

Looking East – The Spiritual Nature of John Coltrane

“My goal 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 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.”

-John Coltrane

Born into a religious family, John Coltrane grew up in a spiritual environment and was influenced by Christianity at a young age. His maternal grandfather, the Reverend William Blair, was a preacher at an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in High Point, North Carolina, and John's paternal grandfather, Reverend William H. Coltrane, was an A.M.E. Zion minister in Hamlet, North Carolina. John's parents met through church affiliation, and married in 1925. John was born in 1926 and in his youth practiced music in the southern African-American church.

Since 1948, Coltrane had struggled with heroin addiction as well as alcoholism. In 1957, Coltrane had a religious experience which is what finally led him to overcome his addictions to alcohol and heroin. In the liner notes of *A Love Supreme* (released in 1965) Coltrane states “[d]uring 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. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music.” In his 1965 album *Meditations*, Coltrane wrote about uplifting people, “...To inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living meaningful lives. Because there certainly is meaning to life.” He also stated, “[I want] to be a force for real good. In other words, I know that there are bad forces, forces out here that bring suffering to others and misery to the world, but I want to be the opposite, I want to be a force which is truly for good.”

In 1955, Coltrane married Juanita Naima Grubbs, a Muslim convert, for whom he later wrote the piece “Naima”, and came into contact with Islam. After his spiritual awakening in 1957, John began exploring Mysticism, Hinduism, Sufism, the Kabbalah, Jiddu Krishnamurti, African history, and the philosophical teachings of Plato and Aristotle. Coltrane also became interested in Zen Buddhism and, later in his career, visited Buddhist temples during his 1966 tour of Japan.

In 1963, not long after his separation from Naima Coltrane, John met pianist Alice McLeod (who soon became Alice Coltrane). John and Alice moved in together and had three sons, John Jr. born in 1964, Ravi born in 1965, and Oranyan (Oran) born in 1967. In Peter Lavezzoli's book *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi* (2006), Lavezzoli says, "Alice brought happiness and stability to John's life, not only because they had children, but also because they shared many of the same spiritual beliefs, particularly a mutual interest in Indian philosophy. Alice also understood what it was like to be a professional musician." Alice played a very supportive role alongside John's spiritual searching and in 1966 was invited to join his band, replacing McCoy Tyner on piano. Alice played on John's last 5 recordings, until his passing.

The decisive turning point in John's career came in 1964, seven years after his spiritual awakening when John composed the revolutionary suite of music "A Love Supreme", which represented his devotion and surrender to a universal God. In the first part of the suite, "Acknowledgment", John begins chanting "A Love Supreme". In Lewis Porter's book *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (2000) he describes the lyrics this way: "Coltrane and another voice—probably himself overdubbed—chant the words 'a love supreme' in unison with the bass ostinato". In Peter Lavezzoli's he says, "Certainly in his opening solo in "Acknowledgment," with his constant modulations of the same phrase in different keys, Coltrane assumes the role of the preacher. After stating the theme in every possible key, Coltrane concludes his solo and quietly begins to chant, "A love supreme ... a love supreme," singing the same four notes played by Garrison on the bass. After chanting "A love supreme" sixteen times, Coltrane and the band shift from F minor down to E flat minor, and the chant slowly tapers off." The liner notes to *A Love Supreme* are deeply spiritual and publicly proclaim his newfound faith of God in a Universalist sense, but does not advocate one religion over another. Coltrane wrote a devotional poem published in the liner notes in which he can be heard reciting through his saxophone in the fourth part of *A Love Supreme*, Psalm.

Further evidence of this universal view regarding spirituality can be found in the liner notes of *Meditations* (1965), in which Coltrane declares, "I believe in all religions." Coltrane describes his vision of universality of Truth: "But as I look upon the world, I feel all men know the truth. If a man was a Christian, he could know the truth and he could not. The truth itself does not have any name on it. And each man has to find it for himself, I think."

After the release of *A Love Supreme* in 1965, most of Coltrane's song and album titles had spiritual implications: *Ascension*, *Om*, *Selflessness*, *Meditations*, "Amen," "Ascent," "Attaining," "Dear Lord," "Prayer and Meditation Suite," and the opening movement of *Meditations*, "The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost," the most obvious Christian reference in any of Coltrane's work. In 1966 Coltrane's music began evolving into more

abstract expressions than the modal music he was known for with his classical quartet. Striving towards a greater perfection in his music he changed and added musicians during various recording sessions searching for a more universal and collective consciousness. Leaving behind conventional western music harmony to express more encompassing universal and spiritual truths, Coltrane's compositions became vehicles of collective improvisations inspired by the spiritual philosophy and truth of the compositions title.

Coltrane's collection of books included *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Yoga of Swami Shivananda*, *Paramahansa Yogananda's Autobiography of a Yogi*, which, Lavezzoli points out, "recounts Yogananda's search for universal truth, a journey that Coltrane had also undertaken. Yogananda believed that both Eastern and Western spiritual paths were efficacious, and wrote of the similarities between Krishna and Christ. This openness to different traditions resonated with Coltrane, who studied the Qur'an, the Bible, Kabbalah, and astrology with equal sincerity." Coltrane states: "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 want to speak to their souls."

In October 1965, based on his belief in cosmic and musical mysticism, Coltrane recorded *Om*, referring to the sacred syllable in Hinduism, which symbolizes the infinite or the entire Universe. Coltrane described *Om* as the "first syllable, the primal word, the word of power". The 29-minute recording contains chants from the *Bhagavad Gita*, a Hindu holy book, as well as Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders chanting from a Buddhist text, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and reciting a passage describing the primal verbalization "om" as a cosmic/spiritual common denominator in all things. Coltrane also believed in the metaphysical laws of the physical universe and strived to realize them through his music: "All a musician can do is to get closer to the sources of nature, and so feel that he is in communion with the natural laws."

Coltrane's spiritual journey was interwoven with his investigation into world music and his search for "a theory of multicultural musical transcendence". He believed not only in a universal musical structure which transcended ethnic distinctions, but in being able to harness the mystical language of music itself. Coltrane's study of Indian music with Pandit Ravi Shankar led him to believe that certain sounds and scales could "produce specific emotional meanings." According to Coltrane, the goal of a musician was to understand these forces, control them, and elicit a response from the audience. Coltrane said: "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." During many interviews, Coltrane showed his deepest desire to harness the transformative power of music for the benefit of others. "[I want] to be a force for real good. In other words, I know that there are bad forces, forces out here that bring suffering to others and misery to the world, but I want to be the opposite, I want to be a force which is truly for good." Communicating the deeper spiritual message of the music the listener has always been John's motive over all else: "I never even thought about whether or not they understand what I'm doing . . . the emotional reaction is all that matters as long as there's some feeling of communication, it isn't necessary that it be understood."

At the young age of 40 years, liver cancer brought an untimely end to John's prolific life on July 17th, 1967 in New York. Between the years of 1964, starting with the recording of *A Love Supreme*, until his death in 1967, Coltrane's music evolved and expanded beyond the scope of almost any other artist in history. Those years mark a profound Yogic journey and an intensive concentration of spiritual and artistic energy that will forever inspire and enlighten the minds of generations to come.

John's spiritual search for universal truth in music was intensely continued by his wife Alice Coltrane, who later completely devoted herself to a monastic life, becoming a Swamini in the Vedantic Order of Monks and spiritual leader of the Shanti Anantam Ashram in California. Alice continued the search determined to express music with "extraordinary transonic and atmospherical power", "illuminating worlds of sounds into the ethers of this universe." She continued John's search to experience a "universal consciousness", and focused on practicing "musical self-realization." In the liner notes of her 1972 album *Universal Consciousness*, she beautifully conveys the meaning behind these concepts in her music:

"Universal Consciousness literally means Cosmic Consciousness, Self-Realization, and illumination. This music tells of some of the various diverse avenues and channels through which the soul must pass before it finally reaches that exalted state of Absolute Consciousness. Once achieved, the soul becomes re-united with God and basks in the Sun of blissful union. At this point, The Creator bestows on the soul many of his Attributes, and names one a New Name. This experience and this music involve a Totality concept, which embraces cosmic thought as an emblem of Universal Sound."

It is easy to see the profound impact of John Coltrane's life and music on humanity. His saxophone sound still resonates throughout the world and will continue to spread the universal and spiritual ideals that guided his life. He has left behind a legacy and the beginnings of a very important movement that we as artists, musicians and spiritual seekers must embrace and use to help guide us in seeking out the universal Truth of reality.

-Jonathan Kay, 2012