

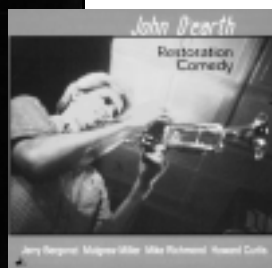
HEROES OF THE CREATIVE SPIRIT:

# John Coltrane



*During the year 1957, I experienced by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life...*

— JOHN COLTRANE (SEPTEMBER 23 1926–JULY 17 1967)



## John D'Earth on Coltrane:

John D'earth of Charlottesville, Virginia, is an internationally recognized jazz trumpeter and composer. He has appeared on over forty CDs, records and film scores, and has performed all over the world. His latest release is *Restoration Comedy*. For more about John and his

playing schedule, see [www.johndearth.com](http://www.johndearth.com).

The whole idea of 'Trane's music being a vehicle for some spiritual message or quest...there's no question that that's what it was for *him*. He stated that over and over again, and in fact, in the 60s a lot of writers tried to get him to cop to a political dimension of his music and he never would. But there's no question that there *was* a political dimension to it—it couldn't help but be, because people even thought of his music as very anti-jazz, anti-swing, anti-beauty. At first he was like the anti-Christ of jazz and really made people angry. People would say, "You're making very angry music, would you like to explain?" and he would basically say, "It hurts my feelings that you think my music is angry because I'm just interested in beauty." He'd actually leave his audience behind. They'd just be shaking their heads, saying "We don't get it," but off he'd go. It wasn't about the audience.

But as far as his music being a vehicle, the bottom line of that is, if it's any kind of vehicle at all, for anything, it's because of the intense amount of musical preparation that went into it, and that's what's easy to forget. And I think that that's true of any spiritual stuff—people get really into this idea of "spiritual" and they forget that it's grounded in this world: you gotta work, it takes discipline, commitment, and dedication, having a goal. 'Trane himself said something really great on the back of one of his recordings, "We practice so that when the doors of perception open, we're prepared to step through."

BY GREG KELLY

**F**rom the years 1957 to 1967, the late jazz saxophonist and composer John Coltrane created a body of musical works which would come to both revolutionize his medium and influence nearly every genre of music to follow. In ten short but prolific years, the musician challenged both his audience and critics time and again by redefining his sound, his influence, and the very structure of his medium.

It was in 1957 that Coltrane, following an extensive battle with heroin addiction, came to find God at the center of his efforts. Already established as a significant contributor in the field of jazz, Coltrane pushed still further into the language of music, diligently seeking to access something more pure, beautiful, and essential to the voice of his instrument and spirit. These new-found convictions were reflected in his insistence upon daily practice, both musically and spiritually.

*My goal is to live a truly religious life, and express it in my music. If you live it, when you play it there is no problem because music is part of the* > PG 14

*whole thing...My music is the spiritual expression of what I am, my faith, my knowledge, my being.*

In the ten years before his untimely death in 1967, Coltrane's music was in constant transformation. He integrated influences from East Indian, African, and Northern European traditions and practices, culminating in sounds which had never before been heard in jazz. These various influences became an integral part of his own daily practice, drawing upon meditation, chanting and scripture in his pursuit and service to both the Creator and the Muse. The musician's tireless exploration seemed to stem from a need to refine, more acutely, his sound as well as his very nature.

*There is never any end. New sounds to imagine. New feelings to get at, and always there is the need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds...so that we can see more and more clearly what we are...I want to be a force that is truly good.*

Coltrane's own life ended on July 17, 1967, following illness brought on by complications of the liver. Although the artist has gone, his offerings remain and continue to be honored. Some even consider him a saint, and his music living scripture. The Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco celebrates the late creator by performing "A Love Supreme"—Coltrane's most revered work—in its entirety each Sunday morning. It is a living liturgy of sound and worship, the music itself a spiritual transmission.

I read somewhere that Hemingway ruined more writers than anybody else because his style was so easy to imitate without really seeing what was underneath it. And that's very true of jazz musicians with 'Trane, too. First of all, as a young person, it's easy not to understand the depth and complexity of all the components that go into making Trane's music what it is technically, theoretically, musically, and to just hear the emotional sweep and the human questing vibe, and to just start doing that too. Someone might say, "I don't have to practice my scales and chords, I'm just gonna blow, I'm going for the intensity." And more and more through 'Trane's life that seemed to be what he was going for—stripping away forms, stripping away everything extraneous to just that sound in the universe... as a result, his band basically quit on him!

When I was 13 or 14 and first hearing 'Trane, I couldn't stand it. More than just "I don't like this man's music"—I *hated* his music. It was just a bunch of noise. I thought people were saying they liked it because they thought it was hip. And then I was sitting home one day listening to "Milestones," a Miles Davis record that 'Trane is on—and this is one of the most amazing things that ever happened to me. It was like a little enlightenment experience. You could say it went from black and white to color, or whatever, but the best metaphor for what happened I came up with later in life: those computer graphic things that you look at and they're flat, and it just looks like a Jackson Pollack painting, and then you cross your eyes and at a certain moment you suddenly see the 3-D image? That's exactly what it was like. So then I sat there listening to 'Trane solos for hours! Ever since then 'Trane symbolized to me "reaching beyond." I have to say that 'Trane is probably one of the major influences not just in music, but in my life.