

"It's powerful to hear that quality of tension-and-release on the great Coltrane records, but to actually experience it first-hand is incredible."

asked for the *montunos*," Gonzalez says, referring to the triplet-based vamps that counterstate the drumbeats of clave. "I had Charlie Palmieri play a real down-home, Cuban-dance-rhythm montuno at him, and it was fascinating to hear him answer it with his own chords and rhythmic feel. It was effortless. Montunos are related to the kinds of pentatonic modal scales that Coltrane was working on, and improvising in those kinds of modes is really McCoy's forte. That's very African, very deep-rooted, getting to the very beginnings of music."

Gonzalez mentions a late '60s conversation with Tyner during a set break at Slugs, an infamous club on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The pianist revealed that a window opened for him after a concert at Harlem's Apollo Theater when Coltrane, sharing the bill with Machito, borrowed the Cuban bandleader's bassist, Bobby Rodriguez, to fill in for an absent Jimmy Garrison. Tyner confirms this. He also emphasizes the impact of Nigerian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji, to whom Coltrane was close, on sustaining his own awareness of African roots. But African music entered Tyner's consciousness in the early '50s, when a Ghanaian drummer named Saka Acquaye arrived at Philadelphia's Temple University to study political science, and earned tuition money by teaching African rhythms to local drummers at a dance school that employed the teenage pianist as an accompanist.

"I fooled around with the drums, but the joints of my fingers started to hurt, and I had enough sense to stop," says Tyner, who began formal piano studies about a year before the drummer came to town. "I observed Saka and learned how to connect one rhythm with another, how to operate with different layers of rhythm. I was fascinated with the drums even before I met him, and I've incorporated those rhythms into my style along with other things."

Tyner acknowledges regarding the piano as a kind of extended drum.

"Thelonious Monk did, too. Monk was very percussive and rhythmic. He'd do stuff that was off-rhythm or against the rhythm or tempo of the song. It was miraculous to me how he could interject so much feeling and depth into such simple ideas. It wasn't about how many notes he played. It was the immediacy, the spontaneity of the situation. He taught me that what's important is what you do with the idea you're trying to portray — the will to push the envelope."

While Tyner's ensembles at Damrosch Park and Iridium played with a palpable attitude of freedom, critics cite numerous '80s and '90s recordings and performances with less resourceful partners on which his playing sounds attenuated and rudimentary, as though he felt responsible, say, for stating both the drum and piano parts. "I have a mixed personality in that respect," Tyner admits. "I have a controlled sense of experimentation. I go outside, but there has to be something to work with. I conceived one tune on the new record as having no melody; we just used tonal centers, moved from one tone, one sound, one cluster, to another. I had that experience playing with John. But I use it when it's appropriate for me, not as a main way to express myself. It's a tool, and that's all. I'm not trying to prove anything to anyone, and I don't want everything to be predetermined. It's not artistic."

Perhaps that sentiment explains why, last year, Tyner decided that his two-decade association with bassist Avery Sharpe and drummer Aaron Scott had "served its purpose for that time period" and formed the current rotating unit with bassists Moffett and George Mraz, and with either Foster, Eric Harland, or Lewis Nash on drums. "You can't get so attached to someone that you restrict them from doing what they ultimately have to do," he explains. "I had my previous trio for a long time because I hadn't heard anyone — and I knew there were guys around — who could really do what I was looking for. Then they came along. The right thing always comes around eventually." >>>