, Mr. Davis, you were so wonderful.' They really didn't know. They didn't know what he played or nothin'."

"Fortunately, I was able to hold down the fort when he was not there, but it was not like him being there. I was under a tremendous amount of pressure with the club owners, and he wanted me to perform without him."

The reason, Coleman said, is that Miles' was in one of his periods of bad health, particular his ailing hip. (The trumpeter had two hip replacement surgeries in his lifetime).

"He needed a hip operation. He was in constant pain. He would always tell me, 'Man, my hip hurts.' He was in a lot of pain, so some nights he wouldn't show. One night I got him out of the bed. We were in California. We going to perform at this place called Adam's West, a big venue where bands would come in. This particular night, he was laying in bed at the Chateaux Montmartre, where he lived, where all the big Hollywood stars stayed. Very ritzy looking. Really didn't look like a hotel.

"Anyway, I said, 'Look, man, you got to get outta bed. It's tough for me.' So he got up and performed that night. But it was a lot of coercion I had to do. I don't think he ever really understood the amount of pressure I was under when Miles didn't show. That was one of the basic reasons. There were several other little things. That was the main thing, why I left. It was too much pressure on me."

Despite the band's now legendary status, then it was just a working band and payday could be erratic, he said. "These little inconveniences were also prevalent in the band when I was there. But it was a great experience, so I endured these little inconveniences because I gained a lot from just being a part of that band. Any little inconvenience I had to go through, it was worth it. For me to be in that band, playing with him, in that period of time. All the elements there were great for good music."

The albums Coleman made during that time hold the test of time, and his playing is typically solid. On the live session (issued as two albums but now available together on CD) is superb.

"I'm not being egotistical, but I do feel that was some very important music during that period of time. It really showcased him. I enjoyed it, four albums with him when I was there. It was an enjoyable experience and I obtained a lot of knowledge and experience working with him, as I did with all the other great players that I worked with, Max Roach included."

Another recent highly-regarded album where Coleman put his personal stamp was Ahmad Jamal's *Olympia 2000* recorded two years ago in Paris on the occasion of the pianist's 70th birthday. "They know about George Coleman, but I think the world is going to know a little bit more about George as a result of the release of this CD. He plays superbly," Jamal told All About Jazz in an [interview](#) after the CD's release.

"That came out pretty good," said Coleman. "Of course there were some other nights when we might have had some better renditions of that material. That's the way it is. The same thing with Miles' live recordings. None of us felt we had put away an A-concert. We'd say, 'Man, we played much better on that other concert we had.' But then, when we got a chance to listen to it, we found out it came off pretty good, considering." But he's critical of his own playing, always looking for ways to improve.

"When I'm on a record, I'm listening to myself and 90 percent of the time, I'm basically displeased with what I played. I always think of another alternative. Maybe I should have done this on this particular bar or this chord. Sometimes, I haven't had time to research the tune. Like with "How Deep is the Ocean" I probably hadn't played that in about 40 years. And he started off on it, what can I do? I think we might have run it down in a soundcheck rehearsal one time, but we had never played it until that time. Three weeks after we ran it down. Plus the fact that Mr. Jamal is such an improvisational wizard, there's no telling where he might go harmonically. You don't know what kind of chord he's going to play, so you have to listen all the time. I felt like I hadn't had a chance to listen to find out what he was going to do. That made me stay on my toes, playing with him. That was a very, very interesting experience."

Coleman is always on his toes. From his early days in Memphis, a fertile music town, and through the years. His journey gave him valuable experience and confidence. Manassas High School was Coleman's alma mater, which had a mass of talent including Harold Mabern, Booker Little, Frank Strozier, Hank Crawford and Charles Lloyd. The city also had the extraordinary pianist Phineas Newborn. It was in Memphis that Coleman did some work for the great Ray Charles, and a bit later B.B. King heard Coleman in a local band hired the young man to play tenor saxophone.

"My first influence was Charlie Parker. He was probably the uppermost and foremost player to ever come on the scene, playing jazz. I had an opportunity to hear a lot of great players when I was down there. Stan Getz had that popular sound and it was on the jukeboxes during that time. Jazz tunes were on the jukeboxes during that time. Dizzy was on the jukebox. These things were on wax," said Coleman. "I had opportunities to hear various players. We listened to a lot of records down there, we accumulated a lot of jazz. And fortunately during that time we did a lot of playing. Because when I moved from my residence in north Memphis down to Beale Street, things began to happen. I began to get a lot of experience. Running into different musicians playing different styles. Some of the older piano players, some of the modernists, the in-betweens, the boogie woogies. I had a full scope of everything. R&B, you name it. Blues, jazz, everything."

"I'm self-taught, but I was able to absorb all these things from being around these great musicians. I can read music, I can write and arrange. I wrote things for Ray Charles' band when I was 18 years old. Arranged some of his hit records, 'Lonely Avenue' and 'I Got a Woman,' and those things. I was commissioned to do the arrangements for him, because he came through and they needed a band behind him. They gave me the record and I transcribed his stuff. And when he came through he was very happy with everything. The only thing he changed, was a chord on 'Drown in My Own Tears' or one of those things, on the end. That was the only thing he changed on my arrangements.

"All of us had big ears. We could hear stuff on the record and just write it down. But that's what we grew up doing. So when you start talking about Berkley [School of Music In Mass.], and these young men that go there for four years, I learned that stuff in about the first two years of picking up a saxophone," he said with pride.

"It was not only me, some of my contemporaries like Lee Morgan and Frank Foster. Frank Foster was formally trained. He's great. But all of these guys, they learned quickly. I remember Frank Foster sent in an arrangement of 'I'll Remember April,' for the high school band in Memphis and it

was so hip. He had tempo changes and everything. Very well voiced. That was one of the highlights of our band, that arrangement."

Coleman maintained an interest in sports, particularly football, during high school and it took him away from the marching band, "because I was on the field playing football," but he played alto sax in concert band and other school groups that didn't compete with the gridiron. "I liked sports, but I liked music too. In my final year, I gave up football and stuck strictly to music," he said, "and then when I graduated, that was it. I knew that that's what I was going to do for the rest of my life."

The break with B.B. King came in 1955.

"And that's when I made my transition from alto to tenor, because I was playing alto saxophone. He needed a tenor player for the band. So they hired me and he bought me a tenor. And that was it. From 1955 up to the present day, tenor sax has been my forte. Although on occasion I do play alto. And recently maybe a little bit of soprano. But I really concentrate on tenor."

The blues band also provided him with his first lesson in what The Road was really like. For a young George Coleman, it was exciting. Nowadays, to quote his old boss, the thrill is gone.

"We traveled all over the United States," he recalled fondly. "We were traveling in a bus. We weren't doing any flying. Each day we had a series of one-nighters. Sometimes 30 in a row. We were moving all over the place. Sometimes leave that night after the gig and we wouldn't arrive at the next gig until time to hit. We'd get in town maybe 5 o'clock. We wouldn't have the chance to check in. We'd be dressing on the bus. The valets would take the equipment and set up the stage. We put on these uniforms and hit the stand. That was a great experience. My first experience with the road."

"Now, I'm not crazy about it. I've had enough traveling. If I never go anywhere ever again, stay right here in New York, that would be fine with me. Because I've been everywhere. Rome, Vienna, Berlin, London. Many times I've been to these places. These are great places. When you get the opportunity to travel it's a great thing, but sometimes you don't really get a chance to see anything because you're moving. The next day, you're out of there," said the battle-weary sax man.

Through it all, in spite of the difficult nature of the music business and a universal decrease in record sales, Coleman is optimistic about the music to which he devoted his life.

"When I go to Europe and observe their appreciation and how well it's received over there and Japan and places like that, all over the world, rather than here in the United States...When I see that, I realize and I know jazz is alive and well and will always be. It's a very special music. It's for special people," he said. "People who have hip-hop minds and hip-hop ears and rap ears, they aren't suitable to listen to this music. They don't even deserve to listen to it. They don't. The people who are interested in great music, nice sounding music, and creative, slow ballads and uptempo and waltzes. Jazz covers all of those facets. There's some kind of jazz that everybody can appreciate."

"Even if they listen to the guys like – and I like this man, he was great – Grover Washington and Stanley Turrentine. These guys are considered commercial players. But both of them could play. But they play the money music. They're money players, Grover and Gerald Albright, you know. And my good friend Dave Sanborn. Dave studied with me too. He's another money player, but he's a good player."

Sanborn is one of the many Coleman has influenced and it makes him happy to see the funky alto player's success.

"We had some great times together. I gave him some insight on harmony and how to get through changes. And he made an album after we worked together, and a lot of people noticed. They said, 'Wow, man. You're playing some different stuff. Less funky than you used to play.' He attributed it to my instruction, and the time we spent together," said Coleman.

"There are some people I've influenced, maybe never actually taught for any long period of time. Like Eric Alexander. He's a great player and a good friend of mine. Some people said we have similar styles. But he's been by my house, but we didn't get into any long drawn-out lessons. This young man, he was just able, with his musical intelligence, to conceive different things that I do and apply them to his style of playing. But we play differently. There's a been a few others, all over the world. I get a chance to hear from them sometimes.

"There was this one kid from Iceland. He was very talented. No more than 20 years old. Good technique and everything. And we worked together. He had four or five lessons with me. The next thing I know, he was on the bill with me in London with one of his bands from Iceland. So it was a really rewarding experience to see him. I've heard from other people too. They call me up and say, 'That one lesson I took from you was really great and I really appreciate it.' From all over.

"The rewards of my career a lot of people don't know about. But I feel good within myself. I don't publicize it," he said. He was particularly pleased by a mention that David Sanborn gave him in a *People* magazine interview, "because artists of his caliber would not want the world to know that they had studied with anybody. Like Kenny G. He ain't never had nobody to teach him nothing," said Coleman chuckling softly. "He learned everything himself. Those kind of guys. David Sanborn deserves all his recognition and his wealth because he is a sweetheart of a guy."

As for Coleman, pleasure isn't derived just in music. It's his life's work, but it's been work. And there are quieter times ahead that the kindly gentleman is looking forward to.

"I thank the creator every time I return home, touch down at JFK. My wife's OK and the children are fine and my friends are doing well. That's a blessing within itself. I'm in reasonably good health. When I get home I go to my health spa and hang out there. Do some walking. Sit down at the piano. I can find some diversion in retirement. I don't just sit around with nothing to do. There's a lot of things I can do without being out on the road, busting my proverbial balls."

Indeed. More power too him, but here's hoping he keeps an ear out from time to time for that saxophone calling out from the closet.