



THE COMPLETE
AFRICA/BRASS SESSIONS
**THE JOHN COLTRANE
QUARTET**

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Spring 1961. John Coltrane, master tenor saxophonist, successful bandleader, resuscitator of the forgotten soprano saxophone—about, with a change of recording companies, to change the face of jazz. Born in North Carolina but raised in Philadelphia, in 1961 the then 34-year-old Coltrane was already an influence on modern jazz. He had begun playing professionally in the waning days of World War II, and soon found himself in a postwar Navy band in Hawaii. Post-Navy apprenticeship in Philadelphia had been followed by anonymous visibility as a sideman in Dizzy Gillespie's big band and small groups (a contemporary photo of a skinny, bow-tied Coltrane staring from the wings at Gillespie and Charlie Parker is prophetic). He left Gillespie in 1951 for advanced music school, and followed school with a variety of sideman gigs in the early fifties, most notably with Johnny Hodges.

In late 1955 Coltrane made a key decision to accept an offer from Miles Davis, whose gradual return to the forefront after a years-long eclipse had enabled the trumpeter to form a permanent band. Over the next 4½ years, with Davis, with Thelonious Monk and again with Davis, Coltrane's abilities blossomed, his hard-toned tenor increasingly heard not only in supporting roles but as a leader, in sessions on Prestige and (from 1959) on Atlantic. In the spring of 1960 Coltrane

formed his own group and (still recording for Atlantic) committed his soprano saxophone and an eerie Indian-flavored "My Favorite Things" to vinyl, with enough impact outside the narrow jazz world to rate an article in *Time* magazine.

The following spring, his two-year contract with Atlantic at an end, Coltrane became one of the first to sign with ABC-Paramount's new Impulse label (or Impulse!, as it appeared on the cover). The association would last for the rest of Coltrane's life, and in that six-year period Coltrane and Impulse would grow to share a similar image: restless, forward looking, innovative, unique. Some of the essential performances of modern jazz would be packaged inside the characteristic Impulse bifold covers, behind the distinctive orange-and-black spine—essential performances like those collected here.

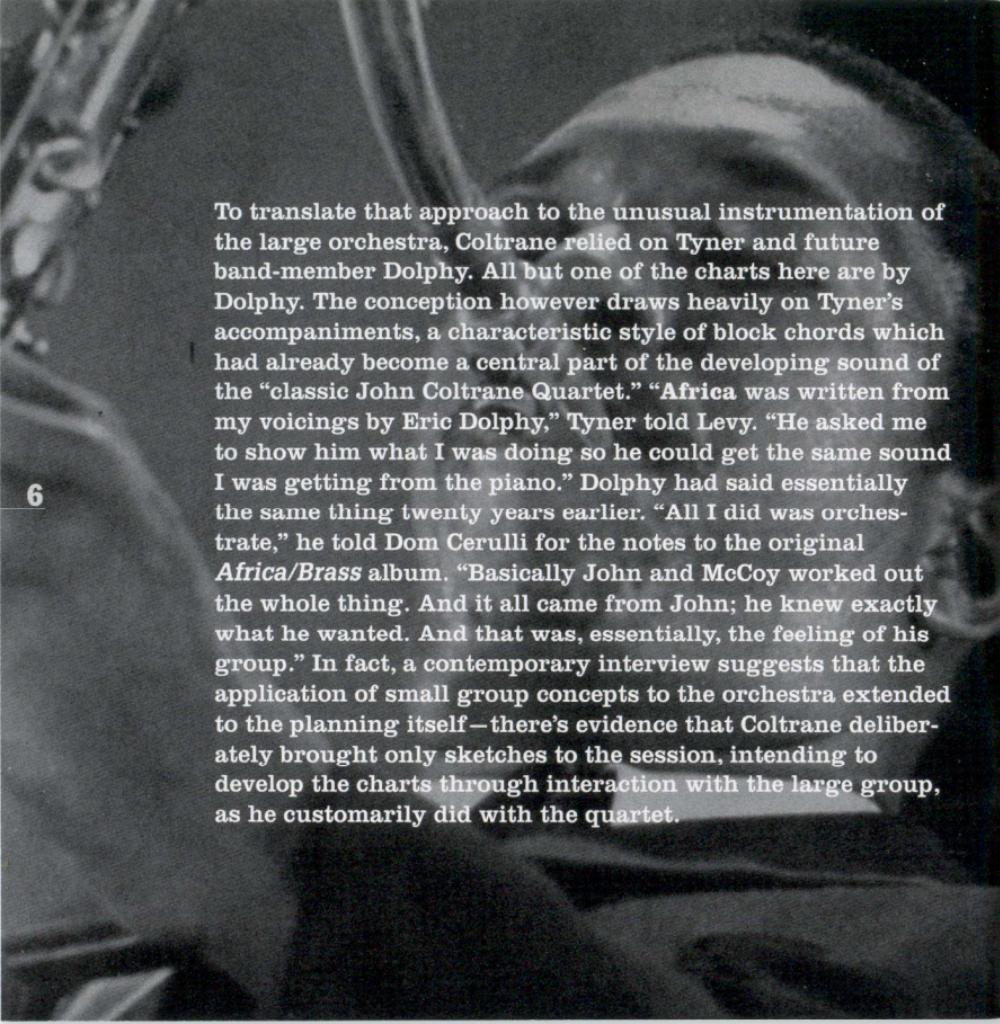
It appears in retrospect that Coltrane saw the move to Impulse as a chance to try things he had not been able to do with his previous label. Impulse was willing, and Coltrane's initial projects (both recorded in 1961) were spectacular firsts—the two studio dates that produced the orchestral *Africa/Brass* (his only recording for Impulse with Creed Taylor as producer) and, a scant four months later, his first

live recording under his own name, the seminal Village Vanguard sessions. Oddly, it also appears that both of Coltrane's 1961 projects were conceived as single recording sessions. Coltrane's dissatisfaction with some of the music recorded at the first recording session for the *Africa/Brass* album brought the group back for a follow-up two weeks later; the continual experimentation on-stage at the Vanguard stretched that one-evening recording into four. In both cases modern-day listeners have been the benefactors, with a wealth of powerful alternate performances recovered and released. Whatever problems it caused Taylor (and his successor, Bob Thiele) with corporate management, whatever heartburn it gave to the accountants, Coltrane's refusal to be satisfied, his push to try each composition several ways, leaves us the riches on these CDs, the combination of titles now known as *The Complete Africa/Brass Sessions*.

To showcase Coltrane (and the quartet) against an orchestral backdrop may have been an obvious choice for "something different" for the debut album on Impulse. But the orchestra Coltrane selected for the project was unexpected—a unique blend of ten low brass instruments only slightly leavened by reeds and flute. According to multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy, "John thought of this sound. He wanted brass, he

wanted baritone horns, he wanted that mellow sound and power." *Africa/Brass* may have been an equally obvious choice for the title of the first album, but it also succinctly summarizes the salient characteristics of the music—the African polyrhythms provided by drummer Elvin Jones and the two bassists, and the dark, richly burnished sound of trumpets, trombones, euphoniums, French horns and tuba.

That sound had its roots in the collective identity forged during the previous year by Coltrane's quartet, and particularly by the contributions of pianist McCoy Tyner. "[Coltrane] tried to get me to do some writing and orchestrating for larger groups around the quartet setting," Tyner told Len Levy in 1981. "But I was so engrossed with what we were doing in the small band I didn't pursue it heavily. The only thing from the early sixties was *Greensleeves* from the *Africa/Brass* album, where we used my orchestration involving French horns and a trumpet. I guess I did feel a lot of voices in my music, and my own (pianistic) style reflects it. I remember John saying that he heard it in my approach to comping."



To translate that approach to the unusual instrumentation of the large orchestra, Coltrane relied on Tyner and future band-member Dolphy. All but one of the charts here are by Dolphy. The conception however draws heavily on Tyner's accompaniments, a characteristic style of block chords which had already become a central part of the developing sound of the "classic John Coltrane Quartet." "Africa was written from my voicings by Eric Dolphy," Tyner told Levy. "He asked me to show him what I was doing so he could get the same sound I was getting from the piano." Dolphy had said essentially the same thing twenty years earlier. "All I did was orchestrate," he told Dom Cerulli for the notes to the original *Africa/Brass* album. "Basically John and McCoy worked out the whole thing. And it all came from John; he knew exactly what he wanted. And that was, essentially, the feeling of his group." In fact, a contemporary interview suggests that the application of small group concepts to the orchestra extended to the planning itself—there's evidence that Coltrane deliberately brought only sketches to the session, intending to develop the charts through interaction with the large group, as he customarily did with the quartet.

With unusual instrumentation and an approach to the orchestra rooted in the quartet, Coltrane took one additional step towards a tight focus, by limiting soloist honors only to the members of the quartet itself. Only Coltrane, Tyner, Workman (and Art Davis) and Jones solo, despite the presence of such distinctive and individual players as Dolphy, Freddie Hubbard and Booker Little. The primary soloist is, of course, Coltrane, who is heard to advantage on both tenor and soprano saxophones. But Tyner's characteristic nimble-fingered lines and block chords are also captured, and Elvin Jones, Art Davis and Reggie Workman are prominent. Thus *The Complete Africa/Brass Sessions*, although unusual in instrumentation and performances, are of a piece with the powerful, individual music the quartet/quintet was producing nightly in clubs across the continent. *Africa/Brass* is the John Coltrane Quartet amplified, expanded, recast as gold-plated steel, the power of the small group leveraged into something unique by the investment of brass, the tight focus creating an instantly identifiable sound.

On May 23, 1961, eighteen musicians crowded into Rudy Van Gelder's legendary Englewood Cliffs, NJ studio for the first of what would be two sessions. Julian Priester and Charles

Greenlee (both regularly trombonists) had brought the less-common euphonium (or baritone horn), the tenor instrument of the tuba family. There were two trumpeters (Freddie Hubbard and Booker Little), a tubaist (Bill Barber) and fully five French horns (one of whom, Julius Watkins, was that rarity, a jazz French horn soloist who had recorded with Thelonious Monk). In addition to Dolphy, saxophonist Pat Patrick and veteran multi-instrumentalist Garvin Bushell (whose career stretched back to the very early 1920s) added reeds and flutes. Coltrane's regular quintet was augmented by bassist Paul Chambers, then in his sixth year with Miles Davis.

First on the agenda that Tuesday was **Greensleeves**, a traditional English folksong which had become a staple in the quartet's repertoire. The cynical might attribute its inclusion to the success of "My Favorite Things" the year before—it is after all another jazz waltz with a simple melody which Coltrane interprets on soprano saxophone. More likely, commercial considerations just happened to coincide with Coltrane's own interests—**Greensleeves** is the first of a succession of jazz waltzes which he used to further explore the simple-melody/waltz format. Tyner's arrangement (here orchestrated by Dolphy) can be heard in its quartet incarnation in the Village Vanguard recordings made later that year,

and again in a studio version taped after Coltrane returned from Europe in December 1961. Coltrane noted at the time that "It was a challenge to add the band to it. I wanted to keep the feeling of the quartet. That's why we took the same voicings and the same rhythm McCoy comps in."

After several run-throughs and a few false starts the group recorded the version heard here, which was included on the original *Africa/Brass* (Impulse A-6). The arrangement follows Coltrane's usual approach, alternating statements and restatements of the melody with a two-chord minor vamp, using an orchestral backdrop that extends Tyner's characteristic block chord punches. Bassist Reggie Workman is central to the success of the performance, anchoring the arrangement with a repeated eighth-note figure, strong walking lines and frequent pedal points. Coltrane, on soprano, swirls over the propulsive rhythm, and Tyner is crisp and crystalline.

With an acceptable take of **Greensleeves** in the can, the group turned to **Song of the Underground Railroad**. Coltrane had been researching spirituals and nineteenth century folksongs, and this composition (originally entitled "The Drinking Gourd") is one of the fruits of that research. Unlike

the later "Spiritual" (from *The Village Vanguard Sessions*), which he recast as a slow waltz, **Song** here becomes a straight-ahead swinger on which Coltrane (on tenor saxophone) and Tyner cook over another minor two-chord vamp. The orchestra's participation is limited to the opening and closing theme statements (and a brief passage behind Tyner's solo). It was first released on *The Africa/Brass Sessions, Vol. 2*.

Coltrane evidently was not completely satisfied with the first set of takes of **Greensleeves**, because the group returned to the waltz after the single take of **Song of the Underground Railroad**. This second version is slower and a little more relaxed, with Workman straying further from the eighth-note figure at the beginning and end of the performance. The sequence of solos (Coltrane's soprano followed by Tyner, followed by Coltrane again) is the same, but Coltrane's solos boil and bubble with sixteenth note runs that dart into unexpected harmonic corners. It provides a fascinating alternate view of the group's approach to the composition.

Next on the agenda was **The Damned Don't Cry**, the only arrangement of the session not contributed by Dolphy and Tyner. Trumpeter Calvin Massey, a long-time friend of Coltrane's from Philadelphia, wrote and arranged the compo-

sition, one of several of his works which Coltrane recorded during his career. According to Coltrane biographer C. O. Simpkins, Massey convinced Coltrane to use the full chart for this session, having recorded a demonstration version (which Coltrane liked). Three days before the record date, Massey and an assistant, pianist Romulus Franceschini, began the difficult job of copying the music for a large band. On the day of the recording session, however, they were still trying to organize the music. Massey, who was coping with a variety of personal problems, passed out at the session, and the performance heard here was conducted by Franceschini.

Perhaps in part because of these problems, **The Damned Don't Cry** is the weakest performance of the two sessions. It also suffers from the common ailment of jazz recording sessions, the lack of time and money for rehearsals. It's likely that none of the performers (including Coltrane) had ever seen the chart prior to the recording session (on the original session tapes Coltrane can be heard discussing the sequence of the arrangement and where his 32-bar solo begins). It's also likely that the session was beginning to run long and producer Creed Taylor couldn't afford to spend much time with the complex chart, so that only this one composite master was recorded.

Caveats aside, there is much of value in this performance. The slow, blues-like 32-bar song-form composition features bitingly dissonant voicings, unusual instrumental combinations and doubling of the bass line by the tuba, echoing some of the late-fifties arrangements of Gil Evans. Trumpeter Booker Little gives the minor-sounding theme a plaintive reading, and is joined the second time around by Coltrane's soprano. However, the orchestra is tentative as they negotiate the tricky accents in the 12/8 opening section, and the piece does not catch fire until Coltrane's opening tenor solo.

Damned is not a blues, but the A section of the composition features blues-like changes, and as Coltrane begins to dig in, we are reminded that his initial reputation was made on the blues. On solid ground, free to blow, with 32 bars stretching out ahead, Coltrane plays the blues as only he could. Tyner also gets to solo, and he is especially effective in the bridge (over an arresting combination of brass and Bushell's oboe). He is followed by the spine-tingling shrilling of Coltrane's soprano high above the punching brass. Little (already ill with the uremia which was to kill him in six months) imbues the theme restatement with a special sadness.

The combined talents of Dolphy and Tyner (together with the

unusual instrumentation) gave these sessions their unique sound. Massey of course uses the same instruments here, but his arrangement, while it is in no way conventional, sounds considerably different. Dolphy seems to have used the brass-heavy orchestra mostly for blocks of sound, while Massey employs it more as a counterpoint to the soloists. Massey also gave the theme statement to Booker Little (the only one not carried by Coltrane), and his arrangement features intricate accents, an echoic countermelody (second eight bars of the melody) and unusual combinations of instruments. It's a remarkable display of how personal is the art of the arranger.

Finally, with only a little time left, the group began to work with the centerpiece of the session, **Africa**. The composition draws its rhythms and format from African recordings Coltrane had been listening to over the previous months. As with **Song of the Underground Railroad**, Coltrane found something he liked (a chant-like bass line), and he and the quartet began working with it on club dates. According to Cerulli's notes Coltrane first used African rhythms instead of swing while the group was performing in Los Angeles earlier in 1961, and in subsequent performances **Africa** assumed the outlines it has here.

There are many remarkable features to **Africa**. Coltrane wanted a drone effect, with two bassists (one low and one high). Over that drone (its bottom note an E, the lowest note on the bass) he superimposed a melody with a different implied tonal center (D minor). The structure of the performance emphasizes repetition, a hallmark of African music, and Tyner's rolling chords are echoed by the orchestra. All the elements of the composition, worked out in quartet performances over the previous months, come together in a powerful, effective whole—complex, polytonal, massive, dark and brooding. This earliest of the three **Africas**, a composite master, has Coltrane soloing with a bitonal feeling, followed by Tyner (mostly in E minor). Chambers and Workman intertwine lines for a while, after which Jones takes the floor for a long, characteristic solo.

Coltrane habitually took home dubs of the masters from recording sessions, and he probably did so with the tapes of *The Complete Africa/Brass Sessions*. One can assume that while much of what he heard was satisfactory, he wanted to take another look at **Africa**, because a second session was quickly scheduled for June 7. The group that assembled on that Wednesday was slightly different from the group featured at the earlier session—one trumpet (Booker Little)

instead of two, four French horns (down from five), a euphonium, a trombone, and tuba. Dolphy and Patrick covered the reeds and woodwinds, while Art Davis took over the second bassist's chair.

Although the main focus was **Africa**, it's likely the first piece recorded was **Blues Minor**. This Coltrane composition may owe some of its character to the aforementioned research into Afro-American folk music, since it is a modal blues (limited to two minor chords). Apparently Coltrane decided to include it at the last moment, and Dolphy did the orchestrations on the spot. "It's a head," Dolphy told Cerulli. "McCoy gave me the notes. I wrote out the parts, and the band did it on one take." Dolphy's arrangement (the theme stated in parallel and unison, together with a few brief ensemble passages behind Coltrane and Tyner) pushes the band, and the piece swings powerfully from start to finish.

One of the advantages of putting all of the *Africa/Brass* performances in one place is the opportunity to hear all three versions of **Africa** in close juxtaposition. The later versions of **Africa** differ subtly but significantly from the May 23 version. In that original arrangement, starting with a slightly different palette of orchestral colors, Dolphy used richer, more complex chords but subordinated the orchestra

more to the soloists. In the June 7 arrangement, however, the French horn parts are more pronounced and the arrangement is more adventurous. Dolphy added whoops and shouts, mostly heard from the French horns, substituted his alto saxophone for the flute heard prominently in the earlier version, and generally revoiced the parts to more closely echo Tyner's piano figures.

Of the two complete versions of **Africa** recorded on June 7, the earlier version is set a little slower than the May 23 **Africa**, but features basically the same solo order (Coltrane, Tyner, the two bassists, Jones, and Coltrane again). Elvin's drum pattern is closer to straight-ahead swing but his solo is no less massive and explosive. On the later version, by contrast, the drum pattern is more clearly Afro-Cuban, and the tempo is, if anything, slightly slower still. Coltrane's solo is the most adventurous of his three outings, obviously propelled by the surging orchestral accompaniment. Tyner too seems energized, freer, more overtly polytonal, while bassist Davis adds a bowed counterpoint. After Elvin's extended solo, Coltrane returns with the theme and some additional soloing, before the performance fades with a conversation between the bassists.

The Complete Africa/Brass Sessions would prove to be one of

Coltrane's only orchestral recordings, and the only one with a soloist-plus-orchestra approach. The other, the equally famous *Ascension*, lies some four years in time and light-years in conception in the future. While it is thus unique, *Africa/Brass* is by no means separate and distinct from the balance of Coltrane's recorded legacy. As a snapshot of where Coltrane's art stood in the spring of 1961, as an example of his ability to combine disparate elements into a strikingly unified whole, as a roadmarker pointing towards the future, *Africa/Brass* remains one of the most powerful and compelling examples of the art of John Coltrane.

David A. Wild

June 1995

(Author/pianist David Wild is a freelance writer, regular contributor to various jazz magazines and the author of *The Recordings of John Coltrane: A Discography*. He currently lives in Texas.)

John Coltrane is a quiet, powerfully-built young man who plays tenor saxophone quite unlike anyone in all of jazz. His style has been described as "sheets of sound" or as "flurries of melody." But, despite the accuracy, or lack of accuracy, of such descriptions, it is a fact that Coltrane's style is wholly original and of growing influence among new tenor players.

Perhaps he himself best described his dazzling style in a recent *Down Beat* article with writer Don DeMichael. "I started experimenting because I was trying for more individual development. I even tried the long, rapid lines that Ira Gitler termed 'sheets of sound' at the time. But actually, I was beginning to apply the three-to-one chord approach and at this time the tendency was to play the entire scale of each chord. Therefore, they were usually played fast and sometimes sounded like glisses."

Although Coltrane has absorbed this experiment into his present style and moved on, its effect was shocking, and intriguing, in the jazz world. Most recently, as this album will attest, Coltrane has become absorbed by the rhythms of Africa.

During the editing sessions for this album he noted, "There has been an influence of African rhythms in American jazz.

It seems there are some things jazz can borrow harmonically, but I've been knocking myself out seeking something rhythmic. But nothing swings like 4/4. These implied rhythms give variety."

This restless probing, extracting, absorbing, and moving on is characteristic of Coltrane. His earliest influence was Lester Young, but his first horn was an alto sax, so he became attracted to Johnny Hodges at the same time.

Toward the end of the 1940s he fell under the musical influence of Charlie Parker. But when he joined Eddie Vinson's band it was as a tenor player and, as he noted, "a wider area of listening opened up for me. On alto, Bird had been my whole influence, but on tenor I found there was no one man whose ideas were so dominant as Charlie's were on alto."

His playing experience included stints with Vinson's band and those of Dizzy Gillespie, Johnny Hodges, Earl Bostic, Miles Davis, and Thelonious Monk. Today he leads his own group. For this record, Coltrane composed two of the three selections, then discussed the orchestration thoroughly with Eric Dolphy, a reed player of enormous talent. Pianist McCoy Tyner of Coltrane's group was the third member of the discussion group.



"Actually," Dolphy recalled, "All I did was orchestrate. Basically John and McCoy worked out the whole thing. And it all came from John; he knew exactly what he wanted. And that was, essentially, the feeling of his group."

AFRICA has an unusual form. Its melody had to be stated in the background because Coltrane is not tied down by chords. "I had a sound that I wanted to hear," Coltrane remarked of this composition. "And what resulted was about it. I wanted the band to have a drone. We used two basses. The main line carries all the way through the tune. One bass plays almost all the way through. The other has rhythmic lines around it. Reggie and Art have worked together, and they know how to give and take." This work began with Coltrane's quartet. He listened to many African records for rhythmic inspiration. One had a bass line like a chant, and the group used it, working it into different tunes. In Los Angeles, John hit on using African rhythms instead of 4/4, and the work began to take shape. Tyner began to work chords into the structure, and, in John's own words, "it's been growing ever since."

The instrumentation—trumpet, four French horns, alto sax, baritone sax, two euphoniums, two basses, piano, drums, and

tuba—is among the most unusual in jazz. But, Dolphy explained, “John thought of this sound. He wanted brass, he wanted baritone horns, he wanted that mellow sound and power.”

Coltrane heard the playbacks and nodded. “It’s the first time I’ve done any tune with that kind of rhythmic background. I’ve done things in 3/4 and 4/4. On the whole, I’m quite pleased with Africa.”

GREENSLEEVES is an updating of the old, revered folk song. It’s included in this set because Coltrane, in recent months, has been studying folk music. “It’s one of the most beautiful folk melodies I’ve heard,” he said. “It’s written in 6/8, and we do it just about as written. There’s a section for improvisation with a vamp to blow on.”

The quartet has been playing this theme recently, and the arrangement is based on Tyner’s chords. Dolphy notated it. “For me,” Coltrane said, “Greensleeves is most enjoyable to play. Most of the time we get a nice pulse and groove. It was a challenge to add the band to it. I wanted to keep the feeling of the quartet. That’s why we took the same voicings and the same rhythm McCoy comps in.”

BLUES MINOR is a piece the quartet has been playing of

late. It was assembled at the recording session. “It’s a head,” Dolphy said. “McCoy gave me the notes. I wrote out the parts, and the band did it on one take.” It swings loosely with the ease and drive of a head arrangement.

All in all, this album is representative of the state of musical mind of John Coltrane, 34, on his way to something new and exciting, but pausing along the way to sum up the fresh and provocative work he has accomplished this far.

Dom Cerulli

Original liner notes from *Africa/Brass* (Impulse! A-6)

To The Listener:

In our continuing attempt to remain true to the original recordings (in both sound quality and design), we at Impulse Records have not made any changes in content, spelling or grammar to the original text. However, it should be noted that in the original liner notes for *Africa/Brass*, McCoy Tyner’s name was misspelled throughout as McCoy Turner. We have opted to make this single correction to the orginal liner notes.

Disc One:

1. Greensleeves 9:57

(Traditional) (Arranged by McCoy Tyner) Jowcol Music (BMI)

2. Song of the Underground Railroad 6:44

(Traditional) (Arranged by John Coltrane) Jowcol Music (BMI)

3. Greensleeves (alternate take) 10:53

(Traditional) (Arranged by John Coltrane) Jowcol Music (BMI)

4. The Damned Don't Cry 7:34

(Cal Massey) Charill Music Publishing Co. (BMI)

5. Africa (first version) 14:08

(John Coltrane) Jowcol Music (BMI)

Disc Two:

1. Blues Minor 7:20

(John Coltrane) Jowcol Music (BMI)

2. Africa (alternate take) 16:08

(John Coltrane) Jowcol Music (BMI)

3. Africa 16:29

(John Coltrane) Jowcol Music (BMI)

Personnel on Disc One:

Booker Little, Freddie Hubbard (trumpets), **Julian Priester, Charles Greenlee** (euphonium), **Julius Watkins, Donald Corrado, Bob Northern, Jimmy Buffington, Robert Swishelm** (French horns), **Bill Barber** (tuba), **Eric Dolphy** (alto saxophone, flute, bass clarinet), **Garvin Bushell** (piccolo, reeds), **Pat Patrick** (baritone saxophone), **John Coltrane** (soprano saxophone, tenor saxophone), **McCoy Tyner** (piano), **Reggie Workman** (bass), **Paul Chambers** (bass on **Africa** only), **Elvin Jones** (drums).

Personnel on Disc Two:

Booker Little (trumpet), **Britt Woodman** (trombone), **Carl Bowman** (euphonium), **Julius Watkins, Donald Corrado, Bob Northern, Robert Swishelm** (French horns), **Bill Barber** (tuba), **Eric Dolphy** (alto saxophone, flute, bass clarinet), **Pat Patrick** (baritone saxophone), **John Coltrane** (tenor saxophone), **McCoy Tyner** (piano), **Reggie Workman** (bass), **Art Davis** (bass on **Africa** only), **Elvin Jones** (drums).

The Damned Don't Cry arranged and conducted by Romulus Franceschini. All other selections arranged by John Coltrane and McCoy Tyner and orchestrated and conducted by Eric Dolphy.

Disc One #1 and Disc Two #2, 3 originally issued on *Africa/Brass* (AS-6)

Disc One #2, 3 and Disc Two #1 originally issued on *Africa/Brass Sessions—Volume Two* (AS-9273)

Disc One #4, 5 originally issued on *Trane's Modes* (IZ 9361)

**Original sessions produced by
Creed Taylor**

Reissue produced by Michael Cuscuna

Recording Engineer: Rudy Van Gelder

Recorded at the Van Gelder Studio, Englewood Cliffs, NJ on May 23, 1961 (Disc One) and June 4, 1961 (Disc Two).

Photography: Ted Russell, Don Parent, Chuck Stewart

Art Direction: Hollis King

Graphic design: Jackie Thaw

