

EMPEROR JONES: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE ELVIN JONES TRIO BLUE NOTE SESSIONS

INTRODUCTION

Elvin Ray Jones was born on September 9, 1927 in Pontiac, Michigan and was the youngest of ten children, three of which (Thad, Hank, & Elvin) would become major figures in jazz history. With music around every corner in his home, Elvin was determined to become a drummer by the time he was a teenager, practicing up to ten hours per day, listening to his influences (Kenny Clarke & Max Roach), and carrying drumsticks with him wherever he went. At age 19, Elvin enlisted in the Army, and became, among all things, a stagehand for a touring production called Operation Happiness. Although not exactly what he had envisioned, Elvin did have opportunities to hone his skills, playing drums at service related parties and affairs. Upon returning home in 1949, Elvin became a part of the blossoming Detroit jazz scene and in three years time had backed visiting jazz artists such as Charlie Parker and Sonny Stitt, and played with Miles Davis for six months. In Detroit, Elvin's burgeoning resume continued to grow, adding names like Tommy Flanagan, Pepper Adams, Barry Harris, Kenny Burrell, Milt Jackson, and Yusef Lateef. In 1955 Elvin journeyed to New York to audition for the Benny Goodman Band, but instead landed a gig playing with Charles Mingus, which lead to other gigs with Bud Powell, Tyree Glenn, Stan Getz, and J.J. Johnson. Then in 1957, Elvin played a gig with tenor man Sonny Rollins and bassist Wilbur Ware at the famed Village Vanguard in New York City that invariably secured his spot as one of the most innovative drummers in jazz. Recorded for Blue Note Records, the gig was released as A Night At The Village Vanguard and made the entire jazz community aware of the incredible talent of Elvin Jones.

Although the Vanguard recording was a success, Elvin didn't get his big break until 1960. It was during this year that leading tenor man John Coltrane decided to leave the Miles Davis Quintet, a band he had played with since 1955, to form a quartet of his own. Elvin got the call and joined Coltrane, pianist McCoy Tyner, and bassist Jimmy Garrison in Denver, Colorado where he played his first gig with the band that would become known as the "Classic Quartet." A string of landmark recordings followed, culminating in one of the single, most artistic, spiritual, and influential records in jazz

history, Coltrane's 1964 masterpiece A Love Supreme, which firmly secured the groups legendary status. As Coltrane's artistic vision expanded, he added a second drummer, Rashied Ali, in 1965, which displeased Elvin, ultimately resulting in his departure from the group.

After a brief tour with the Duke Ellington Orchestra in March 1966, Elvin returned to New York and married Keiko, a woman who would become his life partner, both in matrimony and in music. By the end of 1966 Elvin made the decision to form his own group, a piano-less trio featuring Coltrane alumnus Jimmy Garrison on bass and multi-instrumentalist and tenor man Joe Farrell. Garrison, who grew up in Philadelphia, had freelanced with Bill Evans and Lennie Tristano before replacing Charlie Haden in the Ornette Coleman Quartet. He too was picked up by Coltrane, but unlike Elvin, remained in Coltrane's band until the very end. Joe Farrell, a Chicago native, also had an impressive resume, having played with Maynard Ferguson's big band, Slide Hampton, Charles Mingus, and Elvin's brother Thad in the big band he co-led with drummer Mel Lewis.

After a series of rehearsals, and a short hiatus surrounding John Coltrane's death in July of 1967, the group went into Rudy Van Gelder's Studios in Englewood Cliffs, NJ to record their first of two records for Blue Note. It is these recordings, made in 1968, along with the rest of Elvin's Blue Note Sessions spanning 1968-73 that are preserved in the Mosaic Records box set The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions, from which the listening and research surrounding this paper was taken. The reissue of these recordings as a CD box set preserves the exhilarating music of one of jazz's greatest musicians, drummers, and one the most innovative piano-less trios in jazz history. It also seeks to provide the same listening experience of the original LP releases by presenting the tracks in the original album order rather than in chronological studio recording order, a rarity among CD reissues of original LPs. Both records for Blue Note, released in 1968 as Puttin' It Together and The Ultimate Elvin Jones are stunning testaments to the trio's virtuosity and brilliance considering a single recording session birthed the quality of music found on these recordings.

SESSION A: APRIL 8, 1968
PUTTIN' IT TOGETHER

There is usually something mystical about a great artists' first album as a leader. Often it is the culmination of ideas that have been brooding inside their soul, searching

for an avenue of travel from their heart to the ears of the listeners. In the world of jazz, where musician turnover is constantly occurring, groups are always forming and reforming and changing their musical approach from one style to the next, creating new forms, clichés, and entire expressive contexts along the way. Miles Davis did it on Birth of the Cool, again on Kind of Blue, again on E.S.P. (with his second quintet), and again on Bitches Brew. Coltrane did it on Giant Steps and again on his landmark “Desert Island” favorite A Love Supreme with his “Classic Quartet.” The same magic and mysticism pervades Elvin Jones’ first recording session for Blue Note Records. Originally issued as Puttin’ It Together (BST 84282) on Blue Note Records in 1968, these seven tracks provide the blue print for the music Elvin Jones would continue to make for the rest of his life.

The music on this album links together past, present, and future. One needs to look no further than the personnel for proof. The group is a piano-less trio, reuniting Elvin Jones with his long time partner in the John Coltrane “Classic” Quartet, bassist extraordinaire, Jimmy Garrison. Notable is the absence of pianist McCoy Tyner, who, along with Elvin, provided the steam for the polyrhythmic train that was Coltrane’s rhythm section. Although the interaction of Tyner and Jones is slightly missed on the recording, the ever present left hand and bass drum polyrhythmic comping of Elvin more than fills the void. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the addition of saxophonist and woodwind expert Joe Farrell provides a new voice not previously associated with any of the members of the “Classic Quartet’s” rhythm section. This drums/bass/sax trio also harkens back to the record that firmly planted Elvin on the map, the 1957 live recording A Night At The Village Vanguard with Sonny Rollins and Wilbur Ware. Farrell is perhaps one of the few jazz saxophonists who could be called an expert at woodwind doubles. On Puttin’ It Together, Farrell plays a total of 4 different instruments: tenor and soprano sax (a la Coltrane) with the addition of the serene and playful sounds of the alto flute and piccolo, respectively.

Jimmy Garrison’s role on these recordings is very similar to that of Ron Carter’s with the second Miles Davis Quintet of 1965-1968. The difference here, however, is that Miles’ group had a pianist, although Herbie Hancock was known to lay out from time to time, allowing Ron Carter and prodigious young drummer Tony Williams to engage the soloist without a constant harmonic underscore. In fact, on every record Jimmy Garrison made with Elvin during this period, there is no piano player. Therefore Garrison must not only provide the rhythmic propulsion along with Jones, but must

imply the harmonies of tunes as well. Garrison functions as the “rock” on many of the tunes, clearly delineating the form and time while Elvin swirls around in a graceful dance with the soloist. This becomes a complicated task that in turn seems to dictate the types of tunes Elvin and his band mates chose to play during this period. Most of the selections appear to have simple forms and harmonic structures, relying instead on the virtuosic improvisation and interaction of the players for excitement.

There are two blueses on this album (*Village Greene* and *Gingerbread Boy*), the second of which, a Jimmy Heath penned tune, was recorded and made famous by the Miles Davis Second Quintet on their 1966 album Miles Smiles. Elvin’s tom groove on this track is distinctly “old school,” and is reminiscent of the “jungle music” played by Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club in the late 1920s. The tune also contains some exemplary trading between Elvin and Farrell. The other blues, *Village Greene*, contains a drum solo that shows Elvin in top form, as well as some blistering left hand triplet comping, particularly under Joe Farrell’s solo. Farrell’s solo on this tune is aggressive, venturing up into the altissimo range of the instrument on more than one occasion, screeching and running cascades of notes.

Jay-Ree, a Joe Farrell original, is a modal tune that is quick and to the point, with a burning eighth note line that is stated three times (with slight variation) and then deconstructed over the sixteen bar head. Garrison and Elvin set up an interesting “broken” feel immediately after the head, but Farrell seems to want no part of it and instead wastes absolutely no time digging into this tune. Elvin and Garrison quickly follow, forging ahead and abandoning the broken time feel. Elvin seems slightly hesitant and really allows Farrell to build to a ferocious intensity before unleashing his triplets of thunder. Farrell and Elvin exchange some searing and intense 8’s before restating the melody and segueing into a thunderous, cacophonous, and at once joyous cadenza that is more intense than the rest of the tune.

The ensuing tune, *For Heaven’s Sake* seems like the antithesis to *Jay-Ree*, catching the listener off guard with the pastel and gorgeous sound of Farrell’s alto flute. Farrell’s tone is pure crystal and mysteriously hypnotic and the *arco* playing by Garrison at the opening of the track serves as a nice compliment. Elvin’s brushwork is uncannily smooth. The entire track has a placidness to it and creates an intense feeling of longing, owing much to the sound of the alto flute.

On *Keiko’s Birthday March*, a quirky tune Elvin penned for his wonderful wife Keiko Jones, Farrell quite appropriately (for a march) plays another member of the flute

family, the piccolo, giving the tune a drum 'n' fife band vibe. His tone and intonation seem flawless on this track as well, even as he executes some difficult bebop licks on an instrument that isn't his first. Perhaps the most exciting moments in the track come when Elvin is playing by himself. Most notable is the drum and fife style cadence and "Elvinish" roll-off that sounds almost as if Jones has fallen off his throne. The lengthy drum solo is again masterful; developing, breaking down, and redeveloping as only Elvin can do with his many signature ideas. Overall, the tune is quite adventurous and seems like a tune only Elvin could have written. It was also quite popular with his fans and remained in Elvin's live band book for many years.

Rounding out the selections is a Jimmy Garrison original, *Sweet Little Maia*, a tune played in unison by Garrison and Farrell while Elvin's behind the beat brushwork acts as an undertow. Jimmy Garrison stretches out on this track with his signature double stops and pedal points that he became famous for with John Coltrane during his later years. One has to only listen to Trane's Live In Japan recordings for evidence of Garrison's mastery of the unaccompanied, open bass solo.

The kick-off track on Puttin' It Together, *Reza*, is perhaps the album's most significant piece, which is why I've chosen to discuss it last. Perhaps it is the tune's placement on the album, since it is the first music I ever heard by this group, that creates its reverence, or perhaps it is just the feeling that emanates from the tune; a feeling that David Liebman calls "a palpable sense of joy."¹ Either way, the tune is an all-encompassing definition of the style of music Elvin's groups would play until the end of his life. The tune is structured around two chords (C7 and Eb7) and two different feels (Swing and what drummers call "Elvin Latin," since no one plays Latin feels quite like Elvin). It is Elvin's signature Latin feel with its highly syncopated bell patterns, cross-stick/tom-tom alternation, and quick bass drum fills, that begins the tune. After Elvin's short intro, Garrison enters with a samba-esque style bass part vamping over C7. With the groove firmly planted Farrell enters with an 8 bar introductory line. Upon first listen, the first 8 measures played by Farrell seem like an improvisation that he uses to set up the melody. This is not the case, however, because the same thematic material reintroduces the outhead, leading me to conclude that it was a composed introduction. After this introduction, Farrell presents the melody of the tune, which utilizes four bars of C7 before shifting to four bars of Eb7. This section is played twice, before

¹ Liebman, David. *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions*. Mosaic; Stamford, CT, 2000.
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SESSION B: SEPTEMBER 6, 1968

THE ULTIMATE ELVIN JONES

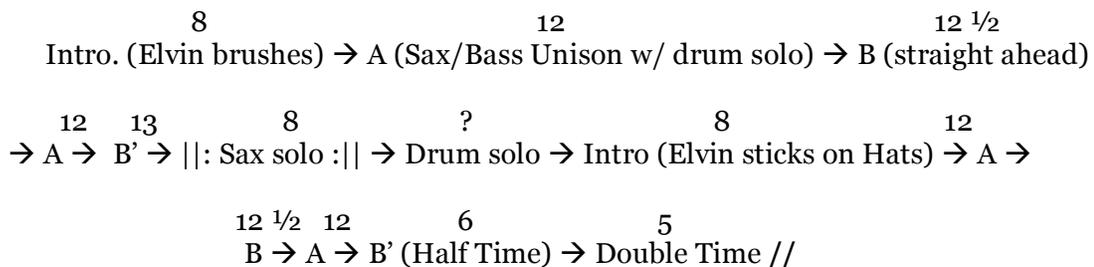
Almost exactly five months later the band returned to Van Gelder Studios in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey to record their second record, The Ultimate Elvin Jones (BST 84305). The group takes even more chances on this session than on the first, particularly on the three originals written by Garrison and one by Farrell, producing their second, last, and most significant record. The group treads a new path that no piano-less trio has tread before, writing complex and interesting originals that benefit from the lack of constant harmonic information from a pianist.

Having been gigging together for the months between the two studio dates, the trio of Elvin, Garrison, and Farrell are in absolute tip top condition, and it is entirely evident, particularly on the Jimmy Garrison original *Sometimes Joie*. The most imaginative playing on the record is contained within this eleven minute cut, owing its length to an extended bass solo that occupies over four minutes of the tracks back half. The tune itself is imaginative, with two 10 bar sections making up the head. The rest of the tune, however, presents the group in rare experimental form. The three of them seem to rely less on what they know and instead seem to search and reach for new expressive motives and gestures. Elvin's comping in particular grows in intensity, feeding Farrell, but all the while maintaining a soloistic approach. Garrison also seems more liberated than on Puttin' It Together, both on this track and for that matter on the entire album, acting less as the "rock" and more as a third and equal participant in the action.

Garrison seems to have a penchant for writing odd measured heads, as *Ascendant*, another Garrison original and the most significant tune on The Ultimate Elvin Jones, uses a 12 bar A section followed by a 12 ½ bar B section, the repeat of which uses the same 12 bar A followed by a full 13 bar B. The tune, which opens with a pointed and tight 8 bar brush intro by Elvin, is played in unison by Farrell's soprano sax and Garrison's bass for the A sections with Elvin soloing on brushes behind them, all the while making the hits present in the melody. Elvin's playing here is particularly noteworthy as he dances in front of, behind, and around the tune being played but is never overbearing. The B section opens up into a feel good swing, which ventures into the gray area that separates jazz and Latin. The soprano sax solo does not stick to this interesting form, but instead seems to use an 8 bar section that keeps repeating. This is

slightly less interesting than using the form, but certainly more comfortable, and the group's playing more than makes up for the solo sections lack of originality.

Ed Beach, famed New York jazz disc jockey, who wrote the liner notes for this album puts it best when he comments, "It's an attractive swing tune that manages to go somewhere and develop."³ And develop it does. Farrell's banshee-like wailing is intense, and Elvin's left hand is a blur of over-the-bar triplets while Garrison's four-to-the-bar thump is sometimes obscured by some more adventurous bass lines. Elvin and Farrell are perhaps the most intense of the three, trading flurries of notes and some screeching with thunderous crashes and mountain-moving fills. Elvin's solo, although short, is equally exciting and he winds it down by playing time on the hi-hats a la Roy Haynes, something we rarely hear Elvin do. This serves as the 8 bar intro that reintroduces the head. Notice how quickly and seamlessly Elvin makes the switch from sticks back to brushes. The first time through the out head is the same as the in head, with a 12 bar A section and quirky 12 1/2 bar B section. However, the repeat holds quite a surprise, as the B section goes into half time for 6 bars before shifting back into the original feel, ending on the last note of the melody. Below is an overall form diagram:



Another tune of note on The Ultimate Elvin Jones is the groups arrangement of the Jerome Kern standard *Yesterdays*. Here it is Garrison's brooding double stops that set up what Ed Beach dubs a "Bolero-like rhythmic pattern,"⁴ while Elvin's delicate brushwork serves as an underpinning. Farrell enters on tenor, first with an improvisation over the bass and drum vamp, and then presents the 16 bar melody with a repeat. Then it's on to the tenor solo. Farrell is extremely fluid here, and seems incredibly comfortable floating over the pillow of swing that Garrison and Elvin are cradling him in. The rhythm section is quite subdued during the solo, which serves as a nice change from the usual. If you listen closely beneath the tenor solo, and also during the ensuing bass solo, Elvin's "mumbles" and "moans" are audible in the left channel.

³ Beach, Ed. *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions*. Mosaic; Stamford, CT, 2000. 5.

⁴ Beach, Ed. *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions*. Mosaic; Stamford, CT, 2000. 5.

Garrison's solo is next and alternates between sections of double stops and walking, much in the same way the arrangement of the head does. His walking here utilizes "the songs beautiful harmonies set out so that the ear tends to fill in the rest of the notes in each chord."⁵ Farrell reenters with the recapitulation of the melody and the tune ends with what Ed Beach so appropriately calls "one of those leave-it-gently-lovingly-languorously extensions."⁶

The rest of the tunes on the record are equally as interesting, but they also tread over similar ground as the tunes on Puttin' It Together. For example, the closer on this album is *We'll Be Together Again*, a standard by Carl Fischer that features Farrell and his wonderful flute sound and amazing facility in much the same way *For Heaven's Sake* did on their first album. The other two tunes on the record are Joe Farrell's *In The Truth* and Jimmy Garrison's *What Is This?*.

In The Truth is a quick paced, energetic piece that opens the album with a bang, much in the same spirit of *Reza*, the opening track off of Puttin' It Together. The tune is, as Ed Beach describes, a "raffish line with rhythm...somewhat like a blues, with an extension and a contrasting 16-bar section to follow."⁷ It is a no-holds barred energy that rockets this tune straight out of the gate. Of particular note is the way the 16-bar contrasting section is handled, with a bass pedal by Garrison and swirling rolls and crashes from Elvin. Elvin's left hand action behind Farrell's virtuosic solo is particularly fluid. The tenor man is full of ideas on this tune and runs some diminished patterns as well as showing his bebop chops while drums and bass thump, crash, and whirl around him. Farrell and Elvin exchange some quick 8 bar pleasantries followed by "a solo from Elvin, pointed and with a percussive sound and rhythmic conception unmistakable as any but his."⁸ The outhead is abbreviated, with only the first 16-bar blues-like section appearing, followed by a long fermata where Farrell hints at the melody over Elvin's flights around the toms.

The following tune, Jimmy Garrison's *What Is This?* is an "easy-go sort of thing" that features a bass and soprano sax cadenza in free time. Garrison's strumming style is smooth and dark, while Farrell moves around the theme of the tune with ease. An eight bar medium-slow, nasty, blues-like swing, with Elvin on brushes and Garrison walking, makes the transition to another free section, this time with all three musicians playing.

⁵ Beach, Ed. *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions*. Mosaic; Stamford, CT, 2000. 5.

⁶ Beach, Ed. *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions*. Mosaic; Stamford, CT, 2000. 5.

⁷ Beach, Ed. *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions*. Mosaic; Stamford, CT, 2000. 5.

⁸ Beach, Ed. *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions*. Mosaic; Stamford, CT, 2000. 5.

Elvin's signature fills and sizzle cymbal compliment Garrison's strumming and Farrell's upper register trills. Elvin switches to sticks and the three swing out on 32 bars of medium-slow swing with Farrell taking the lead. Garrison's groove is tight, as is Elvin's; his signature snare drum, tom, and bass drum triplet comping style taking over underneath Farrell. Following Farrell's solo, Jimmy Garrison takes his most melodic and thematic solo on either of these records with Elvin beneath him. He seems very relaxed and plays a tasteful solo, at one point moving up to thumb position, an area of the instrument he rarely explores. His solo breaks down into free time, with Farrell joining in a repeat of the cadenza-like opening. Elvin joins the cadenza on brushes, using them like he would sticks. The 8 bar swing section returns before again dissolving into free time where Farrell in particular is most aggressive, rocketing into the upper range of his instrument, screeching and screaming, while Elvin switches to sticks, crashing on his signature sizzle cymbal as Garrison's double stop strumming brings the tune to a close.

CONCLUSION

Elvin would continue to record for Blue Note records until 1973, culminating in a landmark live recording released as Live At The Lighthouse. This particular trio, however, would never record again, as Elvin began expanding and changing his lineup. Wilbur Little replaced Jimmy Garrison on bass in March of 1969. Farrell remained with the group, playing tenor sax, soprano sax, multiple flutes, and even English horn. Tenor man George Coleman, a former member of a short-lived incarnation of Miles Davis' Second Quintet, was added to the group, along with trumpeter Lee Morgan, and master conguero Candido Camero, with whom Elvin recorded some remarkable duets on his later albums. By the early 1970s, Elvin was rotating four tenor saxophone players, Joe Farrell, David Liebman, Frank Foster, and Steve Grossman, in many different instrumental combinations. Baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams also played with the group. Young bassist Gene Perla replaced Wilbur Little and Don Alias replaced Candido. Finally, in 1971 Elvin added not one but two harmonic voices to the band, electric keyboardist Jan Hammer and Japanese guitarist Yoshiaki Masuo. Chick Corea was also known to play with the band in place of Jan Hammer. On one recording session for the album Mr. Jones Elvin even added a timpanist by the name of Albert Duffy. By his final recording session for Blue Note, which produced the album The Prime Element, Elvin was playing with two tenor saxophonists (Foster and Grossman), bari sax (Adams), piano and synthesizers (Hammer), guitar (Cornell Dupree), bass (Perla), and four

percussionists (Candido, Richie Landrum, Omar Clay, and Warren Smith) playing an assortment of congas, timbales, bongos, programmable drum machines, timpani, and assorted percussion gadgets.

After the Blue Note sessions, Elvin would continue to record with various instrumental combinations for many different record labels, including a fusion-esque trio with Jan Hammer and Gene Perla. By the 1990s his group was known as the Elvin Jones Jazz Machine and toured the world some 9 out of every 12 months of the year, playing new original compositions as well as older tunes from his Blue Note days. Elvin's spirit was unrelenting, and he continued to bring his joyous drumming to every corner of the world until his death on Tuesday, May 18, 2004. Emperor Jones will sadly be missed, but his musical legacy will live forever on the 500+ recordings on which his signature style pulses, crashes, and thunders in a way that was uniquely his own.

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