"The musical and spiritual legacies of John Coltrane are some of the most powerful and significant in the history of American and global music."

Brown, Leonard L. (2010) *John Coltrane & Black America's Quest for Freedom*, New York: OUP, p7.
Why is *A Love Supreme* such a culturally important album?

The emergence of Jazz can be seen as a direct sonic response to the African Diaspora, life under slavery and the racist laws of American society. Emmett G. Price III (Brown, 2010, p. 172) cites James H. Cone who sums it up with:

> Whatever form black music takes, it's always an expression of black life…and what people must do to survive with a measure of dignity in a society which seems bent on destroying their right to be human beings. The fact that we black people keep making music means that we as people refuse to be destroyed. We refuse to allow the people who oppress us to have the last word about our humanity.

The foundation of cultural and artistic expression that unifies the African American experience is, as Price (Brown, 2010, p. 154) explains, its spiritual ethos. John Coltrane's humanity and spirituality, articulated in the form of jazz music, culminated in the creation of his most famous work, '*A Love Supreme*', which left a towering statement that illustrates the quote above.

I will outline why Coltrane's musical mastery and spiritual force, whose imprint is felt all over in the history of popular music, still represents a musical voice for the liberation of African Americans.

Looking at the timeline of jazz, the 1960s started with a big bang when Ornette Coleman released his album, *Free Jazz* in September 1961.

Bebop musicians, namely founders Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, previously illustrated a change in attitude of African Americans by displaying a revolutionary edge with their fast, difficult to play, improvisations and confrontational appearances. Now free jazz; defined by its postmodern "dismissal of genre boundaries and pluralistic outlook toward expression"[1], symbolized an even more radical shift, which formed associations to the Black Arts Movement and the militant Black Power movement for its essence of breaking out of confinement.[2]

The beginning of the new decade also marked Coltrane's departure from the restricted space that jazz was defined as. Inspired by Coleman's new way of

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[1] McClure, D.R. *"NEW BLACK MUSIC" or "ANTI-JAZZ": FREE JAZZ AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL DE-COLONIZATION IN THE 1960S*. Fullerton: California State University. p. 2

[2] McClure, D.R. *"NEW BLACK MUSIC" or "ANTI-JAZZ": FREE JAZZ AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL DE-COLONIZATION IN THE 1960S*. Fullerton: California State University. p. 44

playing, he was on an open ended journey characterized by a restless search for new ways of musical expression.

Consequently, his music was a divisive factor amongst jazz fans. Herman Gray (Brown, 2010, p. 51) notes, that "in the view of some music critics and popular audiences, Coltrane's constant change and refusal to settle in amounted to abandonment if not a kind of betrayal to the purity of the jazz canon". However, by breaking with traditional musical boundaries, he reflected sonically the social and political turmoil of the era.

1964 was a time of change: The United States of America had sworn in a new president after John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in '63 and the civil rights movement lost its show of strength from the previous year, which saw 200,000 people marching on Washington (Kahn, 2003, p. 14), but achieved a landmark victory with the Civil Rights Act on July the 2nd. The atmosphere though was charged and racial conflict found its release in riots that flared up in Harlem and the ghettos of New York and New Jersey[3]. Bob Dylan's third album '*The Times They Are A-Changin*' summed up the moment. Three of the album's tracks related to racist incidents ('*The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*'& '*Only A*

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[3] Kahn, 2002, *A Love Supreme: The Creation of John Coltrane's Classic Album*. London: Granta Books. 2003 Edition. p. 14

Pawn In Their Game') or reflect the up rise in anger against a society that systematically perpetrated racial injustice ('*When The Ship Comes In*').[4]

Recorded on the evening of December 9th, 1964, '*A Love Supreme'* was an album that stood out for its mix and variety of influences. "A Love Supreme blended it all into a mix…: the elevating effect of African poly-rhythms, the urgency of free jazz, the agitation of bebop, the familiar feel of the blues, the orgasmic release of gospel."[5]

What resonates above all other elements is the sound of the saxophone that reveals much about Coltrane – a humble, deeply spiritual man whose increasingly introverted nature made him a platform for interpretation. The mystique that surrounds Coltrane is not so much about the music, but about what he hoped to express with it.

Musicians and activists such as Miles Davis, Max Roach and Kalamu Ya Salaam claimed more direct links between Coltrane's music and the militant Black Power movement. Miles (Davis/Troupe, 1989, p. 286) wrote in his autobiography:

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[4] Bobdylan.com

[5] Kahn 2002, *A Love Supreme: The Creation of John Coltrane's Classic Album.* London: Granta Books. 2003 Edition. p. 17

> He was expressing through music what the Black Panthers and Huey Newton were saying with their words. He was their torch bearer in jazz…he played what they felt inside and were expressing through riots – 'burn baby burn'.

Kahn (2002, p. 76) quotes drummer Max Roach on the subject: "I heard many things in what Trane was doing. I heard the cry and wail of the pain that this society imposes on people and especially black folks."

Coltrane, born in North Carolina, grew up during the Jim Crow era which inevitably affected his life as an African American as well as an African American musician. Segregation determined "where one could eat, use the bathroom, get gasoline, rent a hotel room, or even get a drink of water" (Brown, 2010, p. 8).

Consequently it is of no surprise that to Coltrane, as a thinking artist, studying African American culture was an integral part of his Life. Washington (Brown, 2010, p. 144) expands on the subject by saying that "he and his wife at that time, Naima, made sure that their daughter was knowledgeable about black history." In the words of his stepdaughter, Syeeda, "he loved his people." "According to

Syeeda, their family discussed politics and social events at the dinner table far more often than they did religion”[6].

In a 1962 letter to *DownBeat* (Brown, 2010, p. 17) editor in chief Don DeMichael Coltrane’s depth of knowledge of Black American culture displays itself with clarity:

> Otherwise how could our founding fathers have produced this music in the first place when they surely found themselves (as many of us today) existing in hostile communities where there was everything to fear and damn few to trust. Any music which could grow and propagate itself as our music has, must have a hell of an affirmative belief inherent in it.

For Coltrane, this understanding couldn’t end there. Although he knew that music was “perceived as entertainment, it was more effective as an agent of empowerment” as Price (Brown, 2010, p. 162) observed. “I think music is an instrument”, Coltrane said in an interview. “It can create the initial thought pattern that can change the thinking of people.”

Price (Brown, 2010, p. 162) expands on this with “Coltrane used his music as a tool for liberation; not only his liberation, but the liberation of those who heard and received his message.” Price’s citation of Coltrane’s words supports the claim that Coltrane intertwined social and political consciousness with his

[6] Brown 2010, *John Coltrane & Black America’s Quest for Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 144

existence as a musician. In this he reflects on observing surrounding realities and putting these into a context of what can be changed. He felt, that he, as an individual, as well as a member of society had to improve things. To him it was "the same socially, musically, politically" and he concludes that "we must make an effort to try to make it better" (Brown, 2010, p. 162).

His previous attendance at a Malcolm X rally (Kofsky, 1970, p. 432), benefit gigs for Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, his deeply haunting composition '*Alabama*'[7] (which memorializes four young school girls killed in a Ku Klux Clan church bombing), as well as his composition '*Song of the Underground Railroad*'[8] (referring to the network used by escaped African American slaves in the 19th century) create a picture of Coltrane as a person whose consciousness defined his music.

Brown (2010, p. 14) explains that "Coltrane's uses of harmonics, swoops, overtones, slurs, bends, multiphonics, yawps, and squawks are rooted in the aesthetics of the language of Black American music culture...". Brown (2010, p. 14) continues with reference to Archie Shepp, who argues that by playing the

[7] Smith 2003, *John Coltrane: Jazz, racism and resistance*. London: Redwords. 2006 Edition. p. 86

[8] Porter 1998, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press. p. 206

tenor saxophone in this way Coltrane incorporated cultural traditions of African Americans in his performances:

> From the point of the African Diaspora here in the new world, he turned a basically western instrument into a non-western instrument. He took the saxophone and he did fundamentally non-Western things with it… His use of hollers in his sound really connotes a thorough and passionate understanding of tradition.

However, these increasingly long parts of improvisation as well as constantly expanding ways of expression on the saxophone were unfamiliar to the ears of most people and lead to condemnation, not least from music critics. Brown (2010, p. 14) cites two reviews published in DownBeat from the early 60s that write of the "onslaught on Coltrane's musical approaches." Referring to an extended live performance at the Village Vanguard, Pete Welding "said Coltrane's performance '"lacked the detachment of true art,"' and Ira Gitler wrote, '"This form of yawps, squawks, and countless repetitive runs… should be confined to the woodshed."'

Analyzing Coltrane's behavior during a live performance where he had "put down his horn… and began beating on his chest whilst hollering", Washington (Brown, 2010, p. 136) states that:

> In the context of 1960s black America, such antics no longer signified minstrelsy, but the serious, fire branded spirituality that inspired the poets and activists of the day. The furrowed brow and sweat-drenched bodies of Coltrane and Elvin Jones were understood as the products of arduous work and deep concentration of committed artists, not the anti-intellectual gestures of clown-savants.

Coltrane's departure from the confines of functional tonality synchronized the development within the freedom struggle of African Americans argues Washington. Just like that movement began with lobbying for a change of legislation to then employing methods of civil disobedience before progressing to more militant strategies, so did Coltrane, reasons Washington (Brown, 2010, p. 147), progress "after exhausting the routes available to him from the hyper diatonic practices of his bebop forebears".

He concludes that "there seems to be a connection between Coltrane's attempts to find a new way to play music in his late phase and what might be seen as the social experiments of the black freedom struggles of the 1960s."[9]

'*A Love Supreme*'s release in February '65 certainly matched with the step-up from protest to resistance. To use Kahn's (2002, p. 160) words: "To black America,

[9] Brown 2010, *John Coltrane & Black America's Quest for Freedom*. New York:Oxford University Press. p. 147

the album's appeal to the Divine… emotional wave of sound fit the season only too well."

But Coltrane's sound was also the result of a work ethic as a musician one would find it hard to find comparison to. Talking of Coltrane's level of musical proficiency, Davis (1989, p. 222) recalls in his autobiography:

> Trane was the loudest, fastest saxophonist I've ever heard. He could play real fast and loud at the same time and that's very difficult to do. Because when most players play loud they lock themselves… But Trane could do it and he was phenomenal. It was like he was possessed when he put that horn in his mouth. He was passionate – fierce – and yet so quiet and gentle when he wasn't playing.

To understand Coltrane's arrival at this level of mastery a look at a pivotal moment from his early life is necessary. In 1940, Coltrane was thirteen years old; his family life was ripped apart by the death of his father, his maternal grandparents as well as his uncle. These events had a major effect on the course of Coltrane's life. Grief-stricken he became reclusive and withdrawn. Lewis Porter (1998, p.17) notes that "he is said to have practiced continuously, obsessively, as if practicing would bring his father back, or maybe help him to forget his father – as if, by succeeding in music, he could restore stability and control to his life."

Coltrane's lifelong spiritual and musical quest had begun and its most dominant component for many years was a rigorous practice regime. Davis remembered: "He would practice for hours after he just got through playing three sets." In a sentimental way Davis (1989, p. 224) adds:

> As much as I liked Trane we didn't hang out much… Before it was because he was deep into heroin… Now, he was clean and didn't hardly ever hang out... So he was only really concerned about playing his music and growing as a musician.

Kahn (2002, p. 41) analyzes the moment the collaboration between Miles Davis and John Coltrane came to an end and Coltrane was handed a soprano saxophone as a parting gift:

It's rare that a musician embraces a new instrument mid-career, and even rarer that, within a year of such decision, it propels his career to another level of renown and artistry. But such was Coltrane's drive and determination in searching out for new sounds.

"For Coltrane," says Eric Nisenson (1993, p. 266)," his musical growth was inextricably intertwined with his spiritual search; his quest was to find the

"essence" of his music and the mind of God, roads that he believed led to the same place". Tommy L. Lott (Brown, 2010, p. 104) adds on the same note that Coltrane's open mind "allowed him to incorporate certain ideas pertaining to a religious metaphysics derived from his readings on science, philosophy, and world cultures", whilst remembering his religious roots. His interest was to understand how other cultures, specifically "in Africa and Asia understood the nature of the universe from a spiritual standpoint".

Lott (Brown, 2010, p. 104) adds that "more important, he began to conceive of music as a sonic language that conveys meanings and allows an exploration of philosophical questions about the nature of reality."

Coltrane's liner notes and prayer for '*A Love Supreme*' words suggest that he intended to make a very personal, singular statement with his album: that the music was a gift to God. Elvin Jones stated in Kahn's (2002, p. 144) book that: "he was baring his soul on the back of *A Love Supreme*. It was the last – the fifth part of the suite."

Containing only four parts, Acknowledgement, Resolution, Pursuance and Psalm, it is the albums fourth part that carries the most obvious spiritual power. Nisenson (1993, p.152) analyses that Psalm is: "at times pleading, almost sobbing in its need to be with God." Porter (1998, p. 247) found a synchronicity between the

prayer and Coltrane's playing. He states that the saxophone solo begins with the words '*A Love Supreme*' and "that he plays right to the final "Amen" and then finishes."

In an interview, composer and professor Olly Wilson (Brown, 2010, p. 188) summarizes Coltrane's efforts claiming '*A Love Supreme*'s is a work whose structure is influenced by the modal improvisations of the late 1950s, pre-dominantly those found in '*Kind of Blue*',

> but whose rhythmic background freely employs non-regular pulse techniques, whose overall harmonic structure is not dependent upon Western functional harmony, and whose overall extended structure is preconceived although most of the music is improvised. Moreover, the basic reason for this work's existence is firmly rooted in his personal spiritual quest.

Nisenson (1993, p. 154) says concisely of '*A Love Supreme*': "That album is, amongst many other things, something of a retrospective of those first few years of the Sixties, a unique time of hope, of the New Frontier and the Great Society and Martin Luther King's dream."

Some believe that the intense creative urge was a result of Coltrane having an inkling about his death. Ben Ratliff (2007, p. 172) refers to Herbie Hancock on the matter: "He believes that anyone who practiced as obsessively as Coltrane must

have had a premonition that he wasn't long for the world. '"Like, I gotta do this fast'."

On July 17th, 1967 Coltrane died from liver cancer at just 40 years of age. Coltrane's passing had a profound effect on Free Jazz and left musicians as well as Avant-garde fans in a void. Davis (1989, p. 286/287) recalls that:

> His death caused chaos in the "free thing" because he was its leader … they seemed to me like people in a boat in the ocean without compass or paddles … Even Duke Ellington seemed to be going into a spiritual direction.

Nisenson (1993, p. 264) argues that Coltrane's "admonition to "live right", and the example he set with his own life, had a great effect on the new generation of jazz musicians." "That is no small thing: to be a great artist, according to Coltrane, one must live an ethical and productive life." Kahn (2002, p. 184) concurs Coltrane stood out as more than a musical role model, as Don Cherry recollects: "It changed the whole scene because of him being a vegetarian and meditating and everything. And everyone became aware of health and balance and life … He didn't speak out about, he just set an example."

But as in living, the controversy about his music did not stop after Coltrane's death, albeit it came from predominantly white music critics. Even famous jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, despite playing a concert devoted to Coltrane's

work "proclaimed that Coltrane's "free" work of the last couple of years of his life was "Nothin'."[10] As Coltrane quite rightly said (referring to the life of Van Gogh) in the above mentioned letter to DownBeat: "It seems history shows us that the innovator is more often than not met with some degree of condemnation; usually according to the degree of his departure from the prevailing modes of expression…"[11]

Unfortunately, Coltrane joined that long list of innovators, musicians and artists, whose status were elevated onto different to higher levels only after their passing.

Ratliff (2007, cover sleeve note) says that: "no young saxophonist of the past forty years has been able to escape his influence, and few musicians had their work so obsessively documented on record."

Coltrane's main contribution has been the shaping and advancement of Free Jazz. *Impulse*, his record label, was devoted to the musicians of the avant-garde. Coltrane's influence on the label - widely named as *"the house that Trane built"* (Kahn 2006, p.5) - resulted in years of investment in individuals playing a style that was very controversial for its time. Coltrane was the first jazz musician to take

[10] Nisenson 1993, *Ascension: John Coltrane and his quest*. New York: Da Capo Press. 1995 Edition. p.222

[11] Brown 2010, John *Coltrane & America's Quest for Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 18

improvisation past five minutes and by doing so changed African American music. As Archie Shepp noted: "Listen to 'What's Going' on – Marvin Gaye is clearly taking his lead from Coltrane. It was the first time that a piece of popular African-American music goes uninterrupted for roughly twenty minutes, for a full side of vinyl."[12]

Eric Clapton, Carlos Santana, U2, Patti Smith, the Grateful Dead, the Allman Brothers, the Who, Iggy Pop and Moby are amongst a long list of artists who refer to Coltrane and his bestselling masterpiece '*A Love Supreme*' as an influence[13].

The Byrd's famous title "Eight Miles High" was directly inspired by a Coltrane composition. Carlos Santana spoke in an interview about his fascination with the music: "I could hear God's mind in that music, influencing John Coltrane. I heard the Supreme One playing music through John Coltrane's mind."[14] Nisenson (1993, p. 231) argues that "long after Hendrix had come and gone, Coltrane continued to influence new generations of rock musicians." Furthermore he (Nisenson, 1993, p. 231) mentions how Bono described his discovery of the music of John Coltrane, and particular '*A Love Supreme*' and how "in one U2 video A

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[12] Kahn 2002, *A Love Supreme: The Creation of John Coltrane's Classic Album*. London: Granta Books. 2003 Edition. p.210

[13] Nisenson 1993, *Ascension: John Coltrane and his quest*. New York: Da Capo Press. 1995 Edition. p. 230/231.

[14] Nisenson 1993, *Ascension: John Coltrane and his quest*. New York: Da Capo Press. 1995 Edition. p.231

Love Supreme is mentioned in the lyrics while Coltrane's face is briefly seen on the screen, undoubtedly bringing blank stares to youthful viewers of MTV".

Furthermore, classical composers such as Philip Glass listened to Coltrane's compositions. The authors of '*Clawing at the limits of Cool*' (Griffin/Washington, 2008, p. 243) argue that Coltrane's musical search forged what was to become 'world music'. Griffin and Washington (Griffin/Washington, 2008, p. 243) see "the globalization of African-based rhythms and the ubiquity of Afro-Latino rhythms" as a part of his legacy.

But Coltrane's legacy stretches far beyond the impact his music had on popular music. Artists, poets, political activists, intellectuals and writers did and still continue to refer to his contribution of giving black music a new aesthetic as well as expression, but also furthering the quest for freedom of African Americans. Emmett G. Price (Brown, 2010, p. 159) summarizes that:

> John William Coltrane rises among the fold as the most influential of all the generations… In the realm of black music, John Coltrane stands boldly and authoritatively as a twentieth-century prophet whose expressions gave meaning, whose communication provided direction and whose sound rang forth as an antidote to a prolonged mid-twentieth-century period of chaos and turmoil for blacks in the United States and beyond.

I find Coltrane's work in '*A Love Supreme*' and his importance as the "last major figure in the evolution of jazz"[15] cannot be understood without considering the implications of being a black musician in early to mid-twentieth-century American society. Jazz could not have developed anywhere else but in America. Jazz, as well as its closest musical companion blues, is a result of the African Diaspora, slavery and oppression under Jim Crow laws.

Or, to quote Malcom X: "When a black musician picks up his horn and starts blowing, he improvises, he creates, it comes from within. It's his soul. Jazz is the only area in America where the black man is free to create".[16]

Overall, I find that the biggest part of his legacy, what makes people so fascinated with John Coltrane, is the emotional depth of his playing. He embodied the spiritual ethos of the Black experience Emmett Prize stressed with every note he played on '*A Love Supreme*'.

"One thought can produce millions of vibrations"[17] Coltrane wrote in the liner notes to '*A Love Supreme*'. Without a doubt '*A Love Supreme*' caused millions of vibrations that will be felt for generations to come.

[15] Ratliff 2007, *Coltrane: The Story of a Sound*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd. p. 4

[16] Smith 2003, *John Coltrane: Jazz, racism and resistance*. London: Redwords. 2006 Edition. p. 9

Coltrane's revolutionary work timelessly symbolizes the irrepressible longing of man for freedom. To end with his own words from an interview with Frank Kofsky (1970, p. 451) on August 18th, 1966, "I feel I want to be a force of good".

[17] Kahn 2002, *A Love Supreme: The Creation of John Coltrane's Classic Album*. London: Granta Books. 2003 Edition. p. 145

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