

# 'He took it further than anyone'

It's 40 years since John Coltrane's untimely death. **John Fordham** celebrates a jazz legend, while below saxophonists young and old chart his unrivalled legacy

**T**he plumbing of a saxophone seemed like too cramped a channel for the river of emotion John Coltrane sought to drive through it: he always sounded as if he were trying to expand the metalwork with the sheer force of his feelings. Coltrane's huge, yearning tone, sermonising intensity and revolutionary technique allowed him to sound like several saxophonists rolled into one; but for all that, he always sounded as if he was striving for what still lay out of reach. It wasn't just the search for more music, or a different music. It sounded like the search for another world, and another life – which is why Coltrane is revered more than ever, inside and outside jazz, 40 years after his premature death from liver cancer at 40, on July 17 1967.

Marginalisation and both music-biz and high-art economics oblige jazz musicians to be realists – often very funny ones – which is part of jazz culture's downbeat appeal. But within that pragmatic climate, Coltrane was perhaps the nearest thing to a guru or a saint the music has ever known. He looked serious, soulful, sometimes haunted. He had profound religious convictions. His sound could be witheringly beautiful, and the contrast of his frantic urgency with the yielding delicacy of his ballads seemed to encompass a very wide span of what it means to be human. He had spent much of the 1950s battling addictions, and a combination of his faith and his music – which he was convinced was

a healing force – had been the route out. Coltrane combined the cry of the blues with the social role and meditative murmur of the Indian classical forms he studied as meticulously as he studied European classical music and jazz. The chemistry worked so well that, late in his short life, he briefly found himself both a guru and a pop success. His classic, prayer-like 1964 album *A Love Supreme* made the charts, influenced rock and fusion players and a very large number of hippies, and earned Coltrane Grammy nominations for both composing and playing.

John Coltrane was born in Hamlet, North Carolina, on September 23 1926, and moved with his family to Philadelphia after high school. He played alto sax in pre-rock "jump" bands in the 1940s, joined Dizzy Gillespie and the Ellington saxist Johnny Hodges' bands as a tenor player, and then Miles Davis's legendary first quintet in 1955. Both Hodges and Davis had trouble with the young Coltrane's heroin and booze addictions, but as a former user himself, Davis cut him more slack. In the trumpeter's band, Coltrane blossomed from a somewhat stiff-sounding hard-bop student of the leading tenorists Dexter Gordon and Sonny Rollins into a saxophone visionary.

Frustrated – as Davis and Ornette Coleman were – by the limitations of improvising over pop songs and Broadway hits, Coltrane sought an alternative. Davis and Coleman looked for simplifications, more lyrical melodies released by pared-down structures like simple modes or spontaneously shifting tonal centres.



John Coltrane

Coltrane went the other way: harmonic mazes like the hurtling *Giant Steps* that changed chords almost every beat; multiphonic techniques that allowed Adolphe Sax's single-line instrument to play several notes at once. It could have been an arid technical exercise. But Coltrane's tireless practice regime was devoted to the guiding cause of increasing the sax's intensity and emotional range.

With the almost telepathically sensitive partners he gathered around him from 1961 to 1965 (pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison and drummer Elvin Jones), Coltrane turned the jazz recital into something more like an emotionally heated collective trance, often with headlong tenor sax solos that might continue unbroken on a single theme for an hour or more. Coltrane also popularised the lighter, somewhat oboe-like soprano sax (mostly unused since the days of the great New Orleans swinger Sidney Bechet), and the breadth of his musical and cultural references widened the audience for jazz.

As British saxophonist John Surman has pointed out, jazz was world music right back at the beginning of the 20th century, when musicians from around the globe crossed paths in the seaport of New Orleans. But its rapid early developments soon hardened into styles, from which the music needed to be rescued if its improvisers' spark was to stay alive. Coltrane heard that need, and split the music open for new influences to pour in, as they still are. A substantial slice of what's considered world music today might never have happened without him.

## Where would Coltrane have gone next?



**Soweto Kinch**  
Saxophonist,  
rapper,  
composer

He was somebody with a rare amount of integrity and sincerity, which is matched only by great leaders of that period such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. One of the biggest losses of his passing was his ability to influence people in a political sense, to enfranchise black people in America in a particular way. I think he would have gone on to spawn a load of new music – obviously jazz, but beyond that as well – and given people a different sense of empowerment. We're feeling the loss even now of somebody that great, somebody that iconic – especially now, actually. Just look at the state of modern black American music.

He was somebody who explicitly realised the power of musical notes to transform society and was busy on that as a project. He practised scales based on ancient Vedic traditions and scholasticism, which could evoke prosperity in somebody or, if they were sad, could bring them out of their sadness into mirth and merriment. That very conscious and deliberate understanding of the power of music is something really important. I think he would have – almost like a Vedic medicine man or a West African griot – been able to transform people's moods and sense of self-worth through the music. I think we would have seen a lot more self-awareness on the part of black Americans and the African diaspora.



**Andy Sheppard**  
Saxophonist,  
composer

stuff he was doing in the *Giant Steps* period, in those hard-bop bands, it's extremely complex music, with the lightning ability to improvise in a seemingly completely free way over ridiculously hard chord changes. He was a spiritual force, his music was so intense.

He was going further and further out with his music towards the end, but I'm sure [had he lived] he would have been writing for orchestra and performing with contemporary classical musicians. He probably never had any time to write. Those guys were working all the time because that was the way it worked. They'd play every night in a club: to sit down and write some music is not easy. Because he was becoming successful, he would have had more time on his hands to compose.



**Ingrid Laubrock**  
saxophonist,  
composer

In a way he really screwed things up for all tenor players to come after him. It was a bit like Bach in the baroque world. What do you do after that? If you go in the same direction, you're just not going to get as good. It still sounds so much deeper and so much more amazing than anything after.



**Jason Yarde**  
saxophonist,  
producer,  
composer

You could take just one aspect of Coltrane's music – *Giant Steps* or even just a part of it – and that in itself could be a lifetime's study for the average musician. It's quite feasible he would

big-band kind of sound, which then, I could imagine, would lead into orchestral things.



**Finn Peters**  
saxophonist,  
composer

It's a question of how much innovation he displayed as a sax player. He took it further than anyone. People are still catching up with what he did – in 2007. He was using a lot of books to inform his playing, and he was bringing other languages in that hadn't been used before; a lot of eastern modes and Indian music. People hadn't really incorporated that into jazz before – the whole modal thing and traditional folk melodies. He was like Bartok in that sense.

Whatever he would have done next it would have been pioneering, leading the way for other people – he was like that all through his life. I think it is likely that he would have gone on to do something electronic – the sort of stuff that he was already doing but adding electronic instruments.



**John Surman**  
saxophonist,  
composer

There's no one single factor that makes Coltrane so great. He did what all pioneers do: broke boundaries. He changed the sound of the music, and that in itself is quite extraordinary. The harmonic progressions he came up with – no one had toyed with them, no one had even heard them. He was a master craftsman and a ground-breaker but he

Coltrane. He was in the strange situation where his music in the avant garde was selling hugely – it was popular music. Finally, in his last works, he started to come back into the melodic and clearer, simpler stuff. So it would indicate to me that he'd gone out on a voyage of discovery and he would come back in and re-explore a lot of the early work that he did. It happens to quite a few artists: they'll go out there but then, later on, with maturity comes looking back – a retrospective thing. But who knows? He may have gone on even greater leaps than *Giant Steps*. He may have gone back and said, "That was quite good but I'm only halfway there with that."



**Lol Coxhill**  
saxophonist,  
improviser

No one can know where he would have gone. If he'd carried on from where he was, he would have developed that. I can't imagine any other direction except him just growing and growing on that level. What he had was perfection in itself, but he could have developed that area anyway. I don't think he needed to go somewhere else. We just naturally develop, we don't think about where we're going. We just keep going – and never arrive, I hope.



**Denys Baptiste**  
saxophonist,  
composer

There's never really been anybody who has covered so much ground and made so many developments within the music, particularly in such a short space of time. In just 10 years, he made all those important stepping-stones in his career. To be not only developing new ideas but mastering them and then moving on to another idea, then mastering that – nobody's ever been able to do that. Most musicians would be lucky to master one thing within their entire career, never mind the number of innovations and developments he managed to facilitate.

His journey through the last 10 years of his life was driven by one epiphany in 1957 – a spiritual experience that made him want to give up drugs and begin pursuing his career in that direction. He felt that God had charged him with a mission. Given this motivation, I don't think he would have done what Miles Davis did and got into electric music or become somebody chasing those popular areas of jazz. I think he would have continued his spiritual journey because he seemed so serious about it. As far as he was concerned, music was a gift from God. God intended him to play music and communicate through music.

All interviews by Daniel Spicer

**Director in disguise – Why Harry Fitzpatrick is the new Alan Smithee blogs. guardian.**

the guardian reader offer

To order this week's reviewed CDs or DVDs call **0870 836 0713**  
All prices include UK p&p.



We endeavour to supply every CD or DVD featured, but in some cases availability is restricted. We cannot supply reviewed titles that are for 'rental' only. Call charges may vary depending on the service provider. Offers are run in conjunction with our partner.