

A Reassessment of the Periodization of the Music of John Coltrane¹

Introduction

John Coltrane is regarded as one of the most significant innovators of jazz. He was an active performer in the genre from the 1940s up until he died in 1967. During this time Coltrane is said to have gone through developmental stages. These stages are framed by famous recordings he produced which are often thought of as examples of each developmental stage at its culmination. However, I'm not convinced that Coltrane himself saw it this way. I would like to offer an alternative view of John Coltrane and his musical output. I propose that Coltrane saw his music making, specifically from 1957 up until his death, not as evolutionary stages that he mastered and then subsequently presented in the form of recordings, but as one continuous, never-ending search of the musical paradigm he was hearing in his head.

Much of the scholarship on the professional career of John Coltrane divides his work up into stages. These periods are often identified by the bands he performed with—Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, his own quartet and large avant-garde groups—to name a few. Additionally, Coltrane's work has been divided by the improvisational techniques he used in his solos: bebop, sheets of sound, Coltrane substitutions, Modal, Pentatonic, Avant-garde techniques.² This is not an attempt to diminish the scholarship done in this fashion; in fact,

¹ This paper was presented at “The New Jazz Histories Symposium”, University of Salford, Manchester, England November 19, 2008.

² In David Baker's instructional book for saxophonist he divides Coltrane's work into a “change running period,” a “modal period,” and an “experimental period” in order to describe some of the improvisational techniques used in each period. Davis Baker, *The Jazz Style of John Coltrane*, (Lebanon, IN: Studio 224, 1980).

much of that work is intended as educational information in order to give aspiring musicians a framework for their own education.³ However it is my assertion that these accounts put superficial divisions into a career that was, in fact very fluid.

To me this is a case of two different types of knowledge. As it is explained in Jeff Todd Titon's essay, "Knowing Fieldwork," knowledge can be divided into two different kinds: explanation and understanding. "Explanation is typical of the sciences, and understanding typifies knowledge in the humanities."⁴ Coltrane's work has been explained by jazz scholars in a way that has allowed other musicians to employ the same techniques. Anyone who has studied Coltrane knows that he practiced eight to sixteen hours a day and it has become common to consider him a musical genius.⁵ His improvisational techniques have been explained to such an extent that Coltrane has had more imitators than any other jazz musician. On the other hand understanding some of the factors that greatly influenced his life will provide greater understanding as to *why* Coltrane improvised the way he did and *how* he was to be able to do it.

From the time he was fired from his first stint with the Miles Davis group until his death, John Coltrane did not pass through many different stages of development or stylistic performance techniques. Instead after being fired by Miles Davis, Coltrane experienced a series

Eric Nisenson divides Coltrane's work into "Early Coltrane" including his work with Gillespie, and Miles, and his first recordings for Atlantic, a "Middle Period" including his work with Monk and the early Impulse recordings, and finally a "Late Period" including Coltrane's avant-garde albums. Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993).

³ Baker's book uses different periods to make Coltrane's techniques more understandable; this seems to be the norm for solo transcription books that focus on instructing young musicians. See Ronny Schiff, *Coltrane Plays Standards*, Milwaukee, (WI: Hal Leonard, 2000). and Carl Coan, *John Coltrane Solos*, (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1995). Historical and bibliographical references including the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* have also characterized Coltrane's development as moving from one period to the next.

⁴ Jeff Todd Titon, "Knowing Fieldwork" *Shadows in the Field*, Barz and Cooley Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵ See J.C. Thomas, *Casin' The Trane*, (New York: Doubleday and Co. 1975).

of life changing events that sparked the embers of a musical concept and set him off on a journey of constant searching for the rest of his life. Like a composer who has an idea for a composition, Coltrane had a concept for his improvisations. Like a composer who writes and rewrites, and makes changes and edits before the premiere of his work, and even after the premiere, for the rest of his life Coltrane would continually present this concept, alter it, edit it, and make changes, sometimes slight, sometimes drastic. Unlike the composer who moves on to a new composition either satisfied with the one he has produced or at least content enough to put it to rest, Coltrane was never able to present his finished composition—his improvisational paradigm. Instead, he spent every waking second of the rest of his life searching for the final version of his improvisational techniques, but he never found it. In this paper I will identify the musical concepts Coltrane began to discover while working with Thelonious Monk’s band and trace the way Coltrane developed these concepts throughout the rest of his career.

Addictions

Coltrane received his first big break in music in 1955 when Miles Davis hired him to be the second horn player in the trumpeter’s quintet. After a few productive years with the Davis Quintet, Coltrane, along with “Philly” Jo Jones, the band’s drummer, was fired. He was fired from Miles Davis’ quintet because his use of drugs and alcohol made him unreliable on the bandstand. Coltrane showed an addictive personality early in his life having a penchant for sugar that caused him to have dental problems in his twenties.⁶ His addictive behavior soon led him to an addiction to drugs and alcohol. Of course, playing in bars with other musicians who were also using drugs and alcohol helped to introduce Coltrane to the dangerous substances, but it was

⁶ Thomas, *Chasin’ the Trane*, 83.

his uncontrollable addictive personality, which led him to troubles with the Miles Davis group and eventually to his dismissal from that group.

While some scholars have indicated that the firing was devastating for him.⁷ In his biography, *John Coltrane*, Lewis Porter states that Coltrane took his dismissal from Davis' group in stride; "Coltrane was not sulking at having lost the engagement with Davis. On the contrary, he took this opportunity to get his career and personal life together."⁸ Regardless of how Coltrane took his loss of employment, he did take the opportunity to rid himself of the drug addiction that was the cause of the problem in the first place. While at home in Philadelphia, he was able to give up his dependencies on drugs and alcohol. Coltrane has explained this time in his life in different interviews. "About that time I made a decision...that's when I stopped drinking and [doing drugs]. I was able to play better right then...that helped me in all kinds of ways when I stopped drinking. I could play better and think better and everything."⁹

Coltrane never did rid himself of his addictive personality; instead, he replaced drugs and alcohol with religious devotion and practicing. To fill the void left by the dependence of drugs and alcohol, Coltrane became deeply devoted to god. He grew up in a family devoted to Methodist Christianity; however, he was also surrounded by many different religious influences at this point in his life. Many young African Americans were converting to Islam to escape the white dominated Christian church. "Islam was a particularly strong influence in Philadelphia,"

⁷ See Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album*, (New York: Viking Press 2002), 24.

⁸ Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1998), 105.

⁹ John Coltrane quoted in Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 24.

the city where Coltrane was living.¹⁰ At the time Coltrane was fired from the Davis group, he was married to Naima; she and her daughter Syeeda were both devout Muslims.

Coltrane was also listening to a lot of music by Ravi Shankar and reading books on the Hindu religion. Thus, although it is commonly believed that Coltrane was a devout Christian, “Coltrane was not worshiping the Christian version of God, or the Muslim, or Hindu, but rather all of them or, more precisely, a personal synthesis of those ideas basic to all religions.”¹¹

Coltrane did not spend this time in his life defining his religious faith, he instinctively accepted what he felt was his own idea of God. Instead, Coltrane focused on what he felt God had intended him to do, “play music that would make people happy.”¹²

Coltrane also became addicted to practicing. He felt that it was his mission to become an empty vessel through which God spoke.¹³ In order to accomplish Gods intentions, Coltrane had to master the medium with which he was working. He would begin practicing very early in the morning and play for up to ten to twelve hours before going to a gig later that night. During intermission he would be in the backroom practicing even more.¹⁴ There is a popular anecdote that I have heard many times, during his last days, when Coltrane knew he was sick (from liver cancer), he took himself to the hospital emergency room. However, the emergency room was very busy and he was told to take a seat and wait for his name to be called. After a half hour of waiting he could wait no longer, he felt he was wasting valuable practice time. Coltrane gathered up his belongings and went back home to practice. He died the next day. In 1957 religion and practicing became his new addictions and they would last the rest of his life.

¹⁰ Porter, *John Coltrane*, 96.

¹¹ Nisenson, *Ascension*, 153.

¹² Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 25.

¹³ Brian Priestley, *Coltrane*, (Great Britain: Apollo Press Limited, 1987) 46.

¹⁴ Bill Cole, *John Coltrane* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976), 5 and 88.

Monk

During this period of spiritual and musical awakening Coltrane was hired to play with the Thelonious Monk Quartet. Monk was one of the innovators of the bebop era. He was a mentor to many of the young musicians playing in the early 1940s, and although he was not very well known to the public, he was thought of in the jazz community as a master musician. Monk was one of the most important innovators of bebop. His home in New York's San Juan Hill "became a Mecca for other musicians... all of whom tried out new harmonic ideas in this informal setting."¹⁵

In the late fifties, Thelonious Monk was finally beginning to get recognition from the public. He had been given a steady engagement at the Half Note jazz club, and Coltrane was his horn player of choice. This tenure with Monk would only last about six months; however, Coltrane was playing with the group six nights a week. During that time Monk opened up Coltrane's ears. Monk was known to layout or stop playing behind soloists for extended periods of time. The freedom Coltrane experienced during these moments of pianoless rhythm section forced him to concentrate very hard on the harmonies he was hearing in his head in order to keep his place in the harmonic progression as he improvised.¹⁶

Coltrane's wife, Niama would go to every gig and record each set for Coltrane, so that he could go home and analyze his playing afterward.¹⁷ During his nightly performances, and while analyzing his own playing of those gigs, Coltrane became aware of something new in his playing. He began to hear a specific and unique way he was navigating chord changes and progression through the harmony of the songs. At the time Coltrane was also practicing out of

¹⁵ Alyn Shipton, *New History of Jazz* (London; New York: Continuum Press, 2001), 485.

¹⁶ Bill Cole, *John Coltrane*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 59.

¹⁷ Nisenson, *Ascension*, 47.

Nicolas Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. Many of the symmetric patterns found in this thesaurus found their way into Coltrane's solos. These patterns, along with his experiences with Monk spurred Coltrane to develop a unique way of navigating traditional chord changes.

A large majority of standard jazz repertoire is built on ii V7 I harmonic progression. While improvising over standard chord progressions, particularly due to the absence of the piano, Coltrane discovered a unique way of getting from the beginning of this progression to its cadence. As he analyzed his playing this new path through the harmony became more obvious to him. "He began playing three chords in place of one, and played the entire scale of each chord; he had to play these chords very fast in order to fit them into the line, which was often impossible."¹⁸ However, Coltrane would soon find a more conducive environment to experiment with his new technique.

Davis Again

After his six-month stint with Thelonious Monk, Coltrane rejoined Davis's group. Coltrane's newfound devotion to music and his abstinence from drugs and alcohol proved he could once again be a valuable member of Davis's group. Coltrane jumped at the opportunity to rejoin the band because Davis's popularity would provide him with even more exposure to a wider audience. Although he was playing six nights a week with Monk, Thelonious never really liked to travel outside New York City, and at the time he was not recording very often. Miles on the other hand, had a rigorous recording and touring schedule that provided Coltrane with much more exposure to the public.

¹⁸ Nisenson, *Ascension*, 48.

One of Coltrane’s first live performances back with the Davis group captured on recording demonstrates his new harmonic concept first starting to take shape. Although the examples are sparse in this situation, their appearance in live performance is significant. It shows that the new technique is becoming an integrated part of Coltrane’s improvising vocabulary, and not used as a preconceived idea that was deliberately place the middle of a solo played in a recording studio. The studio provides an environment where the performer could play as many takes as is needed to get it right, in a live situation the performer only has one take. Coltrane’s improvised solo on “Oleo,” a well known rhythm changes tune, shows that he was beginning to develop his unique substitute chord progression.

*** Example 1: Coltrane solo on Oleo¹⁹**

* Example 1 shows Coltrane’s use of his harmonic substitutions. The lower chord changes are the original changes to the song; the upper changes are Coltrane’s substitutions.

Mile Davis’ move toward modal compositions shortly after this live performance was a particularly significant time for Coltrane because “the trumpeter’s modal experiments had

¹⁹ Coan, *John Coltrane Solos*, 35.

proved the launching pad that propelled the saxophonist [Coltrane], to another musical plane.”²⁰

Modal jazz was a unique idea when Miles and his group recorded the album *Milestones*. The title track from that album is regarded as being the first modal jazz composition to be performed.²¹

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into a detailed explanation of modal jazz, the most noteworthy difference between modal jazz and standard jazz compositions played up to that time is that in modal jazz the harmony of the song is reduced to only a few chords that are repeated for whole sections at a time. The most famous example of a modal composition is Miles Davis’s “So What?” this composition consists of only two different chord changes. Its progression is sixteen measures of Dm7, eight measures of Ebm7, and then eight measure of Dm7 again. Over both chords the improviser would use the Dorian minor scale to construct a solo.

Modal compositions gave Coltrane the opportunity to develop his harmonic substitutions at a much slower moving harmonic pace. Because the harmony is suspended, in some instances for as long as sixteen measures, Coltrane was able to play each substitution much more extensively, almost as if he were working out these substitutions in the practice room. Coltrane was aware of the impact modal compositions had on his playing. In an interview he said, “I now found it easier to apply the harmonic ideas that I had. I could stack up chords—say, on a C7, I sometimes superimposed an Eb7, up to an F#7, down to an F. That way I could play three chords on one.”²²

²⁰ Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 4.

²¹ George Russell, author of the *Lydian Chromatic Concept*, was an equally important contributor to the development of modal jazz. However, Miles is given the most credit for the first significant performance of modal jazz compositions.

²² Thomas, *Chasin the Trane*, 105-106.

However, Coltrane's second tenure with Miles did not last very long. In 1960 Coltrane participated in his last tour with the Miles Davis Group. This tour followed the recent release of Davis' popular modal album *Kind of Blue*. Coltrane was developing his improvisational concepts at such a furious pace that audience members who came to hear the Davis group after the release of the famous album, expecting to hear Coltrane play the way he did on the recording, were disappointed to find that Coltrane's playing had not stayed stagnant, as it was captured on the tracks of *Kind of Blue*. He had continued his search and this disappointed the Miles Davis audiences. The audience was expecting Coltrane to sound like he did on the album, but according to Davis' drummer at the time, Jimmy Cobb, "By that time he was through playing Miles' stuff. He had outgrown everybody's band except his own"²³

Giant Steps

Coltrane had been working with his own group off and on just before he left Davis. The same year that he recorded *Kind of Blue* with Miles; he also recorded *Giant Steps* under his own name. Many scholars consider the title track from that album, "Giant Steps," a culmination of Coltrane's work on the chord substitutions that germinated during his time with Monk and Davis.²⁴ However "Giant Steps" was not the pinnacle of his use of dense harmonic substitutions. Coltrane did not abandon this idea, content to let "Giant Steps" represent the paradigm of a developmental stage, while he began developing a new concept that would eventually culminate in the recording of *A Love Supreme*, as some would suggest.²⁵ In fact, "Giant Steps" was just

²³ Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 4.

²⁴ Coltrane's composition 'Countdown' also appears on the *Giant Steps* album and contains Coltrane's harmonic substitutions superimposed over the jazz standard 'Tune Up.'

²⁵ See Nisenson, *Ascension*, 153.

another snapshot of the continual manipulation of the concept; a concept that he continued to change, for better and for worse, well past his recording of *A Love Supreme*.

What makes “Giant Steps” a unique work in Coltrane’s repertoire is also what leads people to consider it a stylistic benchmark. Before “Giant Steps” Coltrane had been applying his substitutions over standard harmonic progressions like the example of “Oleo” above or over stagnant harmony in modal compositions. However, in “Giant Steps,” Coltrane clearly lays out the harmonic substitutions in a pre-composed chord progression. For the first time Coltrane’s harmonic ideas are clearly laid out and his improvised solo is not using any substitutions, but simply playing chord tones over the corresponding changes. It is this blatant, technical exercise-like, use of his improvisational techniques that have been called the culmination of his ideas. What is interesting however is the way his solo on the originally released version of “Giant Steps” differs from one that was recorded one month earlier.

It is the different way Coltrane plays on the two solos that is most important here. The first solo (version 1), is sometimes said to be more melodic and the second (version 2 the original release), to be almost like an exercise. Listening to and reviewing the transcription of the first solo makes it obvious that the melodic nature of this solo is limited to the opening chorus; however, it is still interesting that Coltrane originally chose to release the second solo instead of the first. From the very first notes of the second solo Coltrane is dedicated to the permutation of pentatonic patterns with very little rhythmic or melodic variation.²⁶

***Examples 2 (Version 1) and 3 (Version 2) See page 11a**

²⁶ A great majority of the patterns Coltrane employs in his solo on ‘Giant Steps’ uses the tones of the specific anhemitonic pentatonic scale derived from each of the chords. Anhemitonic mean that the pentatonic scale contains no half steps. In order to move effectively from one chord to the next, in most instances Coltrane uses only four of the five tones.

Opening Chorus: Giant Steps

Carl Coan, *John Coltrane Solos*, Milwaukee:Hal Leonard, 1995.

Version #1

Chord progression for Version #1:

- 1: D^bMaj7
- 2: E7
- 3: A Maj7
- 4: C7
- 5: F Maj7
- 6: B min7
- 7: E7
- 8: A Maj7
- 9: C7
- 10: F Maj7
- 11: A^b7
- 12: D^bMaj7
- 13: G min7
- 14: C7
- 15: F Maj7
- 16: E^bmin7
- 17: A^b7

Version #2

Chord progression for Version #2:

- 1: D^bMaj7
- 2: E7
- 3: A Maj7
- 4: C7
- 5: F Maj7
- 6: B min7
- 7: E7
- 8: A Maj7
- 9: C7
- 10: F Maj7
- 11: A^b7
- 12: D^bMaj7
- 13: G min7
- 14: C7
- 15: F Maj7
- 16: E^bmin7
- 17: A^b7

Why then did Coltrane prefer to use his second solo, instead of the first? Is it because the accompanying musicians on the second solo play that much better than the first? Is it because the piano solo in the second adds so much to the overall shape of the piece, or that the song is taken at a much faster tempo? These issues were probably part of the reason, though Flannigan's meandering piano solo only adds more proof that the composition was ridiculously difficult to solo on. However, perhaps Coltrane was more concerned with the manipulation of pentatonic patterns over the chord changes rather than developing an organically paced contoured solo. By reducing his solo material to pentatonic patterns Coltrane is able to capture the essence, the most essential sound of each chord.

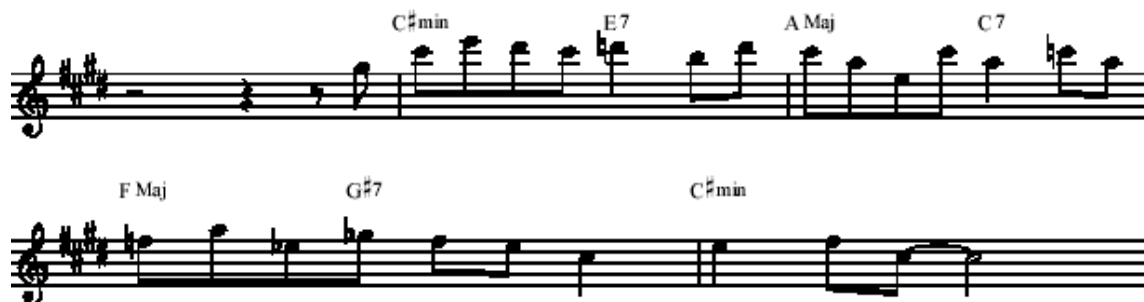
Furthermore, Coltrane had identified a problem with the compositional style of "Giant Steps." With the help of Miles Davis he was able to find an answer. He states, "It was hard to make some things swing with the rhythm section playing those chords, and Miles advised me to abandon the idea of the rhythm section playing those sequences, and to do it only myself."²⁷ Having captured this essence of sound using four note permutations of the pentatonic patterns, Coltrane was then able to disregard the quickly moving chord changes and still use the harmonic concept in a more accessible manner. Disregarding the use of dense chords in the rhythm section but keeping them in his solos leads us to the conclusion that "Giant Steps" was actually a pivot or a catapult for Coltrane much more than it was an end in itself.

Taking Miles' suggestion Coltrane stopped using such dense harmonic progressions. Instead he began having the rhythm section play more modal and pedal point accompaniment. This allowed his rhythm section to develop their signature groove that propelled Coltrane creativity on even further. In 1962 Coltrane made his first recording with the solidified version

²⁷ Coltrane quoted in Shipton, *A New History of Jazz*, 752.

of his famous group with their trademark groove in full swing, this recording was simply called *Coltrane*. This recording is yet another snapshot of Coltrane’s work in progress. The tracks on this recording show a decided turn towards creating a strong groove in the rhythm section. Many of the tracks on the album have modal harmony or a simple harmony in which two chords alternate back and forth at a measure apiece. However, despite the simplification of harmonic material, and dominance of a trance-like groove, Coltrane’s harmonic concept is still present. The new techniques in the rhythm section just disguise it a little. On one of the modal tracks, “Mile’s Mode” Coltrane employs his chord substitutions directly over the minor modal rhythmic accompaniment. Professional saxophonist, Eric Alexander found this technique “mind-blowing”, as he struggled to figure out what Coltrane was up to. To him it sounded very “out” but “I finally realized he was just playing “Giant Steps” changes in a minor key.”²⁸ “Giant Steps” had originally been designed as a major harmonic substitution; however, Coltrane took his harmonic concept and treated the minor mode he was soloing on, C# minor, as if it were C# major.

*** Example 4**



Example 4 is a section of Coltrane’s solo on “Miles Mode.” The rhythm section is accompanying him on the tonic minor, while he is substituting the chord changes above.²⁹

²⁸ Eric Alexander, interview by Jason Squinobal 2000.

²⁹ Transcription by Jason Squinobal 2006.

Coltrane also optimized his use of the pentatonic patterns in order to expand his harmonic concept. As was discussed above, Coltrane used pentatonic patterns in an attempt to sonically ground the harmony of “Giant Steps.” Subsequently, pentatonic patterns became increasingly prominent in his solos. He used these patterns to explore the modal and drone accompaniments his rhythm section was providing him, and he also used these patterns more and more to move away from the provided accompaniment. He was able to do this because the pentatonic patterns were so rhythmically and sonically strong that his deviation from the key center was not that disturbing to the listener.

This technique can be found on the previously mentioned recording *Coltrane*, in a slightly unconventional form. The five-note groupings he uses in this example are not traditional anhemitonic pentatonic scales, but the fact that he repeats the same five-note rhythmic pattern as he weaves in and out of the harmony, stabilizes his motif and makes the listener’s ear accept what he is doing as logical.

*** Written Example 5**

Out Of This World

Ronny Schiff, *Coltrane Plays Standards*, Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2000.

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the piece "Out Of This World". The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The first staff begins with an F min7 chord and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff features a Bb7 chord and another triplet. The third staff continues the melodic line with an F min7 chord and a Bb7 chord. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with rests interspersed throughout.

Example 5 is a selection from Coltrane's solo on "Out Of This World" a track from his recording *Coltrane*. This example shows his use of five-note (pentatonic) groupings in order to move to substitute harmonies, yet still keep his playing sonically and rhythmically grounded. However, a stronger example of this technique can be found in Coltrane's solo on *A Love Supreme*.

A love Supreme

Coltrane and his quartet recorded *A Love Supreme* in 1964. The album consists of one large programmatic work split up into four sections, there is no break between the third and final section. The opening movement starts with slow but steadily building intensity around a static harmony. The second movement continues the build of intensity with more harmonic movement and more structure, a faster tempo and a change in texture with piano solo. The third movement is the most intense. It starts with drum solo and is played at the fastest tempo, this movement is the most dissonant, and it is the climax of the program. With a bass solo used as a transition into the last movement, the intensity subsides. The final movement, "psalm", is played in speech-like rhythm with no harmonic movement. The overall shape of the work is a arching shape with a steady and gradual incline to the climax about two thirds of the way through the piece and a shorter descent to the end.

What is of most concern in this study is the use of the repeated melodic pattern in the first movement, "Acknowledgement." The majority of the melodic material used in this movement comes directly from the pentatonic scale, F Ab Bb C Eb. However, as Coltrane's solo progresses and begins to intensify he latches on to a melodic motif. To which the words "A Love Supreme" are eventual sung.

Melodic Development of A Love Supreme Theme

The image displays a musical score for the 'A Love Supreme Theme' in E-flat major, 4/4 time. The score is presented in a single system with eight staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a common time signature. The melody starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The subsequent staves show a continuous melodic line with various rhythmic patterns, including quarter notes, eighth notes, and rests. The key signature remains consistent throughout. The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of the eighth staff.

in a free jazz context. John Coltrane's son Ravi Coltrane, who has studied his father's playing extensively has said, "I hear *Giant Steps* in many of his 1965-1966 recordings. In many of his solos he used that progression in major thirds with the idea of dominants setting up a resolve."³¹ One of the musicians who performed with Coltrane, during his last years, Archie Shepp, echoes Ravi Coltrane's statement, saying that "even when playing free, [Coltrane] liked to be able to refer to harmonies he was familiar with."³²

Live Performance

It is admittedly easier to describe Coltrane's musical techniques by looking at his recorded output. However, the true nature of his musical searching can only be seen by examining his live performances. Brian Priestley writes, "In the studio he took the best ideas and put them together in relatively concise cohesive musical statements. When performing in public, Coltrane explored ideas as far as he could take them... Coltrane's performance was exploratory rather than reduced to a routine; it was distinctly variable from night to night."³³ The exploratory nature and variability in his live performances meant that at times he was ill received, as in the case of his final concert with the Davis group in Paris. However, it also means that his performances were remarkably innovative and groundbreaking.

Whether he was received positively or negatively, Coltrane's live performances oftentimes overwhelmed his audience members. After listening to one set at the Half Note Jazz Club one audience member remarked, "Here was a performance where one could no longer objectively judge aesthetics; the feelings it engendered were closer to the awe one felt for a

³¹ Ravi Coltrane quoted in Alyn Shipton, *New History of Jazz*, 753.

³² Archie Shepp quoted in Shipton, *New History of Jazz*, 753.

³³ Brian Priestley, *John Coltrane*, 31.

volcano or a mind boggling religious revelation.”³⁴ Religious devotion did play a large part in Coltrane’s ability to sustain such intensity night after night. During club dates Coltrane could play one solo for up to an hour. These performances would take a huge toll on anybody physically. However, Coltrane would comment that he was usually not conscious of the effort needed for the performances; it was “God who creates the music and I am only the vehicle.”³⁵ Coltrane felt that he was an empty vessel that god used to send a musical message. “He was driven to a daunting act of simultaneous impersonation—to be both the pilgrim who surrenders himself to God, *and* the vehicle through which God speaks in his most commanding voice.”³⁶

In an interview with jazz critic Nat Hentoff, Coltrane tried to explain why his solos were becoming quite long. “I’m still primarily looking into certain sounds, certain scales. Not that I’m sure of what I’m looking for, except that it’ll be something that hasn’t been played before. And in the process of looking, continual looking, the result in any given performance can be long or short. I never know. Its always one thing leading into another. It keeps evolving, and sometimes it’s longer than I actually though it was while I was playing.”³⁷ The continual searching Coltrane describes and the spiritual aspect of his improvisations can be seen as “a metaphor for the spiritual searching of mankind.”³⁸ A reflection of his attitude and a common aspect of the time and society he was performing in, the 1960s.

³⁴ Nisenson, *Ascension*, xvii.

³⁵ Priestley, *Coltrane*, 46.

³⁶ Scott Andrew Saul, “Freedom is Freedom aint:” (329)

³⁷ Priestley, *Coltrane*, 52.

³⁸ Priestley, *Coltrane*, 52.

Conclusion

The permutation of Coltrane's improvisational techniques from 1957 up until his death is not an instance of an evolution. Coltrane's music is not an example of a performer who goes through stages of development. Instead he was in a constant state of searching from the time of his religious awakening in 1957 and he continued the search without ever finding the end result of what he was looking for. This search, which has been compared to a spiritual pilgrimage, was caused by a specific combination of circumstances: Coltrane's addictive personality, causing him to become obsessed with practicing and giving him a strong devotion to religion and god, the unique experience of playing with both Monk and Davis within a relatively short period of time, and the political and social climate of the sixties. The distinctive combination of all of these circumstances allowed for the unique artistic accomplishments of John Coltrane. If any one of these circumstances had been altered Coltrane's musical path could have been altogether unremarkable.

The need to provide a comprehensible model of Coltrane's improvisational techniques has led scholars to divide his work up into stylistic periods that have been convenient as educational and instructive tools for young musicians. However, this stylistic periodization has also been used to explain Coltrane's innovations as the work of a genius, without dealing substantially with his addictive personality, his religious devotion, and the complex society he was functioning within.

Rather than explain his improvisational techniques again (defining *what* Coltrane did) I have sought to understand *why* Coltrane played the way he did and *How* he was able to do it.

Why did Coltrane improvise the way that he did?

He improvised the way he did because he was constantly searching looking for a way to play what was in his minds ear. After kicking a drug and alcohol habit, Coltrane's addictive personality caused him to become obsessed with mastering his instrument and his mode of expression: jazz improvisation. His spiritual devotion to God caused him to believe that he needed to master his instrument and music in order to be fluent enough to produce the word of God to the people. Finally, the society he lived in was one that accepted deep religious hope and devotion of many kinds, and the open mindedness, the peace love and happiness of the 1960's provided him with the ability to conduct his exhaustive search.

How was Coltrane able to conduct this exhaustive search?

His addiction to practicing led him to an uncommon mastery of his instrument and music. Being forced to hear the harmony in his head as he played with Monk's group caused him to develop a unique interpretation of harmonic substitutions for common jazz harmonies. Davis' modal compositions gave him a stagnant harmonic pallet to explore and refine his harmonic concepts. His "Giant Steps" recording allowed him to find melodic material that was so sonically strong that he was able to allow his rhythm section to focus on the all-important groove. This groove, along with the strength of pentatonic patterns, allowed him to continue to explore, to search for the sounds in his minds ear.

Coltrane never did find his paradigm, his finished composition. His searching never left him. Even when he did away with harmony altogether in his free jazz performances, he continued to ground his playing in the concepts that allowed him to continue the search. Interestingly in his last year he began to lose his audience and his immense popularity began to

dwindle. He questioned whether his searching had gone too far. However, by that time he realized that he had gone so far that he could not turn back, and he continued his pilgrimage until his death.

The Developmental stages of John Coltrane imply that he was evolving, getting better as the years passed. He may have become a better musician the more he practiced. However, how can one justify an evolution of his musical product, his improvisation? If this were the case we could all agree that Coltrane's last album was his very best. Yet in my opinion his best work was produced from 1962-1964. There are other people who would argue that his work on *Giant Steps*, and other recordings of that time were his best, and still others who think his time with Miles was his finest. Coltrane's musical output should be viewed as a fantastic representation of one man's search for himself and his connection with God.

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