

john coltrane
sun • ship
the complete session





JOHN COLTRANE



ELVIN JONES



JIMMY GARRISON



McCOY TYNER

john coltrane

sun ship

SIDE ONE 1. SUN SHIP—John Coltrane Jowcol Music, BMI (6:16) 2. DEARLY BELOVED—John Coltrane Jowcol Music, BMI (6:28) 3. AMEN—John Coltrane Jowcol Music, BMI

SIDE TWO 1. ATTAINING—John Coltrane Jowcol Music, BMI (11:29) 2. ASCENT—John Coltrane Jowcol Music, BMI (10:10)

JOHN COLTRANE, tenor saxophone; McCOY TYNER, piano; JIMMY GARRISON, bass; ELVIN JONES, drums. Recorded August 26, 1965, at RCA Victor Studios, New York City. Original recordings supervised by Bob Thiele.

Prepared for release by Alice Coltrane and Ed Michel.

Photography by Chuck Stewart.
Design by Wally Caldwell-Potter.

building the ship

by david wild

Sun Ship, recorded August 26, 1965, captures one of the last sessions by the Classic John Coltrane Quartet with Coltrane, pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison and drummer Elvin Jones. It comes at the culmination of a year in which Coltrane arguably reached his creative peak, a year rich in such masterworks. The *Sun Ship* album, though, was not issued until 1971, one of several Coltrane albums issued by Impulse Records after his death. And *Sun Ship* was, like many jazz albums, the product of editing between takes, a process overseen by John's widow Alice. This *Complete Session* edition is much more: sourced from newly discovered original reels, this set includes the album's five original compositions, unedited, in sequence of recording, with all of the takes as they evolved, as well as the surrounding conversations — a rare opportunity to eavesdrop on an iconic master at work. The result is a definitive profile of one of the greatest jazz quartets.



Coltrane's career is by now a familiar story. Born September 23, 1926, in Hamlet, NC, and raised in High Point, NC, Coltrane moved to Philadelphia in 1943. Professional gigs around Philadelphia led to a job with Dizzy Gillespie in 1949; notable later employers included Johnny Hodges. A call from Miles Davis in the fall of 1955 marks the beginning of Coltrane's lasting impact on jazz. With Davis on-and-off through 1960, Coltrane participated in or

led sessions that produced such seminal recordings as *Blue Train*, *Kind Of Blue* and *Giant Steps*.

By the spring of 1960, Coltrane was leading his own quartet. At the behest of label head Creed Taylor he joined Impulse Records in early 1961; with the addition of Garrison at the end of the year he had formed what's now known as the Classic Quartet. Coltrane's last year with that lineup, from December 1964 through the late fall of 1965, saw



Jimmy Garrison and John Coltrane

the production of a dizzying array of masterpieces, from suites (*A Love Supreme*, *Meditations*) to large ensemble compositions (*Ascension*) to superb live and studio small-group sessions like these *Sun Ship* recordings. Coltrane's music was constantly evolving and, by the beginning of 1966, the Classic Quartet was gone. In its place he developed a quintet, including saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, to serve as the laboratory for his final experiments through his death on July 17, 1967.

The Classic Quartet mirrors Coltrane, whose deep roots in the mainstream of jazz supported branches reaching far above his contemporaries. They created a unique sound, an instantly recognizable approach that transcended their standard jazz combo format. They were capable of near-telepathic interaction and split-second reactions that freed the music to surpass the predictable.

"With John we could come in, he would give us two notes and we could play a whole composition on two notes," Tyner recalled years later. "Sometimes he wouldn't bring in a tune, he'd bring in a scale, and we'd play the scale and everything would be right there. We were familiar with each other, the musicianship was high."

During Coltrane's lifetime, jazz in its homeland existed in a struggle between the artistic and the commercial. The Classic Quartet was a working

band, a self-supporting aggregation subject to the legendarily unreliable music business. And, in one sense, we owe these masterful recordings to that tension. Recording sessions provide an additional source of income for musicians, and Coltrane sought out sessions like this one to help his musicians get paid when the calendar entries were sparse. Fortunately, Impulse producer Bob Thiele was more than willing to oblige.

"I think my contribution with Trane was to let him record whenever he wanted to, even when the corporate power structure was opposed to it," Thiele noted in a 1995 memoir. "I believe his contract called for two albums a year to be recorded and released. Well, hell, we recorded six albums a year. And I was always brought on the carpet because they couldn't understand why I was spending the money to record Coltrane, since we couldn't possibly put out all the records we were making." That Coltrane was ablaze creatively in 1965, burning with ideas to record, simply meant that Thiele got more than his money's worth.

Thiele's willingness to record also explains why music of this magnitude was not released until after Coltrane's death. By the end of 1965, Thiele had an embarrassment of riches from which to choose. And Coltrane typically favored the most recently recorded tracks. "We have many things in the can right now that he thought were great at the time he recorded them," Thiele told author Frank Kofsky in 1968. "He would say, 'Let's hold up on

what we've done, I've got something new.” Thiele and his successor, Ed Michel, later collaborated with Coltrane's widow and last pianist, Alice Coltrane, to quarry a series of albums from the cans lying in the tape vaults. The original release of *Sun Ship* was one of those, assembled in late June 1971.

Uncharacteristically, these recordings were made at the RCA Victor Studios, where other classics were cut over the years, from Jelly Roll Morton to Elvis Presley; Coltrane's Impulse recordings were almost all made at the legendary Rudy Van Gelder Studios in Englewood Cliffs, N.J. This diversion to a “Plan B” studio may be a factor in our ability to enjoy these alternate takes today. Evidently, when Michel pulled the tapes to assemble the album, the original session reels stayed behind at RCA Victor. Forgotten, they sat there patiently, protected by their obscurity, until being discovered first by Ben Young in 2001 and then again a few years later by Richard Seidel, who spearheaded their rightful return to the Verve Music Group.

Sun Ship as released in August 1971 featured edited versions of most of the five Coltrane originals from the session. Contemporary studio techniques like splicing - and occasional overdubbing - were used in a number of albums produced during Coltrane's lifetime, and the inserts recorded at this session attest to his willingness to use such techniques. On

the other hand, some of the editing done in 1971 was a result of the physical limitations of the long-playing phonograph record. With limited capacity on each side, and less fidelity when the size of the tracks on a side approach that limit, Michel's cuts are understandable. More than 40 years later, *Sun Ship: The Complete Session* gives us all the music recorded, in the order in which it was recorded and without such limitations.

The recording begins with “Dearly Beloved,” not to be confused with the pop standard written by Johnny Mercer and Jerome Kern. Coltrane's natural minor theme is accompanied by the tempo-less wash of rhythm typical of the approach the quartet had developed to the jazz ballad. His plaintive, beseeching exploration of the theme frames a solo by Tyner.

The first take is a false start, followed by a discussion between Coltrane and Garrison. It's relaxed, casual and almost cryptic, a sign of the quartet's deceptively low-key approach to the creation of the music. Take two is complete, take three breaks down after 90 seconds, but take four is golden: Coltrane moves from melodic peak to peak, his lines emphasized by Jones before ending with Garrison's sonorous pedal notes.

“Attaining” starts out exploring territory similar to “Dearly Beloved,” with two minor themes set a third apart over a similar free wash of rhythm, separated by roiling percussion. Tyner solos in tempo over propulsive drums and sparse bass.

Take one is complete, with Garrison's almost-walking bass lines underpinning a flood of 16th notes from Tyner. Take two breaks down in the middle of the theme. Take three is complete, and features more complexity from the rhythm section; Tyner's solo mixes 16th notes with more percussive punctuations, over much sparser bass and propulsive drums. The insert that follows was likely intended to make Jones's drum rolls line up with the melody more definitively; the original edited release spliced together most of take three and the insert.

The title track is next. Evidently it was unnamed at the time, not uncommon with original compositions. Thiele urges Coltrane to call it “Yeh,” which is its title on the original session reel box; its final name may reflect a resemblance to the introduction to Sun Ra's “Infinity Of The Universe.” Coltrane repeats the simple, razor-edged theme (a four-note cell echoing the patterns he was increasingly using to organize his solos) some 20 times before giving way to a Tyner solo. Coltrane solos before the cell melody returns.

But first: Take one breaks down almost immediately. Take two is complete but less energetic than the later take four. Coltrane's solo is classic, however, burning from start to finish and flowing seamlessly back into the angular theme. Take three is an insert, starting with the end of Coltrane's solo and leading to a long drum cadenza after the theme restatement. Take four is the

stronger version. Tyner's solo starts out exploring the theme's cell and works into a fast solo. Jones accompanies with solo-like punctuations that have a definite halftime feel to them. Garrison hovers in between with pedal points, never quite walking. The layered levels of rhythm build a powerful tension and reveal how the characteristic Classic Quartet straight-ahead swing was evolving. Coltrane's blistering solo moves back to the cell melody, and is followed by a drum cadenza, which was edited out of the 1971 release.

“Ascent” is the fourth title recorded at the session. There's some banter about the title. Coltrane tells Thiele it's “Ascent”; Thiele pretends to misunderstand it as “Ascension,” which had been recorded a mere two months earlier. Coltrane tells him “No, not that one.” Thiele responds, “I learned something with that one.” The relaxed interplay suggests how comfortably the Quartet and producer worked together.

“Ascent,” largely a feature for Garrison, likely draws its name from the ascending scale fragment that begins the theme. Although there are multiple takes here, the first take is the only truly complete take, and it was the source for the version released in 1971 (with several minutes of Garrison's bass solo edited out). Garrison states the two-part melody, gradually expanding it into an extended solo that alternates tempos and mixes lines and double and triple stops. The ascending scale shows up now and then to unify the solo. After

interplay between Garrison and Jones, Coltrane enters with a version of the theme, at a faster tempo, bending tonality, shattering harmonics and probing the ultrahigh register of the saxophone. The theme returns, Garrison slows things down and ends it all with a triple stop. Apparently Garrison was unsatisfied with his solo, since the next few takes are solo largely forays. Inserts four and five take the tune from the end of Garrison's solo and feature more hard-charging Coltrane.

Appropriately, two takes of Coltrane's "Amen" conclude the session. This "Amen" is no solemn closer for a hymn; rather, it's a medium up-tempo excursion growing out of a three-note cell melody. Both takes are marvelous, and one wonders why the quartet felt a second take was necessary. First Tyner and then Coltrane solo; beneath them Jones plays time more explicitly, but Garrison moves in and out of walking bass lines. It's a fitting end to the session, echoing the quartet's signature straight-ahead drive while hinting at the polyrhythmic approach Coltrane would explore the following year.

The giants that so casually carved these sonic monuments are mostly gone. To uncover new versions of these classic performances by the Classic Quartet is to re-experience the music as it sounded then, fresh, unexpected, masterful. It may be the closest we can get to traveling back through time.

Author and pianist David Wild is co-author, with Lewis Porter, Chris DeVito, Yasuhiro Fujioka and Wolf Schmaler, of The John Coltrane Reference. He has contributed liner notes to a number of Impulse releases and has published in several magazines, including Down Beat, Coda and Cadence, and the New Grove Dictionary of Jazz. He plays and teaches in central Texas.



McCoy Tyner and John Coltrane

Disc 1

1. DEARLY BELOVED *Takes 1 & 2, false start and alternate version* 6:36
2. DEARLY BELOVED *Take 3, breakdown* 1:24
3. DEARLY BELOVED *Take 4, complete version*** 6:17
4. ATTAINING *Take 1, alternate version* 13:38
5. ATTAINING *Take 2, breakdown* 1:02
6. ATTAINING *Take 3, complete version*** 10:27
7. ATTAINING *Take 4, insert 1*** 4:41
8. SUN SHIP *Take 1, breakdown* 0:58
9. SUN SHIP *Take 2, complete alternate version* 6:32
10. SUN SHIP *Take 3, insert 1* 2:32
11. SUN SHIP *Take 4, complete version*** 6:33

Disc 2

1. STUDIO CONVERSATION 0:43
2. ASCENT *Take 1, complete version*** 11:36
3. ASCENT *Take 2, incomplete version* 4:49
4. ASCENT *Take 3, false starts and incomplete version* 3:51
5. ASCENT *Takes 4-6, inserts/false starts* 1:39
6. ASCENT *Take 7, complete insert 4* 4:03
7. ASCENT *Take 8, complete insert 5* 4:05
8. AMEN *Take 1, alternate version* 7:46
9. AMEN *Take 2, released version** 8:17

John Coltrane: tenor saxophone; **McCoy Tyner:** piano; **Jimmy Garrison:** bass; **Elvin Jones:** drums

All tracks composed by John Coltrane

All tracks previously unreleased except tracks marked * and portions of tracks marked **

Recorded August 26, 1965 at RCA Victor Studios, 155 E. 24th St., New York, NY

Original recordings produced by Bob Thiele and John Coltrane

Recorded at RCA Victor Studios

Engineer: Bob Simpson

Original release:

Issued as Impulse AS-9211, August 1971

Produced by Ed Michel and Alice Coltrane

Their sequence and choices:

Side A

SUN SHIP

Take 4, as shown above, with Elvin Jones's drum coda edited out.

DEARLY BELOVED

Take 4, as shown above, with the discussion from Take 1 added as an introduction.

AMEN

Take 2, as shown above.

Side B

ATTAINING

The first 7:24 minutes of Take 3, followed by the last 3:58 minutes of Insert 1.

ASCENT

The issued version is Take 1 as shown above, with about 1:30 minutes of the bass solo edited out.

The original edited release is available separately, on CD Impulse B0015952-02.

This edition supervised by Harry Weinger,
Richard Seidel and Michael Cuscuna
Special thanks to Ravi Coltrane
To the Coltrane Working Group:
David Wild, Lewis Porter, Chris DeVito,
Yasuhiro Fujioka and Wolf Schmalzer

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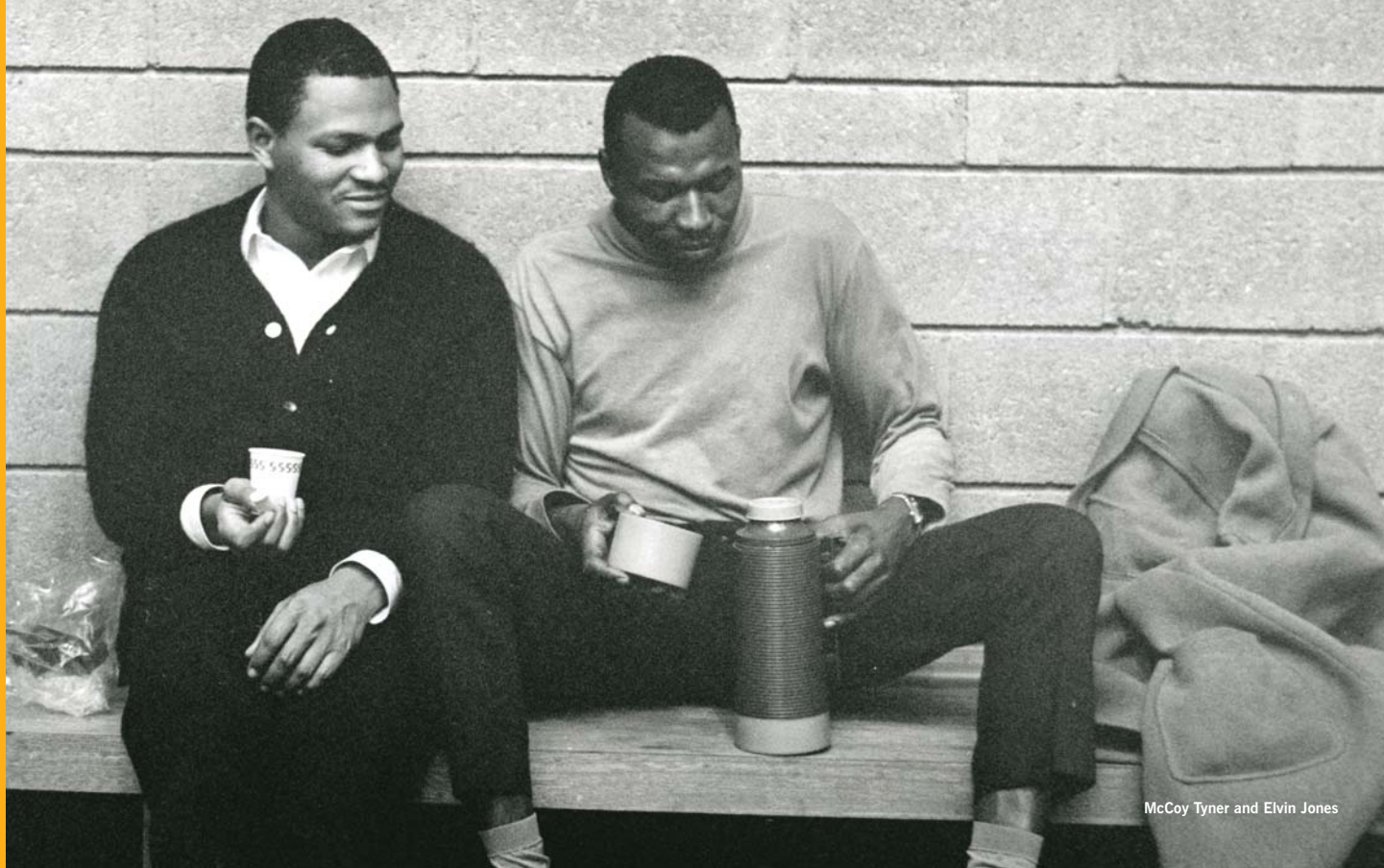
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McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones



A complete document
of one of the last recordings
of the classic John Coltrane
Quartet, featuring unreleased
performances.

Disc 1

1. **DEARLY BELOVED** *Takes 1 & 2, false start and alternate version*
2. **DEARLY BELOVED** *Take 3, breakdown*
3. **DEARLY BELOVED** *Take 4, complete version***
4. **ATTAINING** *Take 1, alternate version*
5. **ATTAINING** *Take 2, breakdown*
6. **ATTAINING** *Take 3, complete version***
7. **ATTAINING** *Take 4, insert 1***
8. **SUN SHIP** *Take 1, breakdown*
9. **SUN SHIP** *Take 2, complete alternate version*
10. **SUN SHIP** *Take 3, insert 1*
11. **SUN SHIP** *Take 4, complete version***

Disc 2

1. **STUDIO CONVERSATION**
2. **ASCENT** *Take 1, complete version***
3. **ASCENT** *Take 2, incomplete version*
4. **ASCENT** *Take 3, false starts and incomplete version*
5. **ASCENT** *Takes 4-6, inserts/false starts*
6. **ASCENT** *Take 7, complete insert 4*
7. **ASCENT** *Take 8, complete insert 5*
8. **AMEN** *Take 1, alternate version*
9. **AMEN** *Take 2, released version**

John Coltrane: tenor saxophone; **McCoy Tyner:** piano; **Jimmy Garrison:** bass; **Elvin Jones:** drums
*All tracks previously unreleased except tracks marked * and portions of tracks marked ***



THE COMPLETE SESSION – 2 CD

