

## Book Review

### ***Clawing at the Limits of Cool: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and the Greatest Jazz Collaboration Ever***

Farah Jasmine Griffin and Salim Washington  
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#### **Reviewed by Ben Leubner**

One of the greatest things about the collaboration between Miles Davis and John Coltrane during the mid to late 1950s was the fact that it occurred in two stages, with a significant break in between (during the year 1957) when Coltrane played with Thelonious Monk. In fact, one of the better things to come out of the Davis/Coltrane collaboration was the Monk/Coltrane collaboration. The trombonist J.J. Johnson described that band as follows: "Since Charlie Parker, the most electrifying sound that I've heard in contemporary jazz was Coltrane playing with Monk . . . I had never heard that kind of performance—it's not possible to put into words. I just heard something that I've never heard before and I haven't heard since" (Porter 110).

What made this band's brief existence possible? A Miles Davis sucker punch, apparently. As Farrah Jasmine Griffin and Salim Washington recount in *Clawing at the Limits of Cool*, Davis, fed up with Coltrane's inability to successfully kick his drug habit (this was in late 1956, just before Coltrane's sobering spiritual awakening), a habit that led to all sorts of other problems (showing up late, dressing poorly, nodding off on stage), finally approached his tenor saxophonist on an October evening, after Coltrane had indeed showed up "late and high" for a gig, and promptly "slapped him and punched him in the stomach" (149). Griffin and Washington continue: "According to one famous version of the story, Thelonious Monk, who had been visiting them backstage, told Trane and Miles, 'Man, as much as you play on that saxophone, you don't have to take nothing like that; you can come and play with me anytime. And you, Miles, you shouldn't be hitting on him like that.'" There are several versions of the story, of what Monk said, of how Davis replied ("Mind your fucking business"), of how Coltrane just kept nodding off throughout whatever dialogue there was. Whatever happened that night at the Cafe Bohemia, it was a crucial stage in the development and eventual emergence of the John Coltrane who would soon lead what Geoff Dyer, accurately, to my mind (with apologies to Griffin and Washington's subtitle), calls "the greatest creative relationship between four men there has ever been" (202), referring, of course, to the classic Coltrane Quartet. Before then, however, there would first be a second stint with Davis, the highlight of which was the recording of *Kind of Blue*, possibly the most famous jazz album ever made.

*Clawing the Limits of Cool* is about the collaboration between Davis and Coltrane from 1955 to 1960, including their brief separation. The trumpeter and the saxophonist complemented each other perfectly precisely because they were completely different from one another, a dynamic which Griffin and Washington explore at great length. Davis, in his life, was extroverted, intense, even violent. In his playing, though, he was cool, humble, reticent. Coltrane, in his life, was cool, humble, and reticent, while his playing was extroverted, intense, and violent, or, to use a favorite word of Coltrane critics during the late 1950s, "angry." In a 1960 interview with Coltrane (during his last tour with Davis, a European jaunt), Swedish radio host Karl-Erik Lindgren assumes that because "the playing mirrors the personality," Coltrane must have an angry demeanor, or at least angry thoughts on his mind. When asked if he feels angry, though, Coltrane replies calmly, "No, I don't" (Davis). Perhaps the playing does mirror the personality, but in the sense of reversing it, not in the sense of replicating it exactly. This, at least, seems to be the case with both Davis and Coltrane during the years of their collaboration.

What's most admirable about Griffin and Washington's book, though, despite the fact that they do discuss these differences between Davis and Coltrane, is that they don't fall into the simplistic argument of asserting that Coltrane is simply the y axis to Davis's x, the argument which posits that whatever Davis is, or was, Coltrane is, or was, pretty much the opposite. This argument is tempting, of course, because it contains a good deal of truth. But it must be treated as a low rung on a ladder from which one must move on towards more intricate, complex assessments. Both Davis and Coltrane were very much of their time, equally produced by it and involved in the shaping of it, and their personalities and playing reflected, in some sense,

not only the anxiety of that time (marked predominantly by racial tension in what was, after all, still the 1950s) but also the exhilaration attendant upon the gathering momentum of the Civil Rights movement. Griffin and Washington aptly weave the basic characterizations of Davis and Coltrane into this larger, more intricate fabric, the result of which is, not surprisingly, a thoroughly captivating picture. It is at the level of cultural biography, then, that *Clawing at the Limits of Cool* does a particularly good service to its subject, and even though one might like to see more extensive work done in this manner, the work that Griffin and Washington do accomplish (without ever announcing their project as cultural biography) is highly commendable, and goes a long way toward providing the more dynamic presentation of the Davis/Coltrane relationship that's needed.

1955, notes Griffin and Washington, "brought the deaths of Charlie Parker and Emmet Till" (108). This overt pairing is both unusual and completely natural. Parker, of course, was the pioneering alto saxophonist who died at the early age of 34 due to illness brought on in large part by excessive use of heroin, alcohol, and other narcotics. Till was a fourteen year old African-American boy from Chicago who, while visiting family in Mississippi, was kidnapped, beaten, and killed by two white men after he had briefly flirted with a white woman on a prankish dare. The killers, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, were acquitted, proving that in certain essential respects little had changed in the South since the days of Dred Scott. Till's mother, furious and defiant, held an open casket funeral (the body was "brutally beaten and disfigured"), shocking images of which, in newspapers across the country, "helped to galvanize the next phase of the black freedom struggle" (111). Words like "furious" and "defiant" are often used to characterize both Davis's persona and Coltrane's playing, and then there is that even more fundamental word used to describe both: "angry." What Griffin and Washington so clearly aver, though, is that *of course* Davis was angry, especially after he himself, four years after Till's death, was brutally beaten outside of Birdland by a white police officer. And *of course* Coltrane's playing sounded angry; he was born in North Carolina and thus a southerner, but one who returned to and played in the south as rarely as possible due a strong distaste for the racial discrimination that led to attacks like the one which left Till dead and disfigured. While Davis balanced his anger with the beautiful, cool, melancholy tone of his trumpet, Coltrane balanced the fury of his infamous "sheets of sound" with a temperament that was monk-like (and, to some extent, Monk-like). In reality, though, Davis himself was often cool in demeanor (he might have even invented that demeanor) and flurry-prone (if not fury-prone) in his playing, while Coltrane's own tone on the tenor saxophone could be as relaxed and soulful (and yet still intense) as Davis's harmon mute treatment of any ballad.

The implied assertion that subtly announces itself throughout *Clawing at the Limits of Cool* is that the music must be seen (and, more importantly, heard) against the backdrop of the political climate in which it was made. The same forces that killed Emmet Till were in a significant sense, even if only indirectly, also partly responsible for the early death of Charlie Parker. Jazz was, in many respects, a branch of the Civil Rights movement, and improvisation a form of civil disobedience.

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