

Duo Uses Coltrane Tribute to Enter Improvisational Space

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John Coltrane created "Interstellar Space" in 1967, six months before his death at age 40. The recorded duet performance with drummer Rashied Ali is a remarkable musical document, the chronicle of one of the final creative journeys of an improviser who spent virtually his entire life in search of ultimate expressiveness. And the title accurately reflects the real nature of that inner quest.

As an extraordinary expression of personal spirituality, Coltrane's "Interstellar Space" would have made an understandable inclusion in the World Festival of Sacred Music. Somewhat more problematic was the presentation of "Interstellar Space Revisited"—a reexamination of the Coltrane work performed by guitarist Nels Cline and drummer Gregg Bendian on Friday and Saturday nights at the Schindler House in Hollywood.

When Cline introduced the program on Friday, he was quick to insist that the duo's effort was intended as a respectful tribute to Coltrane. One can hardly argue with that sentiment, and it's important to note that Cline and Bendian had already recorded their own version of this historic work three years ago in a critically praised CD.

But a question remained. Although "Interstellar Space" was a remarkable musical statement, it was hardly a substantial composition as such—and certainly not one affording resources for new interpretative versions. Its individual segments, named af-

ter planets ("Mars," "Venus," "Jupiter" and "Saturn" in the original LP version, with "Leo" and "Jupiter Variation" added for the CD release), come across as spontaneous improvisations rather than scored works. Most are based upon minimal thematic material, with the real essence of the work tracing to the brilliantly creative soloing of Coltrane, seamlessly surrounded by Ali's galvanized drumming.

So what are two other players, from different backgrounds, with differing goals, at another time and place, to make of such an intensely personal, inherently impromptu musical expression? For Cline and Bendian, the answer was to use the minimal elements of "Interstellar Space" as the springboard for their own flights of improvisational fancy.

From a musical point of view, that decision—although it had little to do with Coltrane's inner journey—offered plenty of purely musical wiggle room.

Cline's free-flying solos used his electric guitar as an all-purpose sound-generating device. Stroking it with various implements, tossing in feedback sounds and using his impressive technique to generate torrents of notes, his reference point seemed to have more with Jimi Hendrix than Coltrane (not surprising, perhaps, given the impact that Coltrane clearly had upon the rock guitarist). Bendian's contributions were less torrential, especially in comparison to Ali's original performance, but more intriguing in the smaller moments in which he reached into the subtle, texture-producing qualities of his drum kit.