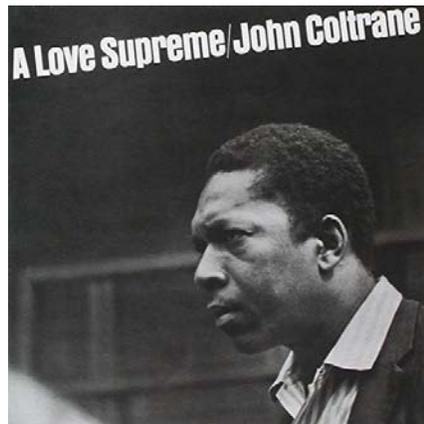


“A Love Supreme”—John Coltrane (1964)

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Essay by Lewis Porter (guest post)*



Original album cover



Original label

As John Coltrane’s approach to improvisation changed and as his quartet evolved during the 1960s, he relied less and less on planned musical routines. In a 1961 interview with Kitty Grime, Coltrane said, “I don’t have to plan so much as I learn and get freer. Sometimes we start from nothing. I know how it’s going to end—but sometimes not what might happen in between. I’m studying and learning about longer constructions. If I become strong enough, I might try something on those lines.”

“A Love Supreme” is his best known effort along those lines. Recorded December 9, 1964, the album clearly was important to Coltrane. It’s the only one for which he wrote the liner notes and a poem.

Coltrane had come to see his music as an extension of his religious beliefs. But one doesn’t have to be religious to find Coltrane’s expression profoundly moving and important. His ‘60s music, though mostly improvised, is tightly structured despite those who consider it an undisciplined, formless expression of emotion. The structure of “A Love Supreme” suite, for example, is not simply abstract but is partly determined by his religious message.

The four sections—“Acknowledgement,” “Resolution,” “Pursuance,” and “Psalms”—recreate Coltrane’s own progress as he first learned to acknowledge the divine, resolved to pursue it, searched and eventually celebrated in song what he attained.

The first part is improvised over the repeated bass motif with no set chorus length. We don’t realize until the end of “Acknowledgement” that this motif means the words “a love supreme.” Coltrane prepares us for this near the end of his solo by playing the motif in each of the 12 keys and in various registers. He finally plays in unison with the bass in F and chants “a love supreme.” It’s a sort of reverse development, saving the exposition, or perhaps “revelation” in this case, for the end. He’s telling us that God is everywhere—in every register and in every key—and he’s showing us that you have to *discover* religious belief.

Much of the melodic and harmonic material of the entire suite is derived from this bass ostinato, and from the pentatonic scales that it implies, F-A \flat -B \flat -C-E \flat . The key scheme, F-E \flat -B \flat -C, is symmetrical. F to E \flat is a whole step, E \flat to B \flat is a fifth, and B \flat to C is a whole step. The inner two movements, E \flat and B \flat , are in a relation of I-V, as are the other two, F and C.

“Psalm,” the fourth part of the suite, is perhaps the most profound. Coltrane plays thoughtfully over a rhythmically free background featuring droning bass and piano, and Elvin Jones on tympani. But what does it mean? Coltrane explained it in his own album notes. He writes, “The fourth and last part is a narration of the theme, ‘A Love Supreme,’ which is written in the context.” He does not mean the musical theme of “A Love Supreme,” the melody of the chant in Part One, although his playing is highly pentatonic so it naturally has much in common with the bass part. He means the literary theme of the poem, which also has that name. He is reciting the poem on his saxophone, one note for each syllable.

His playing expresses the meaning of the words: serene on the word “beautiful,” shouting out “He always will be.” Each section of several lines has an arch shape—an ascending phrase, a recitation on one tone, and a descending phrase. The recitation tones ascend as the piece builds in intensity.

Coltrane’s poem is punctuated with the frequently recurring words “Thank You God.” He plays these words as a minor third or fifth descending to the tonic, resembling formulas used by black preachers for such phrases as “Yes, He did” and “Oh, Lord.” Coltrane uses this formula every time the words “Thank You God” appear, except for two cases in which he ascends to the tonic from below. Either way, “God” always returns to the tonic.

At the last word of the poem, “Amen,” he clearly plays “Amen” on his sax. Coltrane adds a flourish only on that final word. He also added overdubbing to make a bigger, more dramatic ending. A special “Super Deluxe—Complete Masters” edition of the album including “Psalm” without overdubbing and many alternate takes was released in 2015.

“A Love Supreme” is the definitive statement of the musical and spiritual aspiration of this quiet, unassuming man.

Lewis Porter, Ph.D., is a jazz pianist and Emeritus Professor of Music at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ, where he founded and directed the Master’s program in Jazz History and Research. He is the author of the book “John Coltrane: His Life and Music,” among many other works, and, as of July 2018, he has appeared on 27 albums, including “Beauty and Mystery” with Terri Lyne Carrington, John Patitucci, and Tia Fuller.

[This essay is based on material from Porter’s book, a version of which appeared in “Downbeat” magazine in February, 1998.]

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.