

From Archive to Classic: the Story of the Epic Monk/Coltrane Carnegie Hall Recording
by Alan S. Bergman, IAJE General Counsel

The headline read “A Jazz Discovery Adds a New Note to the Historical Record”. I was reading the April 25th New York Times article by Ben Ratliff when I got a call from my client Thelonious Monk, Jr. who had read the same article. He asked me to look into it immediately.

The article described the discovery by Larry Appelbaum, studio engineer and jazz specialist at the Library of Congress, of a recording for the Voice of America of a Concert at Carnegie Hall on November 29, 1957 of the Thelonious Monk Quartet featuring John Coltrane. When I called Larry and introduced myself as the representative of the Monk family, he told me the now famous story about receiving a tip from Lewis Porter, a leading Coltrane scholar, that there might exist a tape of this concert in the Voice of America archives at the Library of Congress. One of Larry’s primary tasks is to preserve this vast collection by digitizing the aging and fragile tapes. In a cardboard box of tapes Larry had been given for digitization, he found one marked “T. Monk” and according to Larry, “It got my heart racing.” When he listened to it, he knew what he had.

T.S. Monk and Doug Yoel, marketing director for the family-owned, Thelonious Records label came to my office the day the CD arrived from Washington to discuss our plan of action. When T.S. came to my office he put his hat on my couch. At one point in the conversation I looked at the hat and said, “Well, if Thelonious was sitting under that hat, what would he say?” to which T.S. responded, “Get me some bread, man.” And so the process began, ending with the extraordinarily successful Blue Note album release on September 27th, 2005.

Although the Library of Congress made no claim to ownership of the tapes and gave all rights to us, we knew this would be a complex process requiring a joint effort of many elements to make it successful.

First, there was the Coltrane Estate, represented by my old friend Bill Kaplan. I first met Bill when he was my boss at ABC Records/Impulse in the late 60’s. That was the golden era of the ABC and Impulse labels with Ray Charles, Oliver Nelson, Archie Shepp, Pharaoh Sanders, producer Bob Thiele and of course, John Coltrane. When Bill left ABC to join a large law firm in California, I took his place. Bill eventually became the attorney for the Coltrane Estate in California and we have kept in touch through the years.

The first thing we did was work out an arrangement to make this in effect a joint venture between Thelonious Records and the Coltrane company, Jowcol Music. Bill and I were in constant touch throughout the entire process although I took the lead with the labels in New York. We narrowed the list to Blue Note, Verve and Sony. We also considered Concord which had recently bought the Fantasy catalog, the successor in

interest to the original Riverside and Prestige labels to whom Monk and Coltrane were signed respectively at the time of the concert. Bill kept in touch with Alice and Ravi Coltrane and I did the same with T.S. and Thelonious Records. I was also the contact with Carnegie Hall and their representative, Anna Weber. Negotiations with Carnegie Hall enabled us to use the name on the front cover of the album.

After I had initial discussions with various labels, we arranged a dinner to discuss strategy. I chose the Princeton Club in New York and those in attendance were Ravi Coltrane and his wife, T.S. Monk, Doug Yoel, Anna Sala (Ravi's manager) and myself. In toasting the dinner I remember saying to the group, "Who could have ever imagined that one day I would be having dinner at the Princeton Club with Monk and Coltrane."

At the meeting it was decided that Blue Note was our first choice although there was enormous interest from other fine labels. One executive from another label opened his conversation with the comment, "I have five words for you, Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig."

Our decision to go with Blue Note was based on historical as well as personal reasons. Bruce Lundvall, the Blue Note president and Michael Cuscuna, his A&R director are long time Blue Note executives who both know and love the music and have years of experience distributing jazz. The classic Blue Note catalog contained the very first Thelonious Monk albums as well as John Coltrane's classic album "Blue Train". They not only have one of the great jazz catalogs but they are also one of the few major labels still looking for and signing new artists.

Blue Note was our choice but time was very short. We wanted a fall release and it was already May. If this was going to get done, everyone would have to cooperate. Fortunately Blue Note was up to the task.

Bruce and Michael made themselves completely available and made this project a top priority for the entire company. We fashioned a highly complex, worldwide licensing deal which was essentially a joint imprint with Blue Note and Thelonious Records. The album was a production of Thelonious Records and Blue Note was the worldwide distributor through its EMI licensees in Europe, Japan and elsewhere. Other issues to resolve included, term of the license, royalties and advances, foreign marketing and release and division of responsibilities between Blue Note and Thelonious Records.

The cooperation of the Blue Note legal department was essential and David Tockman, their senior attorney drafted a relatively short agreement in a matter of days. After some back and forth with Bill Kaplan and several re-drafts, in less than two weeks, we were ready to sign.

When I finally called Larry Appelbaum and told him we had a deal and we needed the original tape, he said he would bring it up from D.C. but he could not leave it. He had to take it back with him since the actual tape belonged to the Voice of America, and consequently the Library of Congress. We had arranged to have a celebratory lunch

hosted by Bruce Lundvall with Larry and Michael at Joe Allen's on West 45th Street. Michael and Larry went to the studio where the transfer was to take place. Larry left for our lunch but Michael Cuscuna said to everyone, "You guys go and have a nice lunch, I'm not letting that tape out of my sight,".

In the meantime, T.S. Monk who with Michael Cuscuna is the co-producer of the album, wanted to remaster the album and brought it to Grand Mixer DXT, who has been mixing and remixing records for Herbie Hancock and others for many years. Blue Note also made a remix, but when Cuscuna and T.S listened to both, it was clear that the DXT version was superior, and that's the one on the final album.

When it came to writing CD booklet notes, there was so much to write about that it was decided to ask six people to submit pieces: Amiri Baraka, Ira Gitler, Ashley Kahn, the author of the excellent book on Coltrane, "A Love Supreme", Stanley Crouch, the renowned jazz writer, Robin D.G. Kelley, the official Monk biographer, and Lewis Porter, who initially put Larry Appelbaum on the track to the album and is a jazz professor at Rutgers Newark and author of "John Coltrane, His Life in Music." The booklet also contains a piece by Larry Appelbaum about the Library of Congress and its processing, cataloging and preserving Voice of America recordings. In 1963 The Library acquired this collection which contains over 50,000 recording of music and other cultural events. The Library of Congress has the collections of Ella Fitzgerald, Charles Mingus, Gerry Mulligan and Billy Taylor as well as the famous 1938 Jelly Roll Morton oral history.

As legendary as this performance was, it was actually just one part of an extraordinary benefit concert for the Morningside Community Center at Carnegie Hall that night, which also featured Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie and his Orchestra, Chet Baker and Zoot Sims, Sonny Rollins and Ray Charles. Ticket price? \$2.00 - \$3.95 (tax exempt).

In addition to the mastering process, other elements of the project began to fall in place. Although the CD booklet does contain several excellent photographs, there was nothing to use for a cover which could really express the monumental importance of this recording. Felix Sockwell did the cover illustration which was finally accepted, and Burton Yount of the Blue Note art department supervised the process with Gordon H. Jee. A brilliant marketing effort was supervised by Tom Evered, Cem Kurosman, and Perry Greenfield at Blue Note, and Doug Yoel and Sandra Tremdacosta at Thelonious Records. Both Ravi Coltrane and T.S. Monk have given of their time extensively for interviews, and Ravi will be performing at this year's IAJE convention in New York. T.S. will be making an appearance at a panel with Larry Appelbaum to discuss the discovery and production of this album.

For an album like this, press and radio, especially public radio are essential. The first week after its release, an unprecedented three different programs featuring the album aired on NPR including the high profile, All Things Considered and Terry Gross' Fresh Air. This immediately translated to a jump to number one on the Amazon chart where it

stayed for over a week. That's not the jazz album chart, where it was also number one, but the pop album chart, outselling artists like Neil Young, Barbra Streisand, the Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney and Sheryl Crow.

The reviews and the press have been unbelievable. It was unanimously acclaimed an instant classic and Nat Hentoff called it a masterpiece. One writer called it the "perfect storm" of recordings. It combines an album of great historical significance by two giants who played together for a very short time before moving on to separate careers which in different ways changed the direction of jazz forever. Coltrane's unmistakable, 'Sheets of Sound' style very evident in this recording was soon to become the volcanic, emotional and spiritual explosion of "A Love Supreme". Monk's genius as a player and composer can be heard to this day in the playing of serious jazz players of all ages. The album also has superb sound quality, it has that great story about its discovery and, most importantly and most enduringly, displays these two giants and their sidemen performing at the very zenith of their musical powers.

As the extraordinary sales potential of this album began to materialize, I called Bruce Lundvall and asked him, "Have you ever had this experience with a jazz record?" Bruce, who started his career with Columbia Records in the 50s replied, "Never!"

I agree.