



JIMMY GARRISON

COLTRANE'S HEARTBEAT

BY TERRELL K. HOLMES

This month marks the centennial of John Coltrane, the saxophonist, composer and bandleader of boundless innovation and creativity, a once polarizing figure who has become a global musical icon. His Classic Quartet recorded a number of timeless albums and set a standard for live performance that bands still try to reach today. Although Coltrane, drummer Elvin Jones and pianist McCoy Tyner have been widely celebrated, bassist Jimmy Garrison has been somewhat overlooked. Small in stature but robust in sound and technique, Garrison was the propulsive force behind that great ensemble. He also did significant work outside of Coltrane's orbit, and his influence endures across generations.

James Emory Garrison was born Mar. 3, 1934, in Americus, GA. At age 10, his family moved to Philadelphia, where he started playing bass during his senior year of high school. Fortuitously, '50s Philadelphia was a hard bop incubator, nurturing luminaries including Coltrane, Tyner, trumpeter Lee Morgan, and fellow bassists Henry Grimes and Reggie Workman. "Most of the musicians who were in Philadelphia knew one another, so I knew Jimmy," Workman recalls. "We became friends and we got a little bit closer when I moved to New York, as he was also in New York at that time [and] our paths crossed a lot. He was very jovial, very straightforward, made a lot of jokes, and had a very positive attitude."

Garrison developed his chops by playing and recording with a first-call roster including Bill Evans, Kenny Dorham and Jackie McLean. But it was his work with Ornette Coleman, especially on *Ornette on Tenor* (Atlantic, 1961), that earned him wider notice. It also put him on Coltrane's radar, and Garrison joined his group for the famous Village Vanguard shows in November 1961. "Jimmy was invited by John to come down and sit in, because at that time my father was dying of cancer and I was going back and forth to Philadelphia," Workman explains. "I told John, 'I'm sorry about my inconsistency but I have family problems.' And John told me, 'Well, I'm sorry, too, but I'm intending to do something different anyway.' In other words, he was telling me that he liked what I had done but he was ready to make a change. [Ornette] and John were very close, so he told John, 'Why don't you try Jimmy, because I like Jimmy's style.'"

Garrison established himself during those Vanguard shows, pulsating on epics such as "Chasin' the Trane" and "Impressions". He would then spend the next six years with Coltrane until the saxophonist's death in 1967. In that time the Classic Quartet recorded some of the most memorable music of any genre. Ashley Kahn, author of *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album*, notes, "Jimmy Garrison had a very important role supporting that incredible all-star Coltrane group... For me, there was a physicality to his playing that was incredibly non-intrusive but at the same time you felt the wood...not aggressive, but very physical and you feel the elements that go into a bass. I love that, and I'm sure that was a big thing for Coltrane, too, that push forward and his fingers on the fretboard that was part of his signature."

Two generations younger than Garrison, bassist Dezron Douglas says, "There are a lot of bass players who need to be reminded that they play the bass." He continues, "This is a support instrument first...The way he plays his bass lines, he's communicating. It's like a dance where there's rules of engagement. It's probably the quality I love in Jimmy Garrison the most."

William Parker, a free jazz bass stalwart and Garrison's former student, observes, "You can't go note for note with a strong musician because that's not your role. Your role is to push, not follow, complement and not borrow. [Jimmy] showed me that that's what I'm supposed to do. He had a knack for connecting phrases; he was writing poems with his bass. But there was also this rhythmic thing happening when he and Elvin played together. There was this drive, there was this bounce, what you'd call—the dance," reiterating Douglas' comment.

Garrison recorded only one album as a leader, the co-led *Illumination!* (Impulse!, 1963) with Elvin Jones, but he appeared on notable albums by Curtis Fuller, Lee Konitz, Philly Joe Jones, Sonny Rollins, Alice Coltrane and Archie Shepp, among others. In 1967 Garrison recorded *Impressions of New York* (Impulse!) with the Rolf and Joachim Kühn Quartet, a suite of open, free-flowing music. "My brother [clarinetist Rolf] lived in New York from 1950 to 1961," pianist Joachim recalls. "In his last quartet in New York there was Jimmy Garrison, drummer Pete LaRoca and on piano Al Haig. He was raving about the rhythm section when he came back to Germany. We played [the Newport Jazz Festival] on July 3rd, 1967." The Kühns' quartet at the time included drummer Aldo Romano and bassist Jean-François Jenny-Clark, but according to Joachim, "Jenny-Clark had to go into the army, so my brother said, 'I'll call Jimmy Garrison.'" Garrison met the brothers the day before, rehearsed two hours, then went to Newport to perform. "Since Jimmy was a very friendly person, we asked him, 'Do you think it would be possible to meet John Coltrane?' He said, 'I'll call and ask him.' So we played in Newport in the afternoon and [producer] Bob Thiele saw the concert. He came to our dressing room afterward and said, 'I like what I heard. Do you want to make an album for Impulse?' It was incredible that he was there to listen to us...because Jimmy was playing with us."

"Later, Jimmy said that he spoke to Coltrane and he was OK to meet us. It was July 10th. So my brother called and Alice [Coltrane] answered the phone. She said, 'John doesn't feel good this week. Can you call back next week?'," remembers Joachim, of course disappointed. A week later, the doorbell of the Kuhn's NYC apartment rang at seven in the morning. "We opened the door and Jimmy was there. He said, 'Coltrane is dead. Put on the radio.' We let him in, I made coffee, and the radio was already playing Coltrane's music. Jimmy stayed about an hour and then said, 'I have to go.' I'd never seen somebody so sad." For the Kühns' session with Garrison, scheduled a few days after Coltrane's passing, Joachim suggested that they not play any tunes on the record, but instead just a long suite: "Bob Thiele was the perfect producer. He didn't say a word, he just let us do it," Joachim says. "We just talked about the solos and that was it." On side one, which includes "The Saddest Day" (for the day Coltrane died), Garrison takes a stunning, emotional, three-minute solo.

Matt Garrison, Jimmy's son (b. Jun. 2, 1970) and godson to the late drummer Jack DeJohnette, is a highly regarded electric bassist. He is also co-founder of the cutting-edge, Park Slope, Brooklyn performance space, ShapeShifter Lab. Sadly, Matt was very young when his father succumbed to lung cancer at age 42 (on Apr. 7, 1976). "I do have vague memories of him being around the house, but it was early on," Matt says. "My father and mother [dancer and choreographer Roberta Escamilla

Garrison] separated and eventually divorced. They got back together again when I was about six, towards the end when he was very sick. That's when I have memories of hanging out with him. The most vivid memory I have is when they got married again the day before he died at the loft."

Matt learned about his father from his family, his father's friends and other musicians. "I always have this sense that my playing in the field that he was playing in, with a lot of the musicians that knew him, was my way of connecting to my father, because any time I play with those cats they would enlighten me with some amazing story of him. I guess I just kept playing more of this music because I wanted to hear more of those stories." Matt has proudly incorporated some things his father did on the bass into his own playing: "An album I've been putting on continuous rotation is *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman*. Jimmy just puts those notes down solidly, but it's just so gentle at the same time. That little slide, or this little move, or this little syncopation, or the way he delayed that note or pushed it forward, I try to incorporate all of it. If you listen to a period of bass playing before Jimmy and after, it is very clear and distinct what he brought to the table. He's definitely the unsung hero of the (Coltrane) Quartet. But when it comes to musicians, they know exactly what Jimmy did, and that's what I really want to focus on during this event that we're presenting."

That event is the "John Coltrane Centennial 2026: Celebrating Jimmy Garrison" two-day tribute this month at ShapeShifter Lab, presented by the 501(c)(3) non-profit ShapeShifter Plus. It will include music, spoken word and visual arts, and feature Matt and fellow bassists Reggie Workman, Stanley Clarke and John Patitucci, as well as saxophonist Ravi Coltrane (son of John) and others. Matt is passionate about what he wants the audience to take away from the celebration: "I want them to know more about who Jimmy was. I want people to understand a little bit of history as observed by people who were close to him, or knew him, because some of them worked with both [Coltrane and Garrison], and God bless that they're still around. And I want there to be that understanding that you can take something from what those people left us and then push it to the next space...So it's past, present and future."

For more info visit shapeshifterplus.org. Presented by ShapeShifter Plus, "John Coltrane Centennial: Celebrating Jimmy Garrison" is at ShapeShifter Lab Sep. 16-17. Other Coltrane centennial events are at The Pocket Sep. 19-20 (with Conrad Herwig), Birdland Sep. 22-26 (with Steve Smith), NY Public Library Sep. 23 (with Ashley Kahn), Marcus Garvey Park Sep. 23 (presented by Jazzmobile), Janes United Methodist Church Sep. 23 (with James Carter), Zinc Bar Sep. 23 (with Abraham Burton), Dizzy's Club Sep. 22-27 (with Roxy Coss, Ron Blake, Camille Thurman, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Wayne Escoffery) and Five Spot Jazz Sep. 25-26 (with Ralph Bowen). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- John Coltrane Quartet — *Coltrane* (Impulse!, 1962)
- John Coltrane — *A Love Supreme* (Impulse!, 1964)
- Sonny Rollins — *East Broadway Rundown* (Impulse!, 1966)
- Archie Shepp — *Life at the Donaueschingen Music Festival* (SABA, 1967)
- Elvin Jones — *Puttin' It Together* (Blue Note, 1968)
- Ornette Coleman — *New York is Now* (Blue Note, 1968)