John Coltrane

John Coltrane is one of the most powerful figures in the music world. Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he strived to make his music representative of a larger spiritual path than merely sound. His personal sound is one of the most influential and imitated among saxophonists even today. One can hear a feeling of “striving for” in his approach to improvisation. Many consider his 1964 recording “A Love Supreme” to be the apex of Coltrane’s music. This music was highly influential in musical and spiritual spheres much larger than the jazz world, and heavily influenced many rock or pop musicians of the mid 1960s. There is even a church in San Francisco, St. John Coltrane Church (African Orthodox, a branch of the Catholic Church). It is my understanding that Mr. Coltrane’s family is a bit put off by the church’s “sainting” of Coltrane. But, it is a testament to how powerfully his music is received.

He was born in 1926 and died relatively suddenly in 1967 from liver cancer. His nickname is ‘Trane.

Coltrane grew up in Philadelphia where he played the alto saxophone, and like most young jazz musicians at the time, was heavily influenced by Charlie Parker. He played in a Navy Band during WWII, and did a lot of gigs with blues bands upon his return. His first important major jazz gig was with the “First Classic Quintet” of Miles Davis in the mid 1950s. ‘Trane”s densely packed “busy” style of stringing fast notes together contrasted with Davis’ use of space and timing.

In 1959, Coltrane released his album “Giant Steps.” This album introduced a harmonic progression that came to be known as the “Coltrane Matrix.” (Check the broadcast for a demonstration of this progression.) The term “Sheets of Sound” was coined by a reviewer to describe his densely packed and unquenchably powerful solo style. (Check out Giant Steps).
In 1960, ‘Trane leads his own quartet for the first time. In addition to the tenor saxophone, he begins playing the soprano saxophone.

Really, up to this point no jazz musician had played the soprano sax since Sydney Bechet! At this point, Coltrane has been listening to and heavily influenced by music from other cultures, particularly India, Africa, and the Middle East. His use of pedal points and his attraction to the soprano sax are perhaps a result of this interest in music of other cultures.

Coltrane’s famous “Classic Quartet” from 1961- early 1965 is one of the most influential on the course of jazz music. They were able to sustain high levels of energy for lengthy improvisational excursions. The personnel in this important quartet:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piano</th>
<th>McCoy Tyner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>Jimmy Garrison</td>
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<td>Drums</td>
<td>Elvin Jones</td>
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Here is a link to video of a festival performance that demonstrates the intensity with which the ensemble attacks a tune from the movie “The Sound of Music” called “My Favorite Things.” This is representative of the use of pedal points and the striving quality in the music: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NllPZ5_Tw40](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NllPZ5_Tw40)

McCoy Tyner was highly influential. With the Coltrane Quartet, he employed piano voicings constructed of fifths and fourths, which gave the music a more open feeling that suited the density of Coltrane’s “Sheets of Sound” Elvin Jones dense poly-rhythms, and Jimmy Garrison’s pedal points.

Jimmy Garrison was able to negotiate the sonically active style of the quartet by his inventive rhythms that complimented Jones’ poly-rhythmic approach and Tyner’s open voicings. He had great stamina to keep up with the long excursions and long phrasing of Coltrane’s searching improvisations. When Coltrane’s music started going into more abstract areas, Tyner and Jones bailed, but Garrison stuck with him to the end.

Of the members in the quartet, ‘Trane’s most important relationship was with drummer Elvin Jones. They had a deep musical connection, and often would end up toward the end of a lengthy song with just the two of them taking the music to inspired heights. Jones was a great driving force, and used polyrhythms and subdivision on of the quarter note into triplets around the kit to create a unique approach to drumming. (Check out The Promise.)
Coltrane’s recording of “**A Love Supreme**” is dedicated to God. In this four movement suite, ‘Trane aspires to capture a spiritual meaning to be shared through this music. It was very uncommon for a “hip” jazz musician to wear his heart so openly on his sleeve. The album included an open poem dedicated to God, and a very personal message to the listener. Here is the beginning of the liner notes:

**DEAR LISTENER:**
**ALL PRAISE BE TO GOD TO WHOM ALL PRAISE IS DUE.**

*Let us pursue Him in the righteous path. Yes it is true; “seek and ye shall find”. Only through Him can we know the most wondrous bequeathal.*

The salutation to these liner notes is:

*With love to all, I thank you,*

*John Coltrane* (his signature)

Here is a link to an excerpt from a wonderful book about the recording of this seminal album: [http://www.granta.com/books/chapters/1062](http://www.granta.com/books/chapters/1062)

The four movements are

I. **Acknowledgement** *(check it out on the broadcast)*

II. **Resolution**

III. **Pursuance**

IV. **Psalm**

‘Trane is “playing” the words of the poem *A Love Supreme* for the movement, *Psalm*. Here is the beginning of that poem:

*I will do all I can to be worth of Thee O Lord.*

*It all has to do with it.*

*Thank you God.*
Peace.
There is none other
God is. It is so beautiful.
Thank you God. God is all.

The poem continues in this vein for quite a while. It seems that the rhythmic structure of the words was very important in the composition. Coltrane was knowledgeable about numerology, astrology, spiritual conventions of non-Western cultures, and a wide array of subjects. So, here the striving for meaning and rhythmic structure may take precedence over other factors normally associated with poetry.

Late ‘Trane
After “A Love Supreme,” Coltrane’s music continued in pursuit of getting beyond the boundaries of “music,” and in the process, he lost much of his following. He seemed on a path from which he could not, nor would he care to, return. All but bassist Jimmy Garrison could not get with the direction ‘Trane’s music was heading, so they left the quartet. The recordings from this late period of Coltrane are packed with dense emotion, and some interpret the energy to be somewhat “angry.” I do not agree with this assessment, and perceive it as more of the same kind of inquiry and striving that is always present in the trajectory of John Coltrane’s career.

This web page is definitely worth checking out!

http://www.johncoltrane.com/swf/main.htm

and this one—
http://airjudden.tripod.com/jazz/johncoltrane.html