The Sound of Transcendence

Understanding the chaos of John Coltrane's 1960s music

Figure 1. John Coltrane, April 1966. Image by Chuck Stewart, via Smithsonian Magazine.

From the early 1960s until his death in 1967 John Coltrane experimented with new sounds, forms, and styles. His music from this era sparked heated debate among critics and is still a controversial topic. Critics in the 1960s brushed off Coltrane's long, cyclical forms, atonal experimentation, and "chaotic" collective improvisation as noisy nonsense. Jazz critic John Tynan coined the term "anti-jazz" when describing a live

performance by the John Coltrane quartet.[1] In the context of traditional big-band jazz, bebop, and cool jazz, Coltrane's 1960s work most certainly stood apart. However, a closer look at Coltrane's spiritual, philosophical, and religious motivations gives new layers of meaning to this hotly contested body of work. Archival and academic sources reveal how Coltrane's personal transformation in the 1960s was the true force behind his musical choices. His interest in religion, spirituality, and non-Western philosophies pushed him away from traditional jazz structures and toward a sound built on repetition, intensity, and freedom. By viewing Coltrane's music as a spiritual practice rather than entertainment, his reshaping of harmony, rhythm, and form is best described as a search for transcendence.

Coltrane's religious journey began at his childhood home in High Point, North Carolina. Coltrane grew up in his maternal grandfather's house. William Wilson Blair was a pastor and elder at St. Stephen Methodist Episcopal Church. In a 1958 interview, Coltrane recalled, "religion was his field. I grew up in that." Despite his religious upbringing, Coltrane drifted away from religion in his early adulthood. After a year in the Navy from 1945 to 1946, Coltrane's addiction to heroin and alcohol seemed to replace his spiritual pursuits.[2]

But in 1957, Coltrane underwent what he referred to as a "spiritual awakening" after quitting heroin and alcohol cold turkey.[3] Coltrane's sobriety didn't result in

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[1] DeMichael, Don. "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics." *DownBeat*, April 12th, 1962. https://downbeat.com/microsites/prestige/dolphy-interview.html

[2] Hedin, Benjamin. "John Coltrane's Spiritual High Point." *Oxford America*, no. 103, Winter 2018. https://oxfordamerican.org/magazine/issue-103-winter-2018/john-coltrane-s-spiritual-high-point

[3] Coltrane, John. Liner notes to A Love Supreme. Impulse! AS-77, 1965. LP.

immediate changes to his sound; it did mark the beginning of a spiritual quest that would reshape his music in the years that followed. In the liner notes of his 1965 album — *A Love Supreme* — Coltrane credited his performance to a "spiritual awakening." He described the album as a spiritual offering, an attempt to say, "THANK YOU GOD."[4] It's important to note that Coltrane was not referring to one specific god in that tribute. By then he had adopted the universalist belief in God as an infinite, universal force. The unique qualities of Coltrane's sound in the 1960s are reflective of his universalist views, blending elements of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. Of all his diverse influences, he was most profoundly inspired by the classical music and aesthetic concepts of India.[5]

Coltrane took inspiration from both the philosophical elements of Indian music and the structures of Indian classical music. He spoke often about the concept of *rasa*—the belief that a *raga's* framework has the ability to evoke specific emotions (*raga* is a fundamental melodic framework in Indian classical music, similar to a scale in Western music). Coltrane's interest in *rasa* is reflective of his shift in musical philosophy; he showed less interest in the stylistic expectations of Western jazz and more interest in the transcendent quality of his new sound. In an interview with Nat Hentoff, Coltrane expressed his interest in "those approaches to music—as in India—in which particular sounds and scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings."[6] In Lewis Porter's biography on Coltrane, Porter reproduced and discussed

[4] Ibid.
[5] Gohil, Dillon. "Spirituality in Jazz." *Fourth Floor*, February 18, 2020. https://www.thefourthfloor.co.uk/culture/the-coltranes-spirituality-in-jazz.
[6] John Coltrane, quoted in Nat Hentoff, notes to Coltrane: Live at the Village Vanguard, quoted in Lewis Porter, John Coltrane: His Life and Music (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 211.

pages from Coltrane's notebook containing Indian *ragas*. Coltrane produced his *ragas* while studying with Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar in the mid-1960s.[7] Shankar was someone who viewed music as a deeply sacred, spiritual, and meditative art form, and this fueled Coltrane's growing interest in music as a spiritual practice. In fact, Coltrane was planning to spend six additional months studying with Shankar when he tragically died of liver cancer in 1967.[8] Ravi Shankar's influence on Coltrane was forever memorialized when Coltrane named his son Ravi.

While the principles of *rasa* informed Coltrane's mindset, the structures of Indian classical music are clearly expressed in his 1960s music. Coltrane was especially influenced by the Indian use of the drone—a repetitive and unchanging sonic anchor. The drone typically alternates between sustained roots and fifths. The root-to-fifth drone is a common convention in 1960s Coltrane tunes like the aptly named "India," in which the bass continually pedals through a G chord. [9] Ethnomusicologist Salim Washington attributed much of Coltrane's experimental and innovative soloing to the influence of Indian classical music. "Without the concerns of harmonic modulation, the improvisers in the [North Indian classical] tradition must exhibit melodic inventiveness, rhythmic flexibility, and stamina, which were exactly the attributes that marked Coltrane's solos."[10]

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[7] Porter, Lewis. "John Coltrane: His Life and Music." Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.
[8] Clements, Carl. "John Coltrane and the Integration of Indian Concepts in Jazz Improvisation." *India Music Week*. PDF, 4. https://indiamusicweek.org/files/coltrane.pdf
[9] "India," track 1 on John Coltrane, *Impressions*, Impulse! Records, 1963, YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiJI9hBBdS8&list=RDtiJI9hBBdS8&start_radio=1
[10] Clements, "Integration of Indian Concepts,"

For all of India's influence, Coltrane's non-Western musical influences were not limited to India alone. He also took inspiration from African rhythms, namely from Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji. In the early 1960s, Coltrane's interest in African music led him to record "Africa/Brass," a unique culmination of African rhythmic language, modal foundations, and big-band jazz. Lewis Porter, Ph.D., author of *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, said Coltrane's studies of folkloric recordings from West Africa influenced the rhythmic conceptions on Africa/Brass.[11] Saxophonist Archie Shepp said many musicians in the 1960s moved away from tonal harmony as a kind of rebellion against the "ultra-sophistication of jazz."[12]

But Coltrane's affinity for African sounds was not just a rebellion against jazz in the 1960s. It was also reflective of a major social movement taking shape in the United States—the Civil Rights Movement. Archie Shepp described Black music as "a reflection of the lived reality in the United States of Black life, which is under constant threat by White racist violence."[13] Dr. Emmett G. Price III described a recently discovered 1961 recording of "Evenings at the Village Gate: John Coltrane (with Eric Dolphy)" as "another example of the power of courageous musicians to inspire hope, innovation, and empowerment through sound." Price explained that the raw sound of Coltrane and Dolphy was not chaos as labeled by critics, but a whirlwind of emotions that generated hope and motivation in a time of suffering— "like the cries of the Civil Rights

[11] Porter, Lewis. "John Coltrane: His Life and Music."
[12] Coleman, Kwami. "Free Jazz and the 'New Thing': Aesthetics, Identity, and Texture, 1960–1966." *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 38, No.3 (Summer 2021), pp. 261-295. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48771558?read-now=1&seq=1
[13] Ibid.

movement.” Interpreting Coltrane's Africa-inspired music through this uniquely American lens makes the mostly White critics of the day appear especially ignorant of Coltrane’s context. According to Price, the disapproval of critics in the 1960s is a reflection of their “arrogance of perceived superiority."[14]

While the context of American sociopolitical turmoil in the 1960s provides a logical layer of meaning to Coltrane’s late sound, Coltrane himself rarely made overt political statements. Instead of speaking, he used “ecstatic” performance practices rooted in African American ritual traditions to transform sound into a form of resistance. Dr. Salim Washington drew a connection between Coltrane’s late sound and Afro-Christian liturgical performance. Washington introduced the term “ecstatic voice” to describe a vocal quality derived from Afro-Christian liturgical performance where vocalization is pushed to timbral excess—to the point where it is split by emetic power as a representation of spiritual compulsion or even seizure. Coltrane commonly used such techniques involving manipulations of his diaphragm, vocal cords, throat muscles, cheeks, tongue, lips, and teeth, which allowed him to create squalls, growls, and screeches emblematic of the ecstatic voice. These sounds, according to Washington, are “an invitation for the audience to become participants, especially by witnessing or testifying to the spiritual power inherent in such a performance, contributing their own vocalizations and body gestures to the event.”[15]

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[14] Mirisola, John. “Lost John Coltrane Record Still Sounds Like Freedom.” *Berklee Now*, Berklee College of Music, July 26, 2023. https://www.berklee.edu/berklee-now/news/lost-john-coltrane-record-still-sounds-like-freedom

[15] Crockford, James R. W., “Coltrane’s A Love Supreme: Mediations of Immediacy in Jazz Ritual and Recitation.” *Yale Journal of Music and Religion*, Volume 9: No. 2, Article 2, 2023. https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yjmr/vol9/iss2/2/

Understanding the religious and social significance of the ecstatic voice gives new meaning to the human-like, screeching multiphonic cries of Coltrane's saxophone. David Tegnell, jazz historian and Coltrane scholar, attended numerous Pentecostal services in North Carolina to explore this connection. Tegnell noted that during these services, "time seemed to stand still. Members acknowledged the Holy Spirit, then basked in His presence.... This happens often in Coltrane improvisations—time seems to unfold endlessly."[16] Despite losing the thread on his religion under the influence of heroin and alcohol, the final chapter of John Coltrane's music seems to remember the Pentecostal ceremonies he attended as a boy in his grandfather's African Methodist Episcopal Church. But instead of singing, his voice had become a saxophone.

Attributing the unique qualities of Coltrane's late sound to just one influence would be reductive. In fact, Coltrane's sound was an eclectic blend of personal struggle, cultural and spiritual exploration, and social commentary. From his roots in the African Methodist Episcopal church to his spiritual reawakening and exploration of non-Western harmony and rhythm, Coltrane's late music is a search for transcendence. Hearing 1960s Coltrane as transcendence rather than style sheds a new light on his purpose and slays the critics of his time. As Coltrane himself put it, "the main thing a musician would like to do is to give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things he knows of and senses in the universe."[17]

[16] Hedin, Benjamin. "John Coltrane's Spiritual High Point."
[17] DeMichael, Don. "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics."

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