

Free Jazz and John Coltrane

Speaker: David Sharp

During the decade of the 1960s, artists of all artistic disciplines sought more freedom and individuality in their work. The decade saw the emergence of the American civil rights movement, Vietnam War protests, and an anti-establishment ideal. Creative jazz musicians began to question the rules governing traditional performance practices. Free jazz, or the more radical term avant-garde, implies almost total spontaneity where the improvisational process is the guiding principle, which is often abstract and esoteric to the listener. The most important musician of the 1960s was saxophonist John Coltrane (1926-1967). Encompassing many aspects of hard bop, free jazz and the avant-garde, Coltrane had by far the greatest impact during the decade and became the single most influential instrumentalist in post-modern jazz.

Free jazz originated in the mid-1950s among a group of musicians who rejected the conventions of bebop and post-bop styles. This revolutionary approach to jazz performance was first exhibited in the music of Charles Mingus and others and was developed and established by alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman during the late 1950s.

General Characteristics of Free Jazz and the Avant-Garde

- A preference of dissonance over consonance; usually atonal sounds
- Open or free forms
- Often dense musical textures and high energy playing
- Collective improvisation is often used
- Tunes are sometimes complete improvisations
- Melodic phrases tend to be uneven and fragmented
- Sometimes an avoidance of steady tempo and/or an abandonment of jazz swing feel
- Bands often utilize unusual and varied instrumentations
- Players often use unorthodox sounds such as squeaks, squawks, screams, and noise
- Drones are used at times
- Abstract expression: music for music's sake

The Ornette Coleman Quartet

During the late-1950s, Ornette Coleman (1930-2015) organized a piano-less quartet with trumpeter Don Cherry, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Billy Higgins that played a radical style called free bop. Coleman composed tunes with bebop-like melodies, which served as heads that lacked pre-set chord progressions. Soloists were able to improvise without having to follow any preconceived chord progression or set formal structure. The group's daring and often dissonant sound became very controversial. And although Ornette's wailing saxophone tone and seemingly rough technique shocked many critics and listeners (some even accused him of being a fraud), others recognized the wit, sincerity, and creativity that characterized his playing. Ornette became very influential to many post-modern

saxophonists and today, many feel that he is as significant an alto saxophonist in modern jazz as Charlie Parker.

Three of the quartet's albums set the stage for jazz of the 1960s: *Something Else* (1958), *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), and the landmark *Free Jazz* (1961) which featured a double quartet (with the addition of trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, bass clarinetist Eric Dolphy, bassist Scott LaFaro, and drummer Eddie Blackwell). Ornette Coleman's approach and musical philosophy on these particular recordings inspired a whole school of avant-garde jazz that flourished in the 1960s and '70s.

Taken at a very fast tempo, "Eventually" opens with the Head, which is an angular melodic bop line without any pre-set chord changes – Coleman and Cherry play their own simultaneous variations of this melody. This opening material serves as a springboard for intense solo statements by Cherry, Coleman, and drummer Billy Higgins before the concluding Head. Coleman is playing an alto saxophone that is made of plastic and Cherry is playing on an unusually designed pocket trumpet. They chose these instruments to play purposefully "out-of-tune." [*Listen to "Eventually" by Ornette Coleman Quartet*]

Ornette's pioneering experiments inspired numerous free jazz and avant-garde musicians of the 1960s and beyond, including saxophonists Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Sam Rivers, and Anthony Braxton, trumpeter Lester Bowie and The Art Ensemble of Chicago, the iconoclastic pianist Cecil Taylor, and the Sun Ra Arkestra.

John Coltrane

The genius of tenor saxophonist John Coltrane (1926-1967) lays in his philosophical and spiritual approach to music. Coltrane's deeply felt religious beliefs served as the foundation of his serious and uncompromising approach to jazz improvisation. Coltrane was always searching for the ultimate truth in music and in life. Always self-critical, Coltrane was never merely self-indulgent, nor did he see himself as an entertainer (although he did enjoy some commercial success). Coltrane transcended bop clichés. He constantly investigated how far his music could take him – how much could he play on a single chord or harmonic sequence.

Coltrane was undoubtedly the single-most innovative and influential saxophonist in post-modern jazz. His dazzling technique, incredible endurance, and expeditious velocity, was described by the noted jazz critic Ira Gitler in the late-1950s as "sheets of sound."

Coltrane's impressive musical virtuosity is evident on his 1959 *Giant Steps* album. Much of this the landmark album is based on tunes highlighting complex bebop harmonies. This is considered his last great bop statement. [*Listen to "Giant Steps" by John Coltrane*]

While much of his playing is identified with speed and intensity, he could play gently with beautiful lyricism and passion. He introduced many yet undiscovered techniques to saxophone performance, including the use of multiphonics (playing more than one pitch at a time), false fingerings that created new saxophone timbres, and the use of screaming and screeching. Most notably, he extended the saxophone's upper range to new heights – the first to play extensively in what is called the instrument's

altissimo register. He also popularized the soprano saxophone as a solo instrument, an instrument that had been rarely used in jazz.

Coltrane's first major exposure was with Miles Davis's "classic quintet" of the late 1950s. It was while playing with Miles that he is said to have "heard his voice." It was evident that Coltrane had mastered traditional harmonic and bebop-based approaches to jazz. Feeling expressively confined by the standard fare of bop and now inspired by the freer modal concepts of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* sessions, Coltrane left Miles and became the greatest exponent of modal and free jazz during the early 1960s. His new quartet with pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison, and the propulsive drummer Elvin Jones became one of the most important small groups in modern jazz.

In 1960, Coltrane recorded the album *My Favorite Things*. This was the debut of this new quartet and introduced many new rhythm section accompanying methods. On "My Favorite Things" (from the Broadway musical *The Sound of Music*), Coltrane, inspired by East-Indian music, re-harmonizes the popular song with a single mode and has the rhythm section play a repetitive drone (sometimes referred to as a rhythm pad). Coltrane's improvisations on this open form is a free harmonic and rhythmic exploration. [\[Listen to "My Favorite Things" by John Coltrane Quartet\]](#)

The 1964 *A Love Supreme* shows the very spiritual side of John Coltrane. The four-part work was conceived as a musical prayer. "Acknowledgment," the first part, is based on the C mixolydian mode. There is no main melody (or head), but rather it is an "open form" based on a simple 4-note motif ("a-love-su-preme") which is first heard in the bass and is chanted near the end. Coltrane's improvisations, as well as the rhythm section's accompaniment, are driven by almost pure emotion. [\[Listen to "Acknowledgment" by John Coltrane Quartet\]](#) and [\[Watch "Impressions" from Jazz Casual\]](#)

By 1965, Coltrane was finding improvisations based on modes confining and pursued even freer structures. Investigating deeper into avant-garde concepts, Coltrane formed a new group with drummer Rashied Ali and, his wife, pianist Alice Coltrane that delved deeply into the spiritual avant-garde.

The evolution of Coltrane's artistry shows a continuum from the extremely advanced and intellectual theory of bop-based music, to the almost completely free and purely emotional output of his last musical quests. He had a deep impact, not only on jazz musicians, but on rock musicians, contemporary "classical" composers, and even on artists in other disciplines. Coltrane truly mastered every aspect of jazz improvisation. Many musicians and scholars feel that John Coltrane took the art of jazz improvisation to its furthest point. This is demonstrated in *Expression*, the last studio album recorded by Coltrane before his death in July of 1967. [\[Listen to "Offering" by John Coltrane\]](#)