

Looking For A Love Supreme

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**Two
decades
after the
Coltrane
era, the
saxophonist
remains
a giant
shadow over
the music.
RICHARD
COOK
considers
what Coltrane
means
to us today,
and MAX
HARRISON
offers an
alternative
view in
the light
of three live
recordings.**



LIKE ANYTHING else, Coltrane can become an obsession. A few years ago I wrote a long, congested piece about who he was and what he did and what he meant. For some weeks I listened to little other than that gargantuan sound, and it came to be like one ceaseless saxophone solo that pounded in my ears until I thought my head would break.

Twisting, charging, unrelenting, the sound drove on and on. I heard it in traffic noise, in the wind, in the central heating. I couldn't bring myself to play a Coltrane record for months afterward.

"There is nothing like Coltrane's sound," I concluded, and while one could say that about most any jazz musician with a distinctive timbre, it's the brazen physicality of those vibrations-in-air that attacks the listener now. As early as "Good Bait", from his Prestige years, Coltrane assaults his available space, demanding that it breaks open before him.

"He was a very greedy man," Miles Davis told me – probably the first derogatory thing I'd ever heard from someone who was associated with him – and greed is encountered in the saxophonist's overweight lines, humourless tone, storming attempts to cram in absolutely everything. Everything! No wonder he exhausts us even as the music dugs the emotions.

It's a curiosity about the sound, though, that it so persistently evades any description in the simple objectives which jazz criticism is wont to deal in. We can easily find the sadness in Lester Young, the ripe machismo in Coleman Hawkins, the scholarly, steely brilliance in Sonny Rollins. None could mistake the tragic supremacism of Charlie Parker, or Stan Getz's butterfly prettiness, or Ben Webster's portly bearhug of affection. But how do we describe Coltrane? He is the dilemma of anyone who's ever tried to pen a line about jazz.

Coltrane is almost never tender. In *A Love Supreme*, long distilled as the spiritual vanguard of 60s jazz, the music is restless, troubled, even – in "Pursuance" – verging on the neurotic. Yet it is intended as a prayer. It's actually more like the lonely inner conflict of a monk in his room. Only in his early ballad readings is there something akin to sweetness. There Coltrane recites melody. It is still without much vibrato, so the music is just more placid; gentle, but not especially warm.

Emotional touchstones are subsumed by the torrent of Coltrane's playing. We can search for nobility, anger or sadness in the saxophonist's movement and fail to locate any of them. Just as his lines reel on and on, so nothing rests long enough to take the clear shape of a communicated feeling. We're staggered by his violence, but this isn't the violence of Albert Ayler, which is generous in its gigantic emotion. Albert poured out everything. Coltrane turned it all inwards and could sound oblivious, even blind. As he explored himself and the quest to discover became an end in itself, there's almost a sense of his becoming inhuman. He transmutes into something which is as granitic as an Easter Island figure, something – even in the midst of his turbulent movement – immovable. We're left with images which aren't emotional states – impressions of urgency, turmoil, mass.

THE DEVELOPMENT of Coltrane's art consists of the charting of this process. In one way, he hardly changes at all from "Good Bait" to the last versions of "Naima", with their

abstract deviations of what was once a simple song. The barlines were being rattled already in 1958 – "Good Bait" shifts from Tadd Dameron's jaunty bop theme into the sheets of sound, and although he observes chorus space the chords have disappeared by the time Red Garland has his say. The tenor's talk is made up of arpeggios that twist and chafe at the beat, and points of stress punctuate the solo like convulsions. Coltrane is already wrapped up in the scale of what he's doing – only Rollins could have seized music with such an appetite then – and it's his surroundings which make this stage of the journey seem elementary. Garland, Chambers and Taylor sound prim and quaint.

In 1966, of course, with achievements of intensity like *Coltrane Jazz*, *A Love Supreme* and *Ascension* behind him, Coltrane had taken more giant steps than any of his peers. And he had impelled his surroundings to evolve too – to the point where they had actually moved beyond the point where he could grasp his position of command. Where the hard bop groups were too constrictingly formal for his eloquence, the band with Pharoah Sanders, Alice Coltrane and Rashied Ali was too outreaching for Coltrane to play inside. They built a rocket pad of sheer energy, but it was Sanders not Coltrane that blasted most effectively out of Ali's arrhythmic dust.

This is what we hear in the final "Naima". Coltrane recorded it first as a graceful poem for his then wife, and the tune as played on *Giant Steps* is quite still and serene. In 1966, Sanders ignores any scent of karmic beauty and explodes away from the theme in a wild gush of croaking, sometimes vicious phrases. Coltrane follows in the same sort of vein, but he cannot exorcise the original "Naima" – although he'd supposedly abandoned his older constraints of form, he can't seem to forget where he took breath, how he'd close choruses, when he'd have to sing a note clearly. Even after all his struggles – with embouchure, tone, rhythm and melody – he is still, underneath, the Coltrane of "Good Bait". Perhaps McCoy Tyner saw that when he chose to leave his old mentor in 1966: "I think that everything reaches its peak, and then it tapers off . . ." Coltrane refused to acknowledge that peak.

It comes back, then, to that sound. The vast documentation of John Coltrane's output disguises how quickly he rushed through his career. Jazz has moved through all its resources with incredible velocity – 35 years between Oliver's "Dippermouth Blues" and Coleman's "Endless" – and Coltrane was no exception to the course, with all his identities compressed into a decade. Like Coleman Hawkins, who supposedly kept abreast of the many saxophone styles that surrounded his long career, Coltrane remained immediately himself – he was always the same man underneath, whether in the pinioning modes of *Kind Of Blue* or the gaunt peace of his valedictory *Expression*. And the sound, which we can't fashion into anything other than the huge locomotive voice, played on.

Yet if it doesn't communicate such tidy matters as joy, sorrow or anger, what does Coltrane's sound impart to us? It would be lazy to say that it doesn't matter, that the process is all in itself, but such a verdict does go some way to explaining the magnetic pull of Coltrane even in 1985 – the reason why this prolific, earthquake music still exerts a unique fascination.

"IT WOULD", Evan Parker suggested, "do a lot of people good to go back and examine

Coltrane's life and music – to see the potential that that man did discover in himself. He was one of the great artists of the 20th century, and now they've almost reduced his music to a painting-by-numbers system. People should go back and look at the original."

Parker himself has become one of the few musicians to take Coltrane as a starting inspiration and build a personal style which is entirely original but distantly true to his first model. His comment illuminates what has become the Coltrane problem: because he is so colossal, so *everywhere*, we have alternately overdrawn and dissolved Coltrane's own character. The sound is not just confined to the unbroken river of Coltrane's own records; it's in the thousands of trickles which are his second and third generation progeny.

There is Coltrane in every modern saxophone, just as there was Charlie Parker in every bop saxophone and – in a parallel universe – Jimi Hendrix in every rock guitar. But while the inflections of Bird were so acidly brilliant, brilliant enough to burn his personality unmistakably into our memories, Coltrane's search without end for his inner self seemed to hide his own emotions. There is – again – just the sound. It became a blueprint system for anyone who's tried to play a 'modern' saxophone since.

With this, the passing of a passion so severe and unflinching into a common currency, we have obscured forever the impact of Coltrane in the first person. I was too young ever to hear him play in the flesh, and only records now remain; those, and a few feet of film. In the *Sound of Jazz* footage with Miles Davis, Coltrane looks as implacable and stone-faced as someone delivering a burial oration. He holds the tenor still, lost in concentration. On the soundtrack, there is the tumble of phrases, hooked together with the matt iron tone. It actually seems a rather perfunctory and disappointing image of the great player.

But greatness is inseparable from what we now keep of this working-class man from North Carolina. "He is so great," a colleague remarks when queried as to his admiration for Coltrane, and though fashioning myths is as unfortunate on this subject as it is for any other, the nature of Coltrane's work is so completely bound up in an indestructible, all-embracing power that 'greatness' is always the last impression we gain – whether in the majestic symmetries of "Out Of This World" or the headlong line over line in "Chasin' The Trane". And it's this measuring up to his aspirations – which he could never, inevitably, fulfill – that makes Coltrane persist, long after his death.

No, it's unimportant that we can't label his messages. It's the bearing of the message that matters. After *Giant Steps*, his one collection of songful, resolved music, he simply went off on the journey and misplaced the words. As John Litweiler concludes in *The Freedom Principle*, when discussing the glorious *Interstellar Space* duets with Rashied Ali: "Now without obstacles of any kind, he nonetheless continues in conflict, endless and exalted." It became all he knew how.

SO – AND perhaps here is the lesson we can understand – as the conflict of a life continues, Coltrane's sound continues. And in compiling these thoughts and finally going back to the long works, I have started to hear him again. But it's not only the sound which is haunting. There is also a quotation from one of his comparatively rare interviews, a passage that is unforgettable: "Once you become aware of

this force for unity in life, you can't ever forget it. It becomes part of everything you do. My goal in meditating on this through music is to uplift people, as much as I can. To inspire them to realize more and more of their capacity for living meaningful lives."

In an age where dimestore philosophers like Keith Jarrett have regrettably had their own say, such a statement could be treated with scepticism; but the sincerity of the words is an offer of involvement which is carried by the extremes of Coltrane's playing. The mighty storms of his music propose no beatific path to self-satisfaction or sensual pleasure. There's perhaps one occasion after *Giant Steps* where he pauses in the quest: "Alabama", from *Live At Birdland*, a requiem for children murdered in the bombing of a church and a matter of deep melancholy. Otherwise there is just the journeying – "endless and exalted".

It is, in the end, like a reflection on music. Whether it's *Trane's Reign or Meditations* that's on the turntable, it's the internal force of a man bearing down on his objectives with complete candour and commitment. Coltrane never escaped himself; he was never the most liberated of players; he located as many blind tunnels as shafts of light. If he was a mirror on his times, a receptacle of the turbulence of his era, then times haven't changed sufficiently for us to lose sight of his continuing relevance. The lengths he went to, and the sound he made on the way – it's worth making into the stuff of legend.

I'm glad he did it. Play it, man.

JOHN COLTRANE

The Copenhagen Concert (Ingo 4)

Recorded: Falkoncentret, Stockholm – 22 November 1962.

Chasin' The Trane; Every Time We Say Goodbye; I Want To Talk About You; Mr. P.C.

Coltrane (ss, ts); McCoy Tyner (p); Jimmy Garrison (b); Elvin Jones (d).

Impressions of Europe (Ingo 7)

Recorded: as above.

Inch-Worm.

Recorded: Stefaniensaal, Graz, Austria – 28 November 1962.

Impressions; I Want To Talk About You.

Personnel as above.

A Love Supreme (Ingo 11)

Recorded: Antibes – 26 July 1965.

A Love Supreme (four movements).

Personnel as above.

I AM indebted to Brian Davis for some of the above discographical details, which are more complete than those given on the sleeves. The "Impressions" track has appeared on Musicdisc 30 JA 5242, but all the remaining items are on LP for the first time. (This version of "A Love Supreme" is quite different from the shorter one on Jazz Connoisseur JC112.) The material on the first two discs is obviously from the Quartet's European tour of late 1962 and gives an excellent idea of what Coltrane's live performances were like at that time.

In some of his previous work the drive to exhaust the potentialities of any given harmonic situation, to crowd in every conceivable chordal substitution, to seek out all 'meanings', led to incoherence. This desire was in any case unrealistic in that it is clearly impossible to explore simultaneously all sides of any situation. Some of Coltrane's performances prior to the formation of the above quartet (which has since come to be regarded, with just a bit too much unanimity, as one of the outstanding ensembles in jazz history) uncomfortably evoked the Tower of Babel. One thing he had not then done was to find the right drummer; but, as nearly all the music on these three Ingo records demonstrates, Jones was able to provide exactly the appropriate polyrhythmic framework to give shape to Coltrane's hitherto somewhat chaotic discoveries.

Listening to his and Jones's better duet improvisations can be a considerable musical experience, yet beyond questions of formal organization darker emotional states were beginning to assert themselves, and even when this jazz is outwardly relaxed it suggests inward apprehension. Frequently it is at once extrovert and grim, and on, say, "Mr. P.C." saxophone and drums share a furious desire to communicate sombre thoughts. However, often Tyner was the stabilizing agent in performances that seemed likely to fly asunder, his lyrical strain relieving the dense passions of reed and percussion. In "Mr. P.C." and "Impressions" his solos are made from showers of crystalline notes which have an almost visible brilliance. During the former piece Jones subjects us to a frantic solo battering with his cross-rhythms, and then Coltrane, startling the music's other dimensions into a surprised awakening, enters at full strength, as if he had already been playing for several choruses. Probably 'chorus' is misleading in that here and in "Impressions" form has become no more than an outline, and moods pass in and out of focus on a pathless terrain of contrasting, even conflicting, emotions.

The long solos taken here submit Coltrane to the most severe tests, yet against all probability the logic holds nearly throughout in each case; there are a few stock repetitive phrases, but no ranting. In comparison, the feverish, troubled "Inch-Worm" lacks continuity. Between these relative extremes comes the tenor solo on "Chasin' The Trane", which, even allowing for some primitive rasps, is at first argued quite strictly from the opening motif. Later, coherence is lost despite Jones's urgent commentary, which at some points comes close to taking the lead.

THOUGH FULL of sour shafts of melody, the ballads are not so very different, and even in calm passages a higher aspiration is evident. During the initial melody statement of "Every Time We Say Goodbye" Coltrane already makes quite drastic, if brief, exploratory departures, although mainly this piece is the subject of a decorative Tyner solo. Much of the Stockholm version of "I Want To Talk About You" consists of a still freer reading of the melody in that while he departs much further from it than from "Every Time", he for a long while does not lose the thematic outline. This is a fine example of organic growth in improvisation, though some of his later phrases derive rather mechanically from the chords so emphatically stated by Tyner. The account of "I Want To Talk About You" from Graz is slightly longer, with a plainer opening statement. After that, Coltrane plunges into a journey through the harmonies which is more

inventively melodic, and more variously phrased, than the other version; there is more depth and less tumult here. Each performance ends with an unaccompanied cadenza which attempts to summarize and resolve all that has gone before; but, like so much of what this band did, these are too long.

No doubt most readers will be thoroughly familiar with the original Impulse recording of "A Love Supreme", done in December 1964. Ingo's alternative concert performance is both disconcerting and extremely welcome, healthily unsettling our fixed notions of how the music should go. The New York and Antibes versions are very different yet have a comparable feeling of completeness. This is partly because although the four movements have themes of their own, everything ultimately descends from a single four-note motif through which is achieved a level of unity highly unusual in a work containing so much improvisation. Perhaps the spontaneous developmental procedures Coltrane employs here derive ultimately from his crucial period with Monk – whose influence on several vital aspects of the jazz of his time becomes ever more apparent. But the full discussion this new version demands must wait for another occasion.

Significantly enough, although nobody has tried to follow-up singular ventures like "A Love Supreme" in any specific way, Coltrane's general manner has, of course, been even more widely imitated, and with still less perception, than that of Charlie Parker. What these countless echoes tell us is that it is much easier to imitate a striking new style of playing than to absorb new, and deeper laid, processes of musical organization. The most shrewd explanation of Coltrane's – for a jazzman – abnormal popularity will be found on page 488 of James Lincoln Collier's *The Making of Jazz*. To which it might be added that during the 1960s – and this parallels what has just been said about the superficial response of his fellow musicians – many young people were attracted not to the strictly musical characteristics of his work but to its obvious outward turmoil, seeing in this an apparent kinship with their own current discontents.

All that is a long time ago now, and, following at a fastidious distance from the egregious myth-making of people like Frank Kofsky (*Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, etc), it is time we tried to see Coltrane plainly, clearly, and whole. Like anyone else whose output was very large, his music is of extremely varied quality, and just because of their unevenness these unfamiliar performances are as good a place as any to make a start. ■



JAYNE HOUGHTON