JAZZ MASTER

Celebrating the works and impact of jazz legend John Coltrane on the 73rd anniversary of his birth

photo from *Coltrane and the Classic Quartet: Box Set — Complete Impulse Studio Recordings* (1998), Impulse Records

As a young musician, John Coltrane applied his childhood exposure to the free-form musical styles found in the bkcak Christian church.

By Dan Marek
State Press Magazine

Legendary sax player John Coltrane created a world of sound, a world that has influenced not only jazz, but rock, pop, soul and funk.

Jazz novelist Martin Williams referred to Coltrane as a "hard" player, but said his ability to pull the listener in through personal expression made his music hard to the point of brittleness.

The little "Trane" that could

Born in Hamlet North Carolina, September 23, 1926, Coltrane grew up with deep spiritual influences. His mother tried to raise him with the strong beliefs of the black Christian churches. This belief system eventually left a mark on his music. The free reign of emotional expressions of the choirs and parishioners Coltrane observed during his youth remained key factors in the development of his style.

"His spiritual being with the music really inspired a lot of people," said Blaze Lantana, program director for the Valley's listener-supported 91.5 FM KJZZ. "His recovering from drugs, really getting into the spiritual side of music and making it a part of his life – opposed to something he did. That's who he was."

Later, when Coltrane moved to Philadelphia to, he began to play the alto saxophone daily. There he began attending lessons at the Grandoff Studios and the Ornstein School of Music, which led to three scholarships.

When World War II struck, a young Coltrane packed up his saxophone and headed off to the Navy to play with big bands across the world.

After returning from the war, Coltrane played rhythm and blues in bands to support himself. Although he began to craft his medium with call and responses between the members he soon began to find interest in a new style of music.

In the late 1940s music began to evolve from the influences of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and Thelonius Monk. Be-bop was born and Coltrane was close behind.

"Even in the early days of playing he had good hands," said Mark Sunkett, ASU Jazz in America professor. "He had a good control over the instrument and a way of working around chord changes that other players couldn't figure out right away."

When Coltrane began playing with Eddie "Cleanhand" Vinson in 1947, he started to switch off between his alto and tenor saxophones. In 1948 Dizzy Gillespie saw talent in the young Coltrane and picked him up for his big band. While with Gillespie, Coltrane took part the early broadcast radio airings with Gillespie's sextet in 1951. His work with the sextet was later said to sound highly influenced by saxophone player Dexter Gordon and hinted slightly at his later pioneering sounds.

Birth of the coolest duo

In 1955 trumpeter Miles Davis picked Coltrane to record *Round Midnight* with his inspirational quartet. Many critics of the time were unsure of the 28-year-old Coltrane, accusing him of having bigger ideas than talents. But the album's version of Thelonius Monk's "Round Midnight" showed Coltrane's new talent emerging.

"Miles Davis really played a pretty sound," Lantana said. "And when Coltrane worked with Miles he was influenced by the sound of that. Just like if you're playing with somebody with a lot of energy, you play with that energy. Just by the way Miles would stand up, play four notes and just kinda make you hold your breath – that really influenced the band."

Coltrane continually worked on his playing, practicing 12 hours a day and in between sets in his dressing room. His music became largely exploratory and far more advanced than most sax players of the time.

Improving day to day, in 1956 Coltrane issued a musical challenge to tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins. The recording titled "Tenor Madness," ended in a draw between the two musicians.

Coltrane proved his musical ability to Davis while recording with him in 1955-56 only to be fired in 1957 because of his drug addictions. After giving up his habits, Coltrane joined up with Thelonius Monk's quintet for a short amount of time. This collaboration gave Monk the long-overdue acclaim he deserved and stretched Coltrane's playing abilities into new realms of jazz.

"Monk's melodies were so angular and different, just to have that start sets you off in a different direction," Lantana said. "Monk was also a character. He would get up and dance around the stage if he liked what you were playing. He would also just stop playing when he was with Coltrane, because he thought Coltrane was creating his own chordal structure within what he was playing."

After being inspired by Monk and Davis, Coltrane's playing became more adventurous and led to the 1957 recording of his hard-bop album *Blue Train*.

photo from *Coltrane and the Classic Quartet: Box Set — Complete Impulse Studio Recordings* (1998), Impulse Records

In the late 1950s, Coltrane's unique ablitites reached new heights as he recorded with Miles Davis on *Milestones* and *Kind of Blue*. This inspired Coltrane to spread his musical wings and lead his own band.

In 1958 he re-joined Davis to record *Milestones*, giving Coltrane the notoriety of being considered the most important tenor in jazz.

During the next two years with Davis, Coltrane's chordal improvisation became faster and more precise. His chordal structures began to take off in directions no one else had thought of or attempted to play.

On the recordings of Davis' *Milestones* and *Kind of Blue*, the quintet produced melodies of gigantic proportions – the face of jazz was changed yet again with the help of Coltrane.

"I liked the modal harmonies they used, the simplicity of what it came from," Lantana said. "There was a structure that they started with and then they created things that were really complex by taking this really simple formation and developing it. It wasn't quite blues, but it was a modal sound that they worked with."

On *Kind of Blue*'s standard "So What" Coltrane formed a solo monumental to the jazz world twisting and turning around saxophonist Cannonball Adderley, pianist Bill Evans, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer James Cobb - all who went on to achieve worldwide popularity.

This improvising based on modes or scales rather than chord changes, helped make *Kind of Blue* become one of jazz' most influential albums.

"At that point he was playing way beyond the rest of the musicians he was with," Sunkett said. "Just like the *Meditations* album, you listen to Coltrane in that setting and you could listen to it 10 times in a row and still hear something different every time."

During that same time Coltrane himself signed a deal with Atlantic Records and began to record one of his best albums, *Giant Steps*.

This Coltrane album twisted bop to its limits by summing up his career in complex melodic structures with the emotional strength of his work.

Tracks like "Naima" and "Giant Steps" demonstrated that his writing abilities could no longer be limited by Davis or conventional jazz altogether.

"Coltrane wanted to be out on his own," Lantana said. "He said, 'Yeah, I'm just playin' with Miles, but I want to do my own thing and stretch.' And he did stretch!"

In 1960 Coltrane was ready to become a leader and Davis had to let him go. His direction was turning from using as many chords as possible, to playing emotionally over two-chord vamps. He also began to double on soprano saxophone at this time, bringing an entirely new approach to the instrument.

Coltrane hired pianist McCoy Tyner, drummer Elvin Jones and bassist Jimmy Garrison in 1961. And his new label, Impulse records, gave him complete freedom to record whatever he wanted.

His 1960 recording of the Sound of Music's "My Favorite Things" became a theme song in jazz and substantially propelled his popularity. His version continually changed while he encouraged his players to "Free it up a little more" each time they played. The resulting sound gave jazz musicians the complete musical freedom they had been searching for.

"He continued to extend the vocabulary of the horn," Sunkett said. "He went as far as he could go. When you get into the 60s and you hear other sax players squeaking and squawking on the saxophone, that to me was just for shock value. But when John Coltrane did it, that was the last note there was to say – what he had to say."

Alto saxophonist Eric Dulphy also sat in with the quintet frequently and recorded with them extensively at the Village Vanguard in New York.

"He used a lot of different colors on the horn," Lantana said. "He did harmonic things that he began and nobody else could do because they were so difficult. Other people tried to achieve that that. Just like that first person to do a triple jump on the ice skates, every other ice skater wants to do that."

Coltrane's "anti-jazz" was talked about relentlessly by critics as he flowed farther from standard forms and older ideas of jazz. Partially to satisfy the critics, he recorded sessions with Duke Ellington and Johnny Hartman. Although his playing on the albums were quite standard and beautiful, his live solos were often 45 minutes long and he explored the tonal qualities of his instrument constantly.

Inspired by minimalist composers Philip Glass and Terry Rollie, Coltrane dropped most of his melodies and began to focus primarily on sound explorations.

In 1965, inspired by Ornette Colman's "free-jazz," Coltrane recorded his most daring recording titled *Ascension*. This 40-minute piece consisted of the traditional quartet, plus a second bassist and six additional horns.

The piece received mixed reviews, but it changed jazz again in a way only Coltrane could.

Coltrane continued to expand his music into new horizons by creating a new band consisting of his wife Alice on piano, the avant-guard tenor stylings of Pharoah Sanders, and drummer Rashied Ali, keeping only bassist Jimmy Garrison from his previous band.

The new band toured around the world and recorded many live albums peaking during their visit to Japan.

Shortly after his return from Japan, Coltrane's health began to fail and on July 17, 1967 he died of liver cancer.

John Coltrane was an innovator, expansionist, and a free thinker. His work has inspired countless musicians across the globe bringing them into his own world of complexity and self-expression through the sounds of his own universal language.

"The quintessential statement of John Coltrane was that he was able to follow his own particular stream of evolution," Sunkett said. "I never got the impression that he was worried about the other music around him. He was setting the pace as opposed to following the crowd."

Must-have jazz:

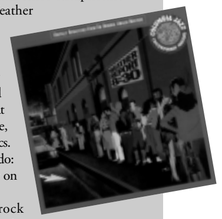
Ten albums self-respecting jazz listeners need to have in their music collections

Compiled by SPM reporter, jazz-lover and all around music-enthusiast Dan Marek, KJZZ program director and DJ Blaze Lantana and ASU Jazz professor and musician Mark Sunket. This collection, listed in no particular order, is designed to enhance your appreciation for or help you discover the wonder that is classic jazz music.

Weather Report — *8:30*
Columbia/Legacy
Recorded January 1979

By far one of the best electric albums ever recorded.

Spawned from the depths of Miles Davis' projects, keyboardist Joe Zawinul and tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter formed Weather Report to bring new ideas to a younger generation in the 1980s.



In fact, in the reissue liner notes of *8:30*, Zawinul said of Davis' electric sound "That was my sound! Through me, he got turned on to electronics. That's what good musicians do: good people turn each other on to good things."

The mix of jazz and rock brought this band to the mainstream market and boosted an interest in jazz once again.

Bassist Jaco Pastorius, voted as "Best Bass Player" by *Bass Player Magazine*, wooed audiences with his unbelievable techniques and modern rock quotes including Jimi Hendrix' "Third Stone From the Sun" in "Black Market."

This live album (originally a double LP) also features the band's hit "Birdland" with punchy riffs and techniques that make the quintet sound like an octet.

Other memorable selections from the album are "A Remark You Made," "Teen Town," and "Slang."

Modern Jazz Quartet and Friends — *Celebration*
Atlantic Records
Recorded June 17, 1992 – July 16, 1993

This 40th anniversary album reinvents MJQ's bop standards with brilliance and clarity.

The first track, "Bags' Groove" features Bobby McFarrin and Take 6 singing amazing skat vocals with Milt Jackson's soothing vibraphone sounds that are sure to grab your ears. John Lewis' piano solo accents.

The album also features guest appearances by Phil Woods, Wynton Marsalis, Illinois Jacquet, Harry "Sweets" Edison, Branford Marsalis, Freddie Hubbard, Jimmy Heath and Nina Tempo.

Bassist Percy Heath lays out the bass lines with true form, but since drummer Connie Kay was sick during much of the recording, he is only featured on seven of the 13 tracks.

Drummer Mickey Rucker fills in quite nicely on the tracks as does Phil Woods on "Django" and "Bags' Groove."

Wynton Marsalis' solo on "Cherokee (Indian Love Song)" is exceptional and still allows plenty of room for Lewis to improvise in the foreground. Marsalis then sets up Jackson for another great vibe solo that flows in and out of Lewis and Wynton's styles brilliantly.

This album may be considered simply a "fun collaboration" for the true MJQ enthusiasts, but it is a great way to hear so many great musicians playing the bop stylings that made them famous.

Stan Getz and João Gilberto — *Getz/Gilberto*
Verve Records
Recorded March 18-19, 1963

Known for its hit single at the time and the "elevator song" today, "The Girl from Ipanema" is by far Getz' most famous work.

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