

John Coltrane

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Abstract

This article is a transcription of the address given by saxophonist David Liebman at the International Coltrane Colloquium in Tours, France, November 2007. While it has been edited for publication, we have tried to stay as true to the spirit of Liebman's remarks as possible. Liebman's perspective is that of a musician growing up during the time at which Coltrane was at his creative peak. His memories of watching the Coltrane quartet play live attests to the transformative power these performances had on many young musicians around this time. Liebman also gives an insight into the conditions in which the Coltrane quartet worked, and his comments on the clubs in which the group performed (which by extension serve as a commentary on the working conditions for professional jazz musicians around this time) are particularly interesting. This emphasis on the economic realities experienced by working jazz musicians at this time serves as a useful counterbalance to the tendency in commentary on Coltrane to elevate his performances to the status of the otherworldly. Liebman also reflects on dealing with the legacy of Coltrane in his own playing, through comments which illuminate the sometimes overbearing influence forebears can exert over musicians seeking to forge their own paths.

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It's well known that Coltrane's professional career, as far as notoriety goes, starts in 1955 with Miles Davis, and of course ends in 1967. And in that 12-year period the ground covered is amazing, on the saxophone, as a band leader and of course as a composer.

So I'd like to talk about my personal experience with Coltrane. Luckily, I was born in Brooklyn so I grew up in New York City, and when I was 14, 15 years old, in what we call high school, [I joined] <delete brackets?> the dance band (it wasn't called jazz band then, it was called dance band). I was in the band and I was already playing saxophone, clarinet and so forth, just for the neighborhood teacher, nothing extravagant. My first music was rock'n'roll; Elvis Presley was my first hero, so I did not hear any jazz really at all. But at 13 years old I began to work general music gigs, meaning weddings and parties and so forth. So I was spending the summers in an

1. This article was prepared by Peter Elsdon, with editorial assistance from Sarina Velt.

1 area about 100 miles north of New York City called the Catskill Mountains
2 where there were hotels. And, they of course would hire very young
3 musicians, very cheap: 15 dollars a week was my first gig. But there was a
4 chance to hear great musicians from the New York area who would also
5 spend their summers here making a living, and it was really my first exposure
6 to jazz. I was hearing people like Eddie Daniels or Andy Lawrence, people
7 like that; many of them have disappeared since then, but a whole crop of
8 New York musicians.

9 So when I was back and starting high school and I was in this band, and
10 someone said: 'Oh, do you want to go to a jazz club?', and so I got
11 permission from my parents. Anyway, my first experience was Birdland. It
12 was Christmas week and we went and saw the Count Basie Big Band and
13 Gerry Mulligan. I was really impressed by Birdland of course; this was like
14 another world to me. If you were from Brooklyn, you might as well have been
15 from the middle of Iowa, because once you went into Manhattan, it was
16 another world, which still lives on to a certain extent. And I was of course
17 interested in music and started to see what jazz was about. What got me
18 interested was to look at somebody who did not have their eyes on music,
19 but had their eyes closed and were moving their fingers fast. I said,
20 'Whatever they're doing, how can they do that? That can't be the same
21 instrument that I play'.

22 So with that in mind, I took my first love who was the flute player in the
23 [school] band, and we went to Birdland. I did not know who was playing
24 there, and I walked to the entrance and they had what we call a marquee and
25 it said 'John Coltrane Quintet with Bill Evans trio'. And in those days, most
26 clubs had double bills: two bands playing, at least twice a night, so four sets
27 [in total]. I was beginning to read Downbeat magazine and I knew Coltrane,
28 and there was a picture of him with a soprano sax. And I thought, 'oh, this is
29 that guy who plays the soprano', which was interesting because in those
30 days soprano was like an unknown instrument for somebody like myself
31 playing only tenor. We did not really know about the soprano because I had
32 no idea who Bill Evans was. And Saturday night anywhere in the world is the
33 same; people are out really more for social reasons than musical reasons. It
34 was noisy and I remember looking at this trio playing and it must have been
35 Scott LaFaro [with Paul Motian] playing because it was 1961, and I was 15
36 years old. I'll never forget the piano player, who was Bill Evans, playing head
37 down and absolutely quiet. You could hardly hear them; people were talking
38 and it was like they were playing in their living-room. So that was the only
39 thing that I noticed about that. And then Coltrane comes on and they start

1 playing and it was the quartet with Eric Dolphy. I listened to this guy start
2 playing, and I'm saying to myself 'It sounds like when I'm practicing at
3 home'. This was the stage of 'Chasin' the Trane', 1961, because with
4 Coltrane you really have to know every three months, when it comes down to
5 it. He was doing the altissimo [register] but doing it not the way we all do it
6 now.

7 In any case, this guy is supposed to be so great, but it sounds like he is
8 practicing. And when of course when Eric Dolphy got up, it was more
9 accessible to the casual listener because it was enveloped in a bebop
10 rhythm. Though Dolphy played some different intervals and certainly had a
11 unique concept melodically and harmonically, his rhythm basically was
12 coming out of Charlie Parker, more or less. So there was something
13 identifiable about it and I said 'Oh yeah, that alto saxophone, I like that guy'.
14 Then the band go into this song and they start playing and this lady says
15 'that's from "The Sound of Music" '. I said 'What? That can't be. These guys
16 don't play that'. Of course it was 'My Favorite Things'.

17 In any case, whatever it was that I heard that first night, that was enough
18 for me. Any time Coltrane was playing from then until his death, I went to see
19 him, and because I was a student it would be a Friday and a Saturday night.
20 In those days, groups played one- or maybe two-week engagements, and
21 they played three times a year in New York. They would go to New York,
22 then they'd do a tour, and they'd come back. They played in New York
23 usually at the beginning of a tour. And in this case, over those years I was
24 able to hear him dozens of times. Without being dramatic it changed my life.
25 I certainly wouldn't be sitting here that is for sure, and I wouldn't be [the]
26 person I am. I don't know what I would have been without that. It saved my
27 life in a lot of ways; it gave me direction. It was the most influential thing that
28 happened to me. I had polio as a young person; that certainly was influential
29 in personal ways but from the standpoint of a human being, developing as a
30 man and as a human being, I really give it to Coltrane, because what that
31 made me see was that there is more than meets the eye, beyond the
32 surface, beyond what you see.

33 I wasn't brought up in an artistic family. My parents loved music and there
34 was opera in the house and I learnt classical piano. At nine years old, I was
35 playing Beethoven and so forth. But art was not on the menu. I was going to
36 be a doctor. That is where I was heading. And I was heading there because
37 my experience as a young person was mostly with doctors, a lot of times in
38 the hospital so forth. They were the great father figure, great savior, and it
39 was where I was going until I heard Coltrane. And what it showed me was

1 that music, and by extension art, is more than you see. And whatever that is,
2 you spend your life trying to figure out and trying to translate, to
3 communicate, which is our job. This came of course, many years later; this
4 was the kind of epiphany.

5 Now at least there are some live performances available on video. The
6 best one of all the live things is the one from Belgium.² That is definitely the
7 closest to the way it was when you saw Coltrane. It's a pale imitation
8 because live was an extraordinary experience, invariably night after night. I
9 mean, with 'Impressions' Coltrane and Elvin went at it for an hour. I mean
10 you can't understand what an hour is in real time until you try to play more
11 than ten minutes in a solo. To sit and listen to somebody play and not want
12 to get out of your seat, the concentration, the trance, what it does to you is
13 beyond words. And that was what compelled me to see him all the time, to
14 go back, to pursue this music and to try to find out what he was doing. I'm
15 still trying to find it out. But the main thing with Coltrane was the feeling. I
16 mean it was incontestable, honest, sincere, to the point, no bullshit, intense,
17 obviously even with a ballad. Intense does not mean loud or fast necessarily,
18 it just means with force and with dedication and honesty. And of course he
19 was surrounded by three wonderful musicians, which made me see that it's
20 always very important to have a group, above all to have musicians who
21 have an empathy with you and who respect you and have some common
22 understanding of the musical feeling that you are interested in; a common
23 vocabulary. And seeing Elvin, McCoy and Jimmy Garrison on a night to night
24 basis with Coltrane was unbelievable. The main thing I remember is they had
25 just got on stage like it was going to the bathroom, I mean it was just a
26 function. Nobody said a word, they just walked up, started playing, nobody
27 talked, no count offs, certainly no announcement. There was no show, no
28 pretense, it was just about the job. The job was to get up and play on a
29 nightly basis, which is a whole other thing in itself, let alone three sets a
30 night, six nights a week, sometimes seven nights with a matinee on the last
31 day, for forty to forty-five weeks a year. It was the way they worked in those
32 days. That is another thing altogether. They got up and just did it like it was
33 their job and did their job well.

34 I never even saw them talk to each other and believe me, I was a young
35 person and you know when you're 14, 15, 16, 17 years old and you're
36 watching your idols, and you're able to be 20 feet away from them because

2. Editor's note: Liebman is referring, I think, to the recording made at the Comblain-la-Tour Jazz Festival in Belgium, 1965.

1 these are clubs. You're close to them, and you're watching every move, how
2 they take the horn out of the case, what they do in the break. Where did they
3 go? Where did they sit? Did they take/smoke a cigarette? What were they
4 drinking? You are on the case because everything leads to the final thing,
5 which is how does somebody arrive at this point. And I got to tell you, I never
6 saw those guys talk to each other, I mean that I can notice. They just went
7 their separate ways. Coltrane would sit in a corner, have a little drink maybe,
8 smoke a cigar. McCoy would usually be in another area. Jimmy and Elvin,
9 needless to say, were doing other things. And they would get together.
10 Sometimes they would not even start together. McCoy would get up with
11 Jimmy and Elvin and Coltrane would get up and McCoy would find his way.
12 It was very matter of fact, very normal. It was not a big deal. They were just
13 playing a set in a club.

14 Now you have to understand that clubs in New York were not concert
15 halls; these were not places where people sat and rented chairs without a
16 drink in their hands. It was about how much money came in the door. Club
17 owners could not care less about the music. Some of them were more
18 enthusiastic, certainly the Half Note owners. They liked the music, and they
19 were very enthusiastic. But for the most part, when you dealt with a club
20 owner it was about business, so this was their job. The musicians did three
21 sets a night. First set usually went, depending on the club, anywhere from
22 9:30 until 11:00, 11:15, 11:30; at least an hour and a half. They would take a
23 good long break, a good hour, and they would get on about 12:15, 12:30
24 and that would be at least an hour and a half, or a two-hour set. That was the
25 big set. And then a very short break and usually about quarter [to] three or
26 three o'clock, they'd go on for one tune, which would be 30 to 45 minutes.
27 So you did not get out of the club until 3:30 or 4 o'clock in the morning. Of
28 course the last set was when all the musicians, the whores, the prostitutes,
29 the dope-dealers, the gamblers and the criminals were in the club. That is
30 your best audience, because they're done with work and people done with
31 work are much more relaxed. So at 2:30 in the morning, the level of the
32 music even went further up. It was like a trilogy when you went to see a band
33 like Coltrane's. The first set was great, the second set really got going and by
34 the third set, it had reached a peak. And they did this every night, at least,
35 that I saw them.

36 So with that in mind, I had no other choice but to try to find out about this
37 music. Now I happened to play saxophone. If I was a piano player, maybe it
38 would have been limited to just what McCoy was doing or something like
39 that. But being a saxophone player, you had to find out what Coltrane was

1 doing on the instrument, because he broke the rules. It's not just the music
2 we are talking about here, this is about the saxophone, the tenor saxophone
3 particularly. The soprano is another story. The things he did on that
4 saxophone had not been done before. I am not going to tell you that nobody
5 ever went above a high F sharp, because certainly Bird did and other guys
6 did, and rock'n'roll guys did it all the time; King Curtis was doing it every day.
7 But to use it as part of the vocabulary in an improvisational setting on the
8 moment, on the spot, was really a new thing. Nobody had done that before.
9 And to that extent, nobody played the multiphonics, the harmonics, [or had]
10 the speed, the clarity, the sound, especially the sound towards the late part
11 from '66 and '67. The sound that he got on that horn is like from another
12 world and I did not get that sound on a tenor saxophone. So, as saxophone
13 players if it had only been that, it would have been enough for a lifetime
14 worth of study, let alone the musical things which you are discussing here,
15 let alone the incredible history that the classic quartet made and of course,
16 we just go to the late period and talk about that. So with that in mind, with my
17 personal reflection here, I want to play you what I would go through. Let me
18 give you some background. This is 1951, with Dizzy [Gillespie]. This is one
19 of [Coltrane's] first recorded solos.

20
21 *[Musical extract]*

22
23 Now as you know, he had played alto and there is a really pronounced
24 Lester Young influence in here: you can really hear it in that particular solo.
25 The blues comes in a little bit later. You can hear Coltrane's very distinctive
26 way of playing behind the beat, which is one of the key characteristics of his
27 style, at least early Coltrane up until the quartet. His sound, his portamento,
28 the sliding in the high register; these things are evidenced at the very basic
29 level already in 1951. And I'll give you a good example of a similar thing. In
30 America, we used to have amusement parks. In an amusement park you had
31 these little booths to make a little plastic record, a three-minute record. You
32 put a quarter (25 cents) in it and you could talk or sing or whatever and you
33 come out with this plastic record. And there is a record of Bird from 1936. He
34 is 15, 16 years old, playing alto in this little booth or whatever it was, in
35 Kansas City or wherever it was, playing 'Body and Soul'. And what is
36 interesting about it is, you hear his influences from Benny Carter, Johnny
37 Hodges and certainly Benny Carter, and yet you hear the beginnings of what
38 he was to become. By 1940, Bird's style is formed.

39 The next track I have here is an overview of [Coltrane's] rapidity of

1 evolution. This is called 'Castle Rock' from 1954, when he was with Johnny
 2 Hodges who took off from Duke Ellington for a few years, not even a few
 3 years, and he formed a small group. This was kind of a hit tune by the way.
 4 And Coltrane is playing gut-bucket rock'n'roll r'n'b blues. Then I have also
 5 from that band Coltrane playing 'Don't Blame Me', which is a ballad, and you
 6 hear his signature way of playing a ballad. Now I will skip from 1954 to 1966.
 7

8 *[Musical extract]* **<confirm only two musical extracts; the text reads as**
 9 **if there are three or four>**

10
 11 This is a live gig from Chicago, actually a place where they played
 12 baseball called Soldiers' Field. This is Archie Shepp and the quartet and that
 13 is basically 'Ascension'.³ That is live in front of a public audience. It's a free
 14 concert, only 15 years after the thing we heard before. So the point is that in
 15 Coltrane's case, whatever it was that drove him internally to progress at such
 16 a rapid rate has not been witnessed at least in the history of jazz that I know
 17 of. I think Lewis Porter was talking [at the conference] about something
 18 interesting; he said that by the time of *A Love Supreme* or this period, the
 19 vestiges of his roots or of our roots, meaning what we have to do to play, are
 20 pretty much hidden. It is not that they are not there, it is just that you don't
 21 know them. But they are there, they are just submerged, which of course is
 22 one of the great goals of an artist: to take his roots and submerge them into
 23 his own language. Only the experts can tell where they are coming from. I
 24 don't know anybody else who has been able to do that in the history of this
 25 music.

26 Now there is a certain thing about timing here. I think that Ekkehard Jost
 27 was alluding to this. I make the same case with Miles [Davis]. Jazz had
 28 reached a certain point. It was a certain milieu in America. It was time to look
 29 at pentatonic scales, augmented scales, whole tone scales, diminished
 30 whole tone scales, diminished altered scales, super Locrian scales, Dorian
 31 scales, Phrygian scales, and so on. It was time to look at pentatonics, which
 32 had been around since the beginning of mankind, and see what could be
 33 done with them when you take them up and down a couple of half steps
 34 here and there. It was time to explore progressions by thirds, which Jerome

3. Editor's note: according to *The John Coltrane Reference* (DeVito et al. 2007), this recording was made on August 15, 1965, at Soldier's Field, Chicago. The *Reference* indicates that Coltrane states **<plays?>** the theme from 'Ascension' towards the close of the recording.

1 Kern did in 1917. It was time to put all the things that were basically encoded
2 into classical music by composers. People like Messiaen, Stravinsky and
3 Bartok had already been through this ground. Coltrane came at that time and
4 I believe if it wasn't Coltrane, it would have been somebody else. It was time
5 for somebody to take the materials that were by the 1960s really available.
6 There were records of African music and Indian music if you knew where to
7 go. Before that they were harder to get. He was the right man at the right
8 time. Coltrane had the disposition and certainly the discipline; his practicing
9 is legendary. Jimmy Heath tells a wonderful story. Coltrane was doing a
10 matinee in Philadelphia. Jimmy and Coltrane were running buddies and
11 Coltrane did a matinee and of course there was a break in between sets. He
12 usually played 4 to 6, and he had a break and started again at 9 o'clock. So
13 he had that little three-hour break. Jimmy came and said 'Come on home
14 with me and have some dinner. Mom will cook you some dinner'. So
15 Coltrane said 'Okay, let me go <let's go?>' and he went and got his horn.
16 So he walked into the house, and said hello to [Heath's] mom. She said
17 'Okay John, we'll have dinner soon'. He said: 'Is it okay if I go upstairs and
18 practice a little bit?' And he went upstairs and in this break, which is a two-
19 hour break, and she was yelling down 'you got to eat John. You got to go
20 back to the club'. And he was practicing for two hours up there. And like
21 Reggie Workman said, 'if John Coltrane did not have the horn in his hands,
22 he was sleeping'.

23 He had record contracts, he had recognition. There is nothing like
24 recognition to keep you going. It helps, it does not hurt, although it can hurt,
25 depending on your personality. It does not hurt to have a record date that
26 you know you have to have that music for; 'Blue Train' is a great example.
27 His organization of the music for that record is very, very heavy. That was a
28 big step for him to put together: three horns to write the music for. That is
29 really the beginning of him as a composer. He was the right guy at the right
30 time but that does not mean that it was not without amazing magic and
31 incredible specialness that he accomplished in what he did. His spiritual
32 quest that Lewis elucidated with the poem [on the liner notes to *A Love
33 Supreme*] is the best summary of it, because you know Coltrane did not write
34 liner notes; he did not talk like that. There are interviews with him of course,
35 and there is evidence of him speaking about music and so forth. The great
36 thing about *A Love Supreme* outside of the music is his poem on there and
37 the belief he has in a higher force. Even that transformation is remarkable, if
38 it was only that. So on many levels, in terms of saxophone technique,
39 musically, spiritually, this guy really took the ball and ran with it, like no one

1 ever did before in that music and no one since. It takes somebody like that to
2 set a very high standard. Now for musicians like myself, who grew up in that
3 shadow, who were the next generation, we had this giant gorilla in the room,
4 meaning you can't not notice it. It's this million pound thing in front of you
5 that you have to deal with.

6 I'll never forget my discussion with Anthony Braxton. We were teaching
7 together in Canada. And he said, 'I'd like to talk to you a little bit, you know'.
8 And I knew him casually, not closely. He said 'I'd like you to talk to me about
9 how to play on "Impressions"'. I said 'Okay, no problem, I do this everyday,
10 it is not a problem'. He said 'You know we have an interesting similarity, we
11 both come from the same period, we were both confronted with this...
12 Coltrane, with his body of music and saxophone. And it is interesting that we
13 both came to different ways to handling it. I went to Stockhausen, you went
14 more into it'. One way or the other, you had to deal with this from our
15 generation. Later generations don't have to deal with something that is not
16 on the plate, in front of them; they can take it or leave it. To grow up
17 musically with that kind of force that you saw in front of you...we were all
18 confronted with this issue. And I am not saying this in a negative way. It was
19 a wonderful thing to be confronted with: what a body of music to have to
20 deal with and to have to get yourself up to understanding and somehow
21 being able to duplicate in some way! Because it is one thing to sit at a table
22 and to say you understand it and write about it or discuss it over a vodka; it
23 is another thing to get up there to try to do it. And in our case, we had to
24 really come up with it. We also had to escape it.

25 There were a few years where I did not listen to Coltrane. I had to
26 absolutely shut it down. I was considering playing trombone, my most hated
27 instrument next to the accordion. And the reason was because nobody on
28 trombone at that time was playing anything near that kind of playing.
29 Whereas on trumpet, or other instruments, there was at least some vestige of
30 some creative stuff. In other words, the Coltrane dilemma became a dilemma
31 for my generation about what to do when somebody so massive was in front
32 of you. I can only think of Phil Woods with Charlie Parker in the same
33 situation, because Charlie Parker came from another planet, that is for sure.
34 He just landed here and brought this language which was like Martian
35 compared to what came before. And I can only imagine what it was like. But I
36 got to tell you, my whole life has been dealing with this, one way or the other.
37 And of course now as I get older, and have a body of music that I feel good
38 about for myself, of course it looks different, it changes in appearance. The
39 truth is when I put Coltrane on, any period of Coltrane, from 1956 right

1 through, it is still unbelievably creative, new, intense and magical. And it's
2 amazing somebody could do that on that instrument, on the saxophone. I
3 am still overwhelmed by it. And I can only hope that listeners who come from
4 future generations, younger generations, 20, 30, 40, 50, 100 years from now,
5 can get the effect. I thank God it's recorded well: Rudy (van Gelder) did a
6 good job. I recorded with Rudy and I saw the way he did it and somehow he
7 got a great sound.

8 The recordings are a well that will never run dry, much like in music Bach
9 is, Beethoven, Mozart. See, first, it becomes you looking at it from afar, then
10 you get a little closer to it, the light gets a little brighter, you get a little clearer.
11 You start to understand a little bit about it. The light gets really bright then.
12 And then you have to turn around and leave it. But then if you live a long life,
13 you are inevitably drawn back to the light. You have to see it again. You will
14 see it differently of course. And now you see it not so bright, you see it in
15 another kind of way. It is like there is a kind of different color about it. It is like
16 the Tibet in 49 days, you know. The light changes. You go through that
17 border and when you see Coltrane at that point, you realize that this is
18 something beyond words, beyond the music and that keeps you going for
19 what you want to do. That is the whole point, not the whole tone scale. That
20 is the secondary point. Now that is the deal.
21

22 **Reference**

23 DeVito, Chris, David Wild, Yasuhiro Fujioka and Wolf Schmalzer (2007) *The*
24 *John Coltrane Reference*, ed. Lewis Porter. New York: Routledge.