

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



JOHN COLTRANE

[This is the thirty-sixth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Well, it's happened once again! I was researching the life and career of the Jazz Saxophonist nicknamed "Trane," while on a vacation in France. Waiting for the tour group in the lobby of the Imperator Hotel in Nimes, I glanced up from my iPad and noted several painted portraits of prominent jazz musicians on the walls scattered around the room: Charlie Parker, Gerry Mulligan, Dizzy Gillespie and the like. And whose picture was directly above the chair in which I had been sitting? Yep – John Coltrane. Coincidence? Sure... but spooky. (Long-time readers of my articles will remember that the same thing happened twice before, while I was writing about Stan Getz and then Sidney Bechet). Odder yet is the fact that Coltrane is officially a canonized saint (more on that later)! Cheryl says it's nice to know these Jazz greats are watching out for me.

Born in 1926, John grew up in High Point, NC and by age 16 or 17, moved to Philadelphia where he played alto sax and clarinet professionally with small cocktail lounge combos. He joined the Navy in 1945 on August 6th, the date the first A-bomb was dropped on Japan. He trained as an apprentice seaman, was shipped to Pearl Harbor and, because by the end of 1945 the Navy was drastically reducing its ranks, John's musical talents were recognized and he was asked to join the base's swing band, the Melody Masters. His orchestral training with that group paid huge dividends later on in his career. Upon his discharge from the Navy in August, 1946, Coltrane returned to Philly and dove headlong into the new music of Jazz: Bebop.

Through the early 50s, he worked with many of the greats of that time, such as Earl Bostic, Johnny Hodges and Dizzy Gillespie, but now playing the tenor saxophone, for which he is best-known. Fame was almost immediate when he joined trumpeter Miles Davis' combo, leading the critics to dub the group the "First Great Quintet." From 1955 – 1957, Coltrane and Davis released dozens of influential jazz pieces. By 1959, John developed a very complicated style, which one Jazz critic coined "sheets of sound," referring to the rapid (almost frenetic) runs through the octaves resulting in several hundred notes per minute. Standard chord progressions were cast aside, as John experimented with very complex musical theory to produce what was known as "Coltrane changes." His improvisations were masterful, both with melody as well as harmony. Throughout this period, Coltrane had been addicted to heroin, but in late 1959, quit cold turkey and emerged very spiritual and transcendental, both in his life and in his music. He incorporated mystical folk songs and sounds into his music.

Because of his departure from music of this realm to his almost otherworldly sphere, his fans were never neutral – they either loved his work or hated it.

Some of his more enlightened contemporaries realized that John was trying to transform music into a medium of healing, of breaking ethnic and religious barriers, and of specific emotional meanings. For example, and I quote the master: "I would like to bring to people something like happiness. I would like to discover a method so that if I want it to rain, it will start right away to rain. If one of my friends is ill, I'd like to play a certain song and he will be cured; when he'd be broke, I'd bring out a different song and immediately he'd receive all the money he needed."



Coltrane continued to perform around the world, solo and with combos, up until months before his death in 1967, at age 40. Some years later, the African Orthodox Church in San Francisco canonized Trane as St. John William Coltrane, and incorporated some of his music and lyrics into their liturgy.

My favorite book on John? Check out Ben Ratliff's *Coltrane, the story of a sound*, available on Amazon (hardcover; Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, September 3, 2007; ASIN: B00SB2OA7I).

My favorite album? Unfair question! Too many to choose from – talk about prolific! But try either his *Giant Steps* (Amazon, Original recording remastered, Audio CD, Label: Atlantic; ASIN: B000002I4S), or *A Love Supreme* (Amazon, Original recording remastered, Audio CD, Label: Impulse, ASIN: B000003N7F).

My favorite quote? In the liner notes of his album *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane stated in 1957 that, "I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music." Who's going to argue with that? In fact, that's our credo each and every time we perform.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic