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John Coltrane

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One of the major musicians of the twentieth century, John Coltrane reshaped the way jazz is perceived. A tenor and soprano saxophonist and a significant composer, he demonstrated how world music, classical music, and classical theory could all be incorporated into powerful blues-based jazz.

He was born John William Coltrane in Hamlet, North Carolina, on September 23, 1926. Both of his parents came from literate families in North Carolina, descended from former slaves and named for the former slaveowners. Coltrane’s mother was musical—she sang and also played piano—and his father, John Robert Coltrane, played violin, ukulele, and possibly clarinet.

Probably beginning in the fall of 1939, Coltrane received his first instrumental training playing alto horn in a community band. He soon switched to the clarinet. When he joined the high school band the next year, young Coltrane, inspired by tenor saxophonist Lester Young, took up the alto saxophone. It appears that he also did some singing in school groups.

John’s father died on January 2, 1939, of stomach cancer, a common ailment at that time (and unrelated to liver cancer). In order to
get work. John’s mother moved near relations in Atlantic City, New Jersey, probably during his senior year, 1942–43. John lived alone with boarders in High Point until his graduation from high school (which ended at eleventh grade). In June 1945 he moved to Philadelphia and found a factory job.

Probably in 1944 and continuing for about a year, Coltrane began taking saxophone lessons and theory classes. Early in 1945 he began practicing with tenor saxophonist Benny Golson. Alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges was his idol until June 5, 1945, when he and Golson went to see Dizzy Gillespie perform with Charlie Parker; from that point he emulated Parker.

Coltrane was in the Navy from August 6, 1945, through August 11, 1946. After going through training, he was sent to Pearl Harbor, Oahu, Hawaii, where he played saxophone and clarinet in a band known as the Melody Masters. He first recorded July 13, 1946, in an impromptu session, not for release, with a small group of musicians from the segregated white band including drummer Joe Theimer (a.k.a. Timer). The eight titles—one of which, "Hot House," is now issued (Rhino)—included a number of recent Parker tunes. One can hear that Coltrane at nineteen had good dexterity but was clearly not familiar with all the chord changes.

After the Navy, Coltrane probably resumed saxophone lessons, but his primary focus beginning probably in the fall of 1946 and continuing until somewhere between 1950 and 1952 was at the Granoff Studios, where his veteran's benefits paid for his tuition. There he studied on and off, when he was in town, with Dennis Sandole. He also began picking up steady freelance work alongside pianist Ray Bryant, Golson, and others.

He called his “first professional job” the tour with Joe Webb from September 1946 in Philadelphia through the end of the year. He then joined the band of King Kolax from February 1947 through about April. From about May 1947 through the end of 1948, Coltrane freelanced around Philadelphia, often with saxophonist Jimmy Heath’s big band.

By 1948, Coltrane was drinking heavily, smoking perhaps as much as two packs of cigarettes a day, and using heroin. These habits caused him to be professionally inconsistent and were probably a major factor in his obscurity over the next seven years. Though everyone recognized him as a fine musician and took notice of his incessant practicing, no one could have predicted that he would become a major force in musical history.
John Coltrane. Courtesy of the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.
He first played tenor professionally while touring on one-nighters with Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson from November 20, 1948, through April or May 1949. His inspirations on tenor included Lester Young, Young’s disciple Jimmy Oliver (a Philadelphia legend), Coleman Hawkins, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, and Sonny Stitt. He once said he liked Stitt best, but many hear the Gordon influence strongest.

From September 16, 1949, he played lead alto in Dizzy Gillespie’s big band, but he kept his now preferred tenor around and used it on recordings with singer Billy Valentine. Gillespie’s band went out of business after June 20, 1950; when he reformed with a small group around August 1950 he retained Coltrane on tenor. Gillespie took the group into a studio in Detroit on March 1, 1951. Coltrane’s solo on the blues “We Love to Boogie” (DeeGee/Savoy) was the only work of his available to the general public until he joined Miles Davis late in 1955. On that recording, he plays with passion and has clearly come far since his Navy days. With Gillespie he also learned about sophisticated harmonies, Latin music, and vamps. He began seeking out any and all method books, even the piano books of Hanon and Czerny. This was the beginning of his arrival at a novel approach.

By early April 1951, he was back in Philadelphia, freelancing and playing in a group named the Dizzy Gillespie Alumni led by Heath. In January 1952 he recorded with the Gay Crosse group in Philadelphia and perhaps in Nashville as well. He continued to study and practice relentlessly, saw Sandole for lessons on a regular basis, and got together with fellow musicians, including a legendary pianist and theorist named Hasaan Ibn Ali, to exchange ideas.

Coltrane toured with Earl Bostic from April 1 through early December of 1952. Bostic was a virtuoso alto saxophonist, and Coltrane said, “He showed me a lot of things on my horn.” During 1953 it seems that he freelanced around home. In late 1953 or March 1954 he joined his early idol Johnny Hodges. Though he did not solo on the studio recordings, a live recording of the band (Enigma) shows Coltrane much changed since his Gillespie days, more fleet, lighter in tone, more rhythmically varied. Though he does not sound like Hodges or Bostic, he learned a lot about saxophone playing itself during those tours.

He must have left Hodges around the beginning of September 1954, because he was gigging afterward in Philadelphia. In September 1955 Coltrane was working at Spider Kelly’s in Philadelphia with organist Jimmy Smith when two major events changed his life: he married for the first time, and he was “discovered” by Miles Davis.
On September 27, 1955, in Baltimore he began his first engagement with Davis. Perhaps bolstered by his new security, he was joined by Naima (née Juanita) Austin, and they married there on October 3. Naima was a single mother with a daughter, Syceda (or Saeeda).

Coltrane began to record prolifically with Davis for Prestige and Columbia and as a sideman with others, mostly on Prestige. Among his reviewers, a pattern was soon apparent that was to remain true to the end of his life: he was mostly praised, though sometimes with reservations, while a minority violently dismissed his work. In either case, it was clear that he had developed a distinctive style.

Even though they were recorded during the same time period, the Prestige and Columbia recordings differ from each other considerably. Prestige encouraged musicians to record one take of each number and to get through as much material as possible at each session. Recording for Columbia was more formal. Each number was recorded for as many takes as needed to get it right, and splicing was used to combine the best moments from different takes. (On the later sessions, as the Davis band became more experienced, less splicing was necessary, and by the Kind of Blue album in 1959 there was virtually none.)

Davis's first Columbia album was 'Round About Midnight, a title that Dizzy Gillespie and others, but not the composer, had sometimes used for Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight." The title piece was recorded on September 10, 1956, in a smoky, evocative Gil Evans arrangement that became a jukebox hit in black neighborhoods in its 45 rpm release. Davis's solo is hushed and confidential, enhanced by his sizzling Harmom-mute sound. After an interlude, Coltrane solos with a double-time feeling in the rhythm section; the chords go by just as slow as for Davis, but the drums and bass accent in between the beats behind Coltrane to give it more motion. Coltrane's solo is exotic, daring. It has a soulful sound and unusual ornaments. It is a mixture of balladic paraphrase—that is, using notes of Monk's theme—and technical passages. It was one of his first recordings to attract widespread attention.

But his alcohol and drug addictions continued to interfere with his performance. When Davis fired him after an engagement that ended on April 28, 1957, because of his unreliability, he finally rid himself of the heroin habit by quitting "cold turkey" during a week in May when he was leading a quartet in Philadelphia. He would later refer to this experience in the liner notes to his album A Love Supreme in this way: "During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more
productive life.” He planned to continue leading his own group and
did so for a few gigs, and cut his first record as a leader on May 31.

During this time period he began his next significant association,
one with Thelonious Monk. He had first recorded with him on April
16 and now began visiting him and playing with him informally on
an occasional basis. He began working on multiphonics, the playing
of several notes at once; he said that Monk “just looked at my horn
and ‘felt’ the mechanics of what had to be done to get this effect,”
but that he learned the specifics of it from John Glenn, a local Phil-
adelphia player.

Monk asked Coltrane to join his group at the Five Spot from July
18 or 19 through New Year’s Eve, 1957 (with a few weeks off and a
few nights when Monk was not present). The engagement was critical
for both of them, and Coltrane’s playing drew raves from most. In
addition, Coltrane’s album Blue Train (Blue Note) was recorded on
September 15, 1957. It was the best display of Coltrane’s talents as a
player and composer to date; all but one of the five tunes were his.
Composing was a major preoccupation for him and something he took
as seriously as his performing.

At the end of the Monk engagement, in early January 1958, Davis
rehired Coltrane. It was a very different Coltrane, one who played
with uninhibited emotion, impressive authority, and dazzling virtu-
osity. Listening to any of the recordings (his own for Prestige, Davis’s
for Columbia) made in 1958, one can hear the transformation in his
playing. First and foremost is the sheer speed, the blinding flurries
of notes that Ira Gitler had dubbed “sheets of sound.” Harmonically,
Coltrane’s runs were adventurous, he would superimpose or stack up
chords. Miles Davis explained it this way: “What he does, for ex-
ample, is to play five notes of a chord and then keep changing it
around, trying to see how many different ways it can sound. It’s like
explaining something five different ways. And that sound of his is
connected with what he’s doing with chords at any given time.”

Coltrane, who was notoriously self-critical and also refreshingly
honest even in the media, acknowledged that his playing of this time
was complex rhythmically. “I found there were a certain number of
chord progressions to play in a given time, and sometimes what I
played didn’t work out in eighth notes, sixteenth notes, or triplets. I
had to put the notes in uneven groups like fives and sevens in order
to get them all in… I want to be more flexible where rhythm is
concerned. I feel I have to study rhythm some more.” By 1959 he
was using the sheets of sound more sparingly.
During the spring of 1959, he was involved in what have become two of the most famous jazz albums ever made, representing two very different approaches: Davis's *Kind of Blue* (Columbia) and his own *Giant Steps*. The latter was his first album as a leader for Atlantic. This time, all seven compositions were his own, and he was the only wind player. His writing and playing throughout were remarkable, but it was the title piece that knocked the jazz world on its ear. "Giant Steps" represents the culmination of Coltrane's developing interest in third-related chord movement, which means that the keys change rapidly, and he played it at a murderous tempo. He made a thorough study of the possibilities of third relations, and he employed them on a number of pieces during 1959 and 1960, notably "Countdown," "Exotica," "Satellite" (a variation on "How High the Moon"), "26-2" (based on Charlie Parker's "Confirmation"), and his influential arrangements of "But Not for Me" and "Body and Soul" (all Atlantic/Rhino).

*Giant Steps* also included four tributes to family and friends: "Naima" (a serene, exotic tribute to his wife), "Cousin Mary," "Syedda's Song Flute," and "Mr. P. C." (for bassist Paul Chambers). Around this time he also wrote "Like Sonny" (Atlantic/Rhino; other version on Roulette) for Rollins; later (1962, Impulse) he wrote "Tunji" for percussionist Michael Olatunji.

As important as "Giant Steps" was, from 1960 onward Coltrane consistently referred to it as a passing phase, a period when he was obsessed with chords, something he had grown out of. In his own groups, and in his composing, "modal" pieces would predominate. For at the same time that Coltrane was developing his "Giant Steps" chordal concepts, Miles Davis had become interested in doing away with chord progressions. In 1958 Davis, with his pianist Bill Evans and the unrelated Gil Evans and also inspired by George Russell, had begun to experiment with the use of modes (i.e., medieval church scales). Davis was playing modes other than major and minor, the most common in Western music, and was working with simplified chord sequences—in a way, quite the opposite of "Giant Steps"—so that one could stay on one mode for as long as sixteen measures at a time.

Though not the first album to employ this approach, *Kind of Blue* was the one that popularized what became known as "modal jazz." On "So What," a Davis piece with a Gil Evans-written introduction, Coltrane created a tightly unified solo notable both for the abstract quality of its melodic motives and for the way he develops each of
them. He was clearly liberated by the slow harmonic movement. By being able to spend so much time on each chord and mode, he was allowed to grow in his ability to develop musical ideas while improvising. It also allowed him to concentrate on rhythm, which he had said he wanted to do.

Coltrane had for some time wanted to lead his own group—he did so periodically between gigs with Davis—and in late July 1959 he quit Davis. He was persuaded to return in mid-August but left for good after Davis's tour of Europe in March and April 1960.

On April 16, 1960, Coltrane led a group at Town Hall, Manhattan, on a bill with Dizzy Gillespie and others, and May 3 he began a two-month engagement at the Jazz Gallery. Apparently he had wanted to hire McCoy Tyner on piano, Art Davis on bass, and Elvin Jones on drums; but none of them was available, so he opened with Steve Kuhn on piano, Steve Davis on bass, and Pete Sims "LaRoca" on drums. Tyner joined in about a month, and Jones in late September, while the group was touring nationally. The bass chair changed around—Reggie Workman played for most of 1961, sometimes in tandem with Art Davis—and finally went to Jimmy Garrison at the end of 1961.

Coltrane had purchased a soprano saxophone around February 1, 1959, and tried it out that week on a gig at the Sutherland Hotel in Chicago. He began using it regularly in May 1960; his recording of "My Favorite Things" (Atlantic/Rhino) that October reestablished the soprano, rarely used in modern jazz, as a favored jazz instrument. His arranging concept was equally brilliant as his playing; essentially he took one chorus of the song and extended it vastly with long vamp sections. That same week he recorded all the material that would eventually become Coltrane Plays the Blues and Coltrane's Sound. He signed with the Impulse record label in April 1961. (All of the remaining albums mentioned are on Impulse except as noted.)

He was increasingly popular. Down Beat honored him as Jazzman of the Year in its review of the year 1961. In both the magazine's International Critics Poll and Readers Poll that year, he won for best tenor saxophonist and for miscellaneous instrument (soprano saxophone); the critics also voted his the new star combo. But his detractors grew louder with the addition of Eric Dolphy to the group for most of 1961. A majority of English critics (though not all) lambasted him on his first European tour that November. Coincidentally, the November 25 issue of Down Beat contained a scathing review from John Tynan, who spoke of "musical nonsense currently being peddled
in the name of jazz... a horrifying demonstration of what appears to be a growing anti-jazz trend." Coltrane and Dolphy responded with an article in *Down Beat* published April 12, 1962.

Coltrane also considered expanding his group to a sextet with the addition of guitarist Wes Montgomery. They performed together in California in September 1961 and again in 1962. But neither Montgomery nor Dolphy stayed, and Coltrane’s best-known quartet—with Tyner, Garrison, and Jones—remained intact from April 1962 through the fall of 1965, except for some absences of Jones.

By this time his repertory was dominated by the blues and his modal pieces, as he had realized that he could play through his complex harmonic ideas while the rhythm section supported him with more open, modal backgrounds. He became deeply involved in motivic improvisation and with building a sense of structure throughout each solo. His solo on “Equinox,” from *Coltrane’s Sound* (Atlantic), provides a good illustration of how concise his improvising became in the 1960s. His detractors were so busy noticing how many notes he played that they failed to grasp how sensibly he was using all these notes. Coltrane develops his solo on “Equinox” out of just a few motives, beginning with a repeated-note idea. The power, the concentration, and the depth of blues feeling are gripping. He played long solos, but there was good reason for this seemingly inordinate length. He was concerned with following his compositional ideas of the moment and preferred not to try to curtail, edit, or predetermine this process.

He moved further and further into a self-reliant sound world, a world that by the 1960s had less and less in common with the music that he started with: the music of Lester Young and Charlie Parker. For one thing, Coltrane was never partial to quoting—that is, to making musical references to famous solos or songs. What’s more, he developed a vocabulary of licks, or formulas, that are in many cases not traceable to his predecessors. One way that Coltrane developed this unique sound world was by bringing into his music—and, through his influence, into all of jazz and beyond—an eclectic collection of method books, exercises, and scales from around the world. Yet Coltrane’s music was always focused because he anchored all these sources in the deep soulful sound of the blues, particularly the blues in minor keys.

Coltrane’s sound world with his quartet was built around little fourth-based motives such as the chant from *A Love Supreme* (which fills a fourth), or Tyner’s tendency to use stacked fourths as the basis
of his piano chording, rather than the arpeggios of major chords that are such a critical part of most jazz—and Western music generally. This gives his music a serious, rather abstract sound, and it probably contributes to the spiritual element in his music. His tunes became more and more spare, until, with “Dear Lord” and “Love” in 1965, a few well-chosen scale tones would suffice. The way he builds his solos by developing short ideas at length, repeating them in different registers and building up to higher and higher notes, makes him a preacher on the saxophone. He does this most clearly on a slow out-of-tempo piece such as “Psalm,” as we'll see. But as German jazz educator Gerhard Putschögl has pointed out, Coltrane builds his solos the same way even when working with the rhythm section at a medium or fast tempo. And because those little fourths are a basis of the blues, his music is simultaneously drenched in blues feeling. That mixture of intense blues and spiritual fervor gives his music astounding power.

Jazz historian Dan Morgenstern recalls a typical evening at the Half Note around 1964 or 1965: “The intensity that was generated was absolutely unbelievable. I can still feel it, and it was unlike any other feeling within the music we call jazz. It carried you away. If you let yourself be carried by it, it was an absolutely ecstatic feeling. And I think that kind of ecstasy was something that Coltrane was looking for in his music.”

Just as “My Favorite Things” was a soprano feature, “Impressions” became his tenor theme song. This is based on the same AABA structure and D Dorian mode (E flat for the bridge) as “So What,” but the A section (main) melody was derived from Morton Gould’s “Pavanne” [sic] and the B section was taken from yet another “Pavane,” Maurice Ravel’s Pavane pour une infante défunte (or from the popular song that was based on it, “The Lamp Is Low”). Far from indicating any paucity of inspiration on Coltrane’s part, this is a characteristic example of his remarkable breadth of interests and his ability to apply these diverse sources to jazz.

He was among the first to play what is now called “world music.” For some years Coltrane had been exposed to the music of other cultures—India, parts of Africa, Latin America—through Dennis Sandole, Gillespie, Yusef Lateef, and others. He must have also learned about Middle Eastern music from Ahmed Abdul-Malik, the bassist during most of his Monk engagement, and John invited him to play the tamboura (not the oud) on “India” at the Village Vanguard in November 1961. He arranged to meet Ravi Shankar in New
York in December 1964, the first of a handful of informal lessons. He even named his second son Ravi.

He based some of his pieces on the sources he found. His "Spiritual" is a melody for "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See" from James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Spirituals*. "Olé" was based on a song known as "Venga Vallejo" or as "El Vito." The notes to *Africa/Brass* state that "he listened to many African records for rhythmic inspiration. One had a bass line like a chant, and the group used it, working it into different tunes."

"India" appears to be based on a recorded Vedic chant (that is, with a text coming from the Vedas, religious books of the 1500s) that was issued on a Folkways LP at the time. "I like Ravi Shankar very much," he told French writers Jean Clouzet and Michel Delorme in 1962. "What brings me closest to Ravi is the modal aspect of his art. Currently, at the particular stage I find myself in, I seem to be going through a modal phase. . . . There's a lot of modal music that is played every day throughout the world. It's particularly evident in Africa, but if you look at Spain or Scotland, India or China, you'll discover this again in each case. . . . It's this universal aspect of music that interests me and attracts me; that's what I'm aiming for."

It wasn't only the sound of world music that attracted him: Coltrane was interested in all kinds of religion and in all kinds of mysticism. He knew that in some folk cultures, music was held to have mystical powers, and he hoped to get in touch with some of those capacities. He told Nat Hentoff, "I've already been looking into those approaches to music—as in India—in which particular sounds and scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings."

His mystical, spiritual interests are explicit in *A Love Supreme*, his best-known and still best-selling album, recorded in December 1964. Its four sections—"Acknowledgement," "Resolution," "Pursuance," and "Psalms"—suggest a kind of pilgrim's progress, in which the pilgrim acknowledges the divine, resolves to pursue it, searches, and, eventually, celebrates what has been attained in song. Virtually the whole piece is based on the little "A Love Supreme" motive chanted by Coltrane (overdubbed as two voices) at the end of Part One. Perhaps most striking is the way he incorporates his poem, which appears in the liner, into Part Four. His saxophone solo is a wordless "recitation" of the words of the poem, beginning with the title, "A Love Supreme."

Eventually Coltrane accepted the diversity of human belief as representing different ways of recognizing one God. The titles of Col-
trane's last compositions suggest a mixture of religious influences. Only "The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost" is specifically Christian. Others, such as "Dear Lord" and Meditations, are more general, while "Om" suggests Eastern beliefs. He is quoted on the back of Meditations saying, "I believe in all religions." He made a special study of Indian Buddhism, but he also was interested in what Sonny Rollins had to say about the Rosicrucians. And he found Einstein's profound mixture of science and mysticism especially inspiring. "My goal," he said,

is to live the truly religious life and express it in my music. If you live it, when you play there's no problem because the music is just part of the whole thing. To be a musician is really something. It goes very, very deep. My music is the spiritual expression of what I am—my faith, my knowledge, my being.... When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to do something really good for people, to help humanity free itself from its hangups. I think music can make the world better and, if I'm qualified, I want to do it. I'd like to point out to people the divine in a musical language that transcends words. I want to speak to their souls.

Coltrane never saw himself as a guru of any sort; he was too modest for that, and too self-critical. He always felt that he could be better and could do better, and he was always pushing himself, always searching for new things. In 1965 he said, "I don't know if you can ever be a complete musician. I'm not. But I don't think I'll know what's missing from my playing until I find it."

A Love Supreme was voted album of the year by both Down Beat and Jazz in 1965, and Down Beat readers also named Coltrane Jazzman of the Year, and best tenor saxophonist and elected him to the magazine's Hall of Fame. But he continued to excite controversy. He was enamored of Ornette Coleman and the so-called avant-garde. Coltrane talked quite a bit about music with Coleman, and they reportedly discussed putting a group together but never did. Coltrane helped to arrange recording sessions at Impulse for Archie Shepp and others, and he was always generous about letting these younger players sit in with his group at performances. On June 28, 1965, he gathered eleven musicians together for a recording session that produced one of his most awesome, and daunting, recordings, Ascension. Besides his regular quartet, and bassist Art Davis, he used trumpeters Freddie
Hubbard and Dewey Johnson, alto saxophonists Marion Brown and John Tchicai, and tenor saxophonists Shepp and Pharoah Sanders.

By September, Sanders was a regular member of Coltrane’s group. On October 1, 1965, they recorded “Om,” which opens with the chanting of words from the Bhagavad-Gita. Coltrane’s work, disturbing to some, revelatory to as many more, continued to have profound musical substance, and his own solos were as tightly organized as ever.

He was playing in free time, without the bass walking, and decided to try out two drummers on a regular basis; beginning at the Village Gate in Manhattan in November 1965, he hired Rashied Ali as a second drummer. However, this prompted the departure of Tyner by the end of 1965. Jones left soon after. Jimmy Garrison stayed with Coltrane through the summer of 1966 (though he returned for recording sessions) along with Sanders, Rashied Ali, and pianist Alice McLeod Coltrane (his second wife).

In his last two years, Coltrane did away with rehearsed material almost completely in order to devote himself purely to the manipulation of abstract motivic ideas. His last works are, on one level, about form, just as they are concerned with metaphysical and philosophical concepts on another level. He also came upon a richer tone, with fuller vibrato, than he had ever used before.

The barrage of sound presented by Coltrane’s last works may, unfortunately, conceal from many listeners the magnificent power of his playing. What seems to be chaotic is just the opposite. Coltrane managed to create long solos that flowed seamlessly from theme to improvisation—which is just what he said he wanted. And the improvisations were devoted relentlessly to the exploration of abstract motivic ideas. (The posthumous release Interstellar Space is the perfect place to hear this because it consists entirely of duets with drums.)

In the fall of 1966, Coltrane began to cut back on touring (even Sanders began to lead his own band) and made plans to stay around New York, probably as much for family reasons as for health reasons. (He was not yet aware of any serious illness.) He had begun to take control of his own business affairs. He had arranged for his own label imprint and was planning some self-produced concerts jointly with Olatunji; they already had reserved January 14, 1968, at Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic Hall. He spoke of opening a space in New Jersey or in Greenwich Village where rehearsals and performances would be open informally to the public for a nominal charge. By the spring of 1967, he was reportedly planning on performing less often or even
taking a break altogether, while he concentrated on producing younger artists and possibly doing some teaching.

But by the spring of 1967, Coltrane’s health was failing. On April 23, he appeared in a benefit concert for and at the new Olatunji Center of African Culture on East 125th Street. His final performance was in Baltimore on May 7. He died in a hospital in Huntington, Long Island, New York, of liver cancer on July 17, two months before what would have been his forty-first birthday. The cause has never been definitively found, but it was apparently not related to the drugs and alcohol he ingested as a youth, though it might have been a long-term effect of a dirty needle causing hepatitis.

A funeral service was held on July 21, 1967, at St. Peter’s Church in Manhattan. A thousand people attended. A longtime friend, composer Cal Massey, read the poem “A Love Supreme.” The quartets of Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler performed one number each.

Historical markers have been raised in Hamlet and High Point. His cousin Mary still lives on North 33rd Street in Philadelphia in a house he bought in 1952; it is now the base of the John W. Coltrane Cultural Society. A Christian church in San Francisco centers its ritual on the album and poem A Love Supreme.

Coltrane’s impact was profound and nearly all-pervasive, not only musically but as part of jazz culture. Everyone who plays jazz since has had to contend, in some way, with his legacy, and the naysayers have dwindled to a few. Many musicians are influenced directly by the notes he played and by his approaches to composition; an equal number are inspired by his approach to the profession, by the seriousness and nobility that he brought to his work. Without intending to, and with utmost humility, he redefined what it means to be a jazz musician.