

JOHN H. BRACEY JR.

The Coming of John, with Apologies to W. E. B. Du Bois and Amus Mor

“John,” she said, “does it make every one—unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?”

He paused and smiled. “I am afraid it does,” he said.

“And, John, are you glad you studied?”

“Yes,” came the answer, slowly but positively

—*W. E. B. Du Bois*, *Souls of Black Folk*

I FIRST SAW COLTRANE live at Birdland in New York City, during the summer of 1959. I was working as a potwasher/waiter at Camp Sea Breeze, located on the south coast of Staten Island. This camp for unwed mothers and children up to the age of twelve was run by the Community Service Society, under the directorship of the head of the School of Social Work at Howard University. My older sister was a counselor and I got my job in the kitchen. Due to an early socialization by my older cousins in Chicago, I had known of Coltrane through some of his work with Gene Ammons and Johnny Griffin, both hard-bop tenors from Chicago, and of his current role in the Miles Davis Quintet.

After growing up in Washington, D.C., upon arriving in New York I soon learned that New Yorkers thought D.C. was socially and culturally part of the Deep South. I was warned not to go to Manhattan, where I'd face the possibility of becoming hopelessly lost, or being attacked and robbed by street gangs who would recognize me by dress and speech as easy prey. What rescued my social status was my love of jazz, and my awareness of the importance of John Coltrane. One of the older (i.e., early twenties) Black camp counselors had a copy of *Monk's Music* which, in addition to the striking cover photo of Thelonious Monk sitting in a child's red wagon, featured John Coltrane and Coleman Hawkins on tenor saxophones. This is the session where Monk cuts short his opening solo on “Well You Needn't,” catching Coltrane off guard and necessitating Monk's famous shout of “Coltrane, Coltrane.” After a brief hesitation,

Coltrane comes roaring in. Sitting on the bunk beds or floor of our dorm room we holler and slap five with each other, playing that short segment over and over so we can join Monk in calling forth the best tenor sax player on the planet. Monk's voice, Coltrane's name, Coltrane's solo. For a jazz-loving teenager it couldn't get any better than that. But it did.

Wally Whitehead, fellow kitchen worker, and my self-appointed guide through the perils of Manhattan, informed me that Miles Davis was playing a stint at Birdland with Coltrane on tenor, and we had to go. I reminded Wally that I was still seventeen and couldn't get into a nightclub that served alcohol. Wally looked at me in disgust, then said I guess we'll have to sit in the "peanut gallery," which was an area up and back away from the bandstand that was designated "no alcohol." Wally was annoyed that he couldn't be cool and sip Scotch. I cared more about the music than the alcohol or appearing "hip" to overly self-important New Yorkers.

It was the standard Miles Davis small-group set: familiar pieces, short, five to seven minutes top, tight ensemble opening and close, solos technically brilliant, but not too far out. Coltrane clearly was constrained by the format and would be cut off by Miles and Cannonball Adderly when Miles thought the time limit for the piece was nearing. On at least two occasions Miles and Cannonball moved in on Coltrane from both sides and began to play the theme over Coltrane's solo, forcing him to join in the closing. Sharing what we saw as Coltrane's frustration, we muttered to ourselves, *Let him play, let him play, he was just getting started.* We went back to Camp Sea Breeze, and put on *Monk's Music*.

The next summer, Wally and I went again to the Randall's Island Jazz Festival. In an amazing stroke of luck I ran into an acquaintance from D.C., Tom Hoover, who went to Banneker Jr. High with me and was now playing for Villanova's basketball team. He had extra tickets for the second day of the festival, allowing Wally and me to come back and see John Coltrane again. Coltrane had left Miles Davis and was in the process of assembling his own groups.

Sitting high up in the cheap seats I heard Coltrane play "My Favorite Things" for the first time. Wally and I didn't recognize the sound or the instrument. We knew it wasn't a tenor, but it sounded a bit different from a clarinet. I told Wally I was going down front, so I could see what Coltrane was playing. Doing what would be impossible in today's world, we came down the stairs, walked onto the field and got near enough to the bandstand to sit down on the grass and watch Coltrane play what looked like a golden clarinet. I later learned that it was a soprano saxophone and that

Sidney Bechet had played one. To someone raised on bebop, Sidney Bechet might as well have been Beethoven.

The sound and the song never left my head, and when I returned to D.C. I spent a year going to record stores singing/humming the melody to “My Favorite Things” and asking for the John Coltrane version. All I was offered were soundtracks to a Rodgers & Hammerstein musical set in the Alps in Austria. No, that wasn’t what I was looking for. Coltrane’s best-selling album entitled *My Favorite Things* was not released until the spring of 1961. I bought four copies, two of which I kept in the back of my closet in case of damage or theft. Every morning after awakening I played my record player. The song lasted thirteen and a half minutes, which gave me time to wash, dress, gulp down breakfast, and get out the door to class. It was the perfect way to begin each day.

Later that year, 1961, Coltrane brought a group to Abart’s Jazz Mecca on U Street. This was the ensemble that included two bass players: Steve Davis and Jimmy Garrison. Abart’s was a small crowded upstairs club. The bandstand was backed into a corner and always seemed too small for whatever sized group. I went, hoping to hear “My Favorite Things” live once again. On this evening the piece opened with a very brief statement of the melody by Coltrane, who then yielded to the piano, drums, and the two basses, one arco, one picked, producing an increasingly dense body of sound that seemed to fill up the club, like water in a bathtub. Coltrane actually put his instrument in its case, and sat under the piano at the front of the bandstand while the sounds swelled up around him and throughout the club. The windows were open, but that didn’t seem to quell the feeling that you were going to be suffocated with sound. When it seemed that there was no space left in the room for another note or phrase, Coltrane reassembled his soprano and fingered a few scales sotto voce. He stood up, and with tremendous power and beauty blew in, through, and around the walls of sounds that filled Abart’s. His solo lasted at least twenty minutes, and every time we thought he was coming to a conclusion by stating the melody, he would take off again with a run of notes and phrases each more thrilling and complex than the last. By this time, we were shouting and screaming in encouragement, bearing witness to acts of creation that in a few years would become “normal” or expected, what frightened critics would deride as noise and “anti-jazz.” No, this was not Coltrane practicing in public or playing out of control. This was a master musician who could play hard bop with the best of them, play ballads that would put Smokey Robinson to shame. I wasn’t

sure where this journey was going, but it was a trip worth taking.

All of this took place before the March on Washington, the Birmingham bombings, the onset of annual summer rebellions, the rise of Black Power and a new Black consciousness. Coltrane had not made a speech or written a manifesto, but you knew he was a part of a breaking away from the old, a charting of some path to new ways to create, think, and live. You didn't have to make music that stopped after five minutes to sell soap on the radio or to meet the time constraints of half-hour sets. You could play until you had completed or exhausted your ideas or vision. There were people who would listen as long as you wanted to play, and not walk out, check their watches, complain about "why does he play so long." This was not art as entertainment or celebration of what is. This was art as raising possibilities of worlds unseen and yet unrealized. This was art that demonstrated that you could abandon or tear down old assumptions, and build beauty from the wreckage. John Coltrane, of course, never said that this was what he was doing. He was a humble man, but I know what I felt.

MY GOING TO Chicago in the fall of 1961 to resume my college education at Roosevelt University was one of the most important decisions in my life. Viewed in one way, I was going home to the city of my birth. In retrospect I was breaking away from the constraints of life on the campus of Howard University, and the limitations, comfortable though they might have been, of the world of E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie*.

The cultural offerings in the Black communities of Chicago's South and West Sides were available to me in ways that were not possible in Washington, D.C. The anonymity of life in such a large city meant I could experience a range of musical expressions without having to negotiate inter- and intraracial impediments. You attended what you liked and the other members of the audience accepted the sincerity of your interest with no questions asked. The choices included rhythm and blues at the Regal Theater or dance halls, blues, gospel music at churches or high school auditoriums on Sunday afternoons, and jazz.

When Coltrane came to Chicago I went as often as possible. My most vivid memories are of McKie's, a jazz club/lounge off of 63rd and Cottage Grove Avenue on the South Side. By this time my interest in Coltrane's music had taken on a unique meaning which I still have difficulty putting into words.

I always went alone to hear Coltrane. If I was on a date, I would go to the Regal Theater for the Chi-Lites, Jerry Butler, or Motown. If the

interest was jazz, it would be to hear Miles Davis, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, the Horace Silver Quintet, or locals such as Ahmad Jamal, Ramsey Lewis, Gene Ammons (before his incarceration on drug charges) and Sonny Stitt, the Joseph Jarmen/Roscoe Mitchell Quartet (before the four evolved into the AAC, etc.), or Phil Cohran and the Pharaohs, who played what is now called “world music” with African, Middle Eastern, and Asian influences.

When I went to hear Coltrane, I went as much to learn as to listen. The experience was one of enlightenment, rather than entertainment or escape from the problems of the world. My ritual at McKie’s involved arriving early and getting a table off-center from the bandstand. (Watching Coltrane empty the spit valves of his saxophones was not a pleasant sight.) There also was the danger of being covered with shavings from the numerous pairs of drumsticks that Elvin Jones went through during the evening. Jones’s drum kit was center front next to Coltrane and, in addition to the snowflake-like shavings that drifted through the air from time to time, there was the danger of being hit by a drumstick when it splintered in half and went spinning off into some undetermined direction.

McKie’s had a cover charge that you paid at the door, and a two-drink minimum for each of the three sets. Given the length of some of the pieces, sometimes the difference between two and three sets was hard to determine. I solved that problem, and that of being interrupted by the waitress asking me to buy the drinks for the next set, by purchasing six drinks, usually beer, which I placed in groups of two, with a tip for each set under one of the bottles. That way I, sitting alone, could listen undisturbed for the entirety of the evening.

To follow Coltrane through one of the many lengthy and complex solos on *My Favorite Things*, *Greensleeves*, *Inch Worm*, or *Afro Blue* required your undivided attention. The ballads played after the emotionally charged atmosphere generated by the aforementioned pieces were similar in form and purpose to the slow chants that took place in a Baptist or Pentecostal church after a moving sermon or gospel song. Coltrane would play “I Want to Talk About You” or “Every Time I Say Goodbye” so you could get your head back together, return from the journey you had embarked upon, settle down so you could go back out into the world that still exists and not the one you had heard and felt a glimpse of. It is difficult to describe music in words without using the technical terms that have meaning primarily for other musicians or trained musicologists. I will not attempt to go any further in that regard.

I WILL OFFER two special memories that reveal glimpses of Coltrane's character. Like Samuel Delaney, whom I met when he joined the faculty of the Comparative Literature Department at the University of Massachusetts, the radical intensity and ferocity of some of Coltrane's most important creations stood in sharp contrast to the gentleness, humbleness, and shyness of his personality.

In the winter of 1965 I went to McKie's in a blizzard to hear John Coltrane. My thinking was to get to the club before the storm intensified, park on a side street to avoid a city snowplow clobbering my Volkswagen, get a bag of fried shrimp from White's Shrimp Place next door, and enjoy the evening, warm and well fed. There were about twenty people in McKie's who shared my strategy. The only problem was that Coltrane had not arrived in Chicago. He was in midflight on a plane from New York headed for O'Hare Airport. On a warm, dry day O'Hare is a forty-five-minute to one-hour drive from the South Side. In a snowstorm who knew how long it would take for Coltrane to arrive, if he could make it at all.

We intrepid followers (my cousins used the word idiots) decided to wait until the plane landed before making a decision about whether to try to make it home. If Coltrane was coming, we would be there. The owner's wife offered to refund the cover charge and let us have the drinks for free, if anyone wanted to leave. We all stayed. Coltrane called from the airport, said the group was on the way, if the club was still open and people were waiting.

Almost two hours after the first set was to start at 9 p.m., about 11 p.m., Coltrane's classic quartet, this time accompanied by Eric Dolphy, arrived. Trane wore a light brown sheepskin coat, collar up, no hat. None of the group—McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, Elvin Jones, Eric Dolphy—were dressed for a performance.

Trane, Dolphy, and Tyner went straight to the bandstand and began playing. Jones had to set up his drum kit, which took about twenty minutes or so, then he joined the others. Garrison took his bass into the kitchen to get it warm so he could tune it safely without breaking the strings. None of the group had eaten since they had left New York, and they took turns going next door to White's to get sandwiches, fries, hot drinks.

The horns were fantastic. Dolphy and Trane both played more than one instrument: Dolphy—flute, alto sax, and bass clarinet, Trane—soprano and tenor sax. They changed instruments several times within each piece to produce a variety of tones, moods, and textures. Dolphy was the first to leave the bandstand to eat. Trane, with or without a full rhythm section,

kept us mesmerized. He could have played for hours without being boring or repetitive. Dolphy returned and Trane left the bandstand. As great as Dolphy was, he was not John Coltrane. After about twenty minutes or so, Dolphy began playing nursery rhymes, “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” etc. We’re starting to laugh. What is he doing? Dolphy then goes into what can only be described as a call for help: “din da, din da, din da, din da.” After a few minutes Coltrane comes through the door, with a fish sandwich in his hand, laughing and calling to Dolphy, “I heard you, I heard you. I’m back.” Dolphy had been blowing “Coltrane, Coltrane, Coltrane.” As Dolphy gladly put down his horn and headed for a chair and a glass of water, Trane picked up his tenor and went into an Ammons/Griffin/Stitt medium-tempo blues that had everybody feeling good.

When the whole group had settled in, Trane announced that since he came late the band wouldn’t take breaks. They would play the sets continuously, so we would get our money’s worth. Then they played nonstop for over two hours.

Coltrane didn’t owe us anything. If he had said that the group was exhausted after the flight and they were going to their hotel to rest, that would have been okay. He came. The warm-up songs, done with partial and changing personnel, were way beyond anything we could have expected or hoped for. I still remember the looks of desperation on Dolphy’s face as he was running out of energy and repertoire; the smiling, laughing Coltrane in the sheepskin coat, with a fish sandwich in his hand. When Coltrane played, he always was so serious and focused: it was good to see that he had a relaxed, playful side. That awareness meant as much to those in the room as the music. He wasn’t some bitter, angry black man who made harsh, difficult music out of hatred and despair. Coltrane was a great artist in pursuit of a vision. And at the level of fish sandwiches, snowstorms, and friends in “distress,” he was like us.

THE FINAL MEMORY is of one of the most extraordinary expressions of kindness and generosity toward a stranger that I have ever witnessed by an artist of Coltrane’s stature. Again, an evening in McKie’s, the classic quartet. This time I came late from political work and had to take a seat at the long bar that ran from the side of the bandstand to the kitchen and dressing rooms.

Coltrane had finished a beautiful set, finished up with a ballad on tenor, and was walking behind the bar to his dressing room. As he approached us, he looked at me and a young white man sitting next to me, and said, “Did

you like the set?" I'm thinking, "You're John Coltrane. Why would you care whether I liked your music or not?" What I stammered out with was "Yeah, it was boss, I'm still floating." The white guy said, "Mr. Coltrane I made something for you, would you please accept it?" It was a leather pouch that contained a hand-carved wooden flute. Trane slid it carefully out of the pouch, fingered the holes, put it to his lips and blew a few notes. Then he added: "This has a nice sound; if you had given it to me earlier, I could have worked it into one of the sets." Trane nodded his acceptance, put the flute back in the pouch, and went on his way. The guy next to me looked at me, saying several times, "You heard him, you heard him, John Coltrane said he was going to play my axe. Right, right, you heard him." I said, "Yeah, that's what he said, that's what he said."

My fellow Coltrane fan looked like he was suspended in air above the barstool the rest of the evening, and never stopped smiling.

It was that kind of gesture, as well as the music and its implications, that help account for the influence that Coltrane exercised over a broad swath of my generation. When I came to UMass and met Archie Shepp, Reggie Workman, and Yusef Lateef (who all worked with John Coltrane), they confirmed my impression of both the significance of his achievements, and of his humility and generosity of spirit.

LIKE MALCOLM X, John Coltrane is widely acknowledged one of the touchstones of the movements toward black consciousness and a new black aesthetic. Black Arts poets had to have both a Malcolm poem and a Coltrane poem. In the political and cultural movements I was most active in, during the decade and a half from the onset of the 1960s through the first half of the 1970s, an awareness and appreciation of both Malcolm and Coltrane were key determinants of the level of your consciousness. With few exceptions, if you didn't like at least some of Coltrane's music, I was likely not to continue talking to you.

I still get great satisfaction out of introducing students to the music of John Coltrane. Over the years I have students tell me that what they remember most from a class was that I turned them on to John Coltrane. When I teach a course on culture, students still move through the same range of reactions when I play the gamut of approaches to "My Favorite Things" from Julie Andrews in *Sound of Music*, the classic Coltrane quartet, and the final versions with Pharoah Sanders and Alice Coltrane.

At the time it was not clear why John Coltrane assumed such an iconic stature to me and to others of my generation, as we underwent

a change in consciousness, from being Negroes to being Black or Afro-American. During the years after Coltrane's passing I came to realize that what made the greatest impact on me was the initial break with the "cool" of the 1950s, represented by the music and style of Miles Davis, but best embodied in the elegance of the Modern Jazz Quartet. There were other artists whose individual rebellions began with the onset of civil rights activism in the U.S. and anti-colonial struggles abroad. The relevant works of Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, Sonny Rollins, Charles Mingus, and Randy Weston are well known to the most casual student of post-World War II jazz. I loved the music of Thelonious Monk, but his resistance seemed too individualistic to help shape a group consciousness. The same could be said of Roland Kirk, who I also never passed up a chance to see perform. He was quite a marvel—with the strange horns, the pennywhistle, the corny banter, the bad jokes. I was glad when he stuck to the wonderful sounds he produced.

Beginning in the late 1950s with "My Favorite Things," Coltrane began the process of stripping away the foundations of music as I had learned them. It was John Coltrane who first demonstrated to me that you could take a simple Broadway show tune and make it into a beautiful, complex, ever-evolving anthem of change. In the decade from 1958 to 1967 John Coltrane produced a body of work whose influence is still with us, whose paths still being explored. By the time Coltrane had jettisoned the melody, harmony, bass-drum-piano background and freed members of his ensemble to create in the absence of those constraints, we arrive at *Live at the Village Vanguard Again*. The theme to "My Favorite Things" appears midperformance, after an opening barrage of group improvisation. The break was complete, the future was unknown, but not to be feared. I kept track of Trane's music, buying all the available recordings. But, with the exception of *A Love Supreme*, none of the work of the last years moved me as much as the earlier works. Perhaps if I had heard it performed live I would have felt differently.

John Coltrane left a lot more music than words. One quotation that I came upon a few years ago sums up my experiences: "The main thing a musician would like to do is to give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things he knows of and senses in the universe." I was fortunate enough to witness some of the most magnificent and moving of John Coltrane's "pictures" as he painted them with sound.

John Coltrane died in 1967, on July 17, my birthday.