

# John Coltrane and the integration of Indian concepts in jazz improvisation

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## Abstract

John Coltrane was at the forefront of many important directions in jazz in the 1950s and 1960s, including 'hard bop', 'modal jazz', 'avant-garde jazz', and 'world music'. One interest that became an increasingly dominant focus for him in his later years was the study of Indian music and spirituality. While Coltrane's music remained firmly rooted in jazz, this exploration was an important part of the development of Coltrane's personal style from the early 1960s to the end of his life in 1967. A number of factors inspired Coltrane to explore Indian music and thought, and an investigation of specific applications of these ideas in his music will present some insight into his stylistic motivation. His incorporation of Indian ideas also inspired many other musicians, such as John McLaughlin, Dave Liebman, and Jan Garbarek, to pursue this direction, and it remains an important part of his legacy.

**Keywords:** Coltrane; crosscultural improvisation; Indian music; world music

John Coltrane was at the forefront of many important directions in jazz in the 1950s and 1960s, including those that have been labeled hard bop, modal jazz, avant-garde jazz, and world music. One interest that became an increasingly dominant focus for him in his later years was the study of Indian music and spirituality. While Coltrane's music remained firmly rooted in jazz, this exploration was an important part of the development of Coltrane's personal style from the early 1960s to the end of his life in 1967. My intent here is to compile the available information regarding Coltrane's interaction with Indian music and thought in order to present a coherent discussion of his role in introducing Indian elements into jazz. Using this as a starting point, I will expand upon the existing research by reconsidering some of the relevant issues. These include Coltrane's notes on Indian *ragas*;

his study of Indian music with Ravi Shankar; Coltrane's own discussions of his interest in Indian music; his use of Indian ideas in the names of many of his compositions and in the texts that he used to accompany his music; Indian derivations of some of the melodic, harmonic, and structural ideas that Coltrane used in his compositions and improvisations; and Coltrane's legacy as a source of inspiration for many musicians who later incorporated Indian concepts into their own music.

From the late 1950s, Coltrane increasingly employed a modal approach, releasing his music from the confines of jazz chord changes. While this loosening of harmonic boundaries may have provided him with a greater sense of freedom, it also seems to have prompted him to explore other forms of structure. Michael (Salim) Washington notes that 'without the concerns of harmonic modulation, the improvisers in [the North Indian classical] tradition must exhibit melodic inventiveness, rhythmic flexibility, and stamina, which were exactly the attributes that marked Coltrane's solos with [the classic quartet<sup>1</sup>]' (Washington 2001: 234). Coltrane's search for structure led him to the study of Indian and other non-Western scales and modes. The notes copied from Coltrane by his cousin, Carl Grubbs, include details of some Indian *ragas* (Porter 1998: 210). These notes indicate that Coltrane understood at least some of the fundamental concepts of Indian music, particularly the idea that a *raga* is more than just a scale. His notation of the *raga* Bhairavi, for example, shows the different ascending and descending structures. While Bhairavi uses the same notes as the Western Phrygian scale, he correctly indicates that the fifth scale degree is omitted in the ascent and included in the descent (see Example 1).<sup>2</sup>

He also shows an awareness of *rasa*, the Indian concept assigning a mood and time of day to a *raga*, and uses such labels as 'Morning, Sad' and 'Evening, Gay' in place of the names of the *ragas*. In 1961, Coltrane considered his use of Indian ideas to be 'more or less subconscious' (Porter 1998: 209),<sup>3</sup> and his music does not seem to exhibit a literal use of Indian *ragas*. Nonetheless, elements of Indian music are evident in much of his later playing, composition, and conception. According to Washington (2001: 234), the North Indian classical idea 'that music could have quite

1. What is commonly referred to as the 'classic quartet' is Coltrane's group with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones.

2. The full structure of *raga* Bhairavi is actually somewhat more complicated than Coltrane's notes indicate, but his awareness of differing ascending and descending structures is significant.

3. From an interview with Michiel de Ruyter, November 11, 1961.



and more interested' (Farrell 1997: 191). Coltrane had intended to spend six months studying with Shankar in 1967, but died before this could take place (Farrell 1997: 191).

Coltrane also developed an interest in Indian religion and philosophy. Though raised in a Methodist household, Coltrane did not consider himself to be specifically Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or any other single faith. However, by the mid-1960s, the religion and philosophy of India took on a special importance for him. This is evident from the titles of such compositions as 'Om' (1965, *Om*) and 'India' (1961, *Live At the Village Vanguard*). Lewis Porter notes that Coltrane 'made a special study of India', including the writings of Paramahansa Yogananda and Mohandas Gandhi (Porter 1998: 259). Bill Cole states that Coltrane was aware of the works of the South Indian spiritual teacher and philosopher Krishnamurti and practiced yoga (Cole 1993: 97).

Coltrane also held a mystical view of the power of music, which he considered to have the potential to affect human emotions and influence the physical world around him. One example of this is his interest in the Indian concept of *rasa*, the 'emotion or mood' of a *raga* (Khan and Ruckert 1991: 350). In an interview with Nat Hentoff, Coltrane said that he had 'already been looking into those approaches to music—as in India—in which particular sounds and scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings' (Porter 1998: 211).<sup>6</sup> His ideas regarding the magical quality of music are evident from the following statement:

I would like to discover a method so that if I want it to rain, it will start right away to rain. If one of my friends is ill, I'd like to play a certain song and he will be cured; when he'd be broke, I'd bring out a different sound and immediately he'd receive all the money he needed. But what are these pieces and what is the road to travel to attain a knowledge of them, that I don't know. The true powers of music are still unknown. To be able to control them must be, I believe, the goal of every musician. I'm passionate about understanding these forces. I would like to provoke reactions in the listeners to my music, to create a real atmosphere. It's in that direction that I want to commit myself and to go as far as possible (Porter 1998: 211).<sup>7</sup>

This same concept appears in a variety of Indian stories about the power of music. O. Gosvami writes that, when properly performed, 'the *Raga* is

6. From Nat Hentoff's notes to *Coltrane 'Live' At the Village Vanguard*.

7. From Jean Clouzet and Michel Delorme, 'Entretien avec John Coltrane', *Les Cahiers du Jazz* 8 (1963): 1–14.

believed to have the power to move the elements in nature, in man and in animal', citing examples of performances in which Rag Dipak generated intense heat and Rag Megha brought on torrential rains (Gosvami 1961: 245).

Coltrane's interest in Indian spirituality was also a significant influence on some of his later music. Along with pieces such as 'India' and 'Om', many of his composition titles suggest broad spiritual concepts that might be associated with Indian and other religious thought. For example, the titles 'A Love Supreme', 'Ascension', 'Selflessness', or 'Meditations' all evoke Hindu or Buddhist imagery or concepts, though one might also associate them with various other non-Indian mystical religions. As Nat Hentoff writes, 'Coltrane became a theosophist of jazz... In this respect, as well as musically, he has been a powerful influence on many musicians since' (Hentoff 1976: 205).

In the piece 'Om', Coltrane's integration of Indian religion into his music is overt. The title refers to 'the sound that represents the reverberations of all creation in Hinduism' (Farrell 1997: 191). The group recites a chant at the beginning and end of this composition that was 'reportedly taken from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a classic poem of Hinduism' (Porter 1998: 256). The conclusion of this chant was: 'I, the oblation and I the flame into which it is offered. I am the sire of the world and this world's mother and grandsire. I am he who awards to each the fruit of his action. I make all things clean. I am Om-OM-OM-OM!'<sup>8</sup> (Porter 1998: 256). This is clearly derived from verses sixteen and seventeen of the ninth discourse of the *Bhagavad Gita* in which Krishna, who has revealed himself to the warrior Arjuna as the incarnation of the god Vishnu, explains how his divine essence permeates all things.

The first verse of this discourse reads: 'The Blessed Lord said: To thee who dost not cavil, I shall now declare this, the greatest secret, knowledge combined with experience, which having known though shalt be liberated from evil' (Sastry 1991: 238). Thus, in a general sense, the ideas of 'Om' may hold a key to the understanding of much of Coltrane's later work, in that he seems to be increasingly trying to break out of the conventional boundaries of jazz to express a universal consciousness. As Hentoff asserts,

8. See also <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=14286>, which states that 'According to John Page, posting to Coltrane-L on 19th October 1998: "The passage quoted in OM are [*sic*] from the 9th Book of the Bhaghavad Gita, and match the Prabhavananda/Isherwood translation word for word (p. 104). This translation is from the mid 40s, so it seems reasonable that this was the one used"'.

for Coltrane, 'the music was a way of self-purgation so that he could learn more about himself to the end of making himself and his music part of the unity of all being' (Hentoff 1976: 205). The expansion of intensity in his work could be seen as a reflection of Hindu teachings. Nisenson writes that 'the point of [Coltrane's] music was, to use a now hackneyed Sixties phrase, to "expand the consciousness" of the listeners, to create nothing less than a transcendent religious experience. The spiritual burden borne by the Indian musician is certainly something to which Coltrane could relate' (Nisenson 1993: 111).

While it is clear that Coltrane looked to Indian music and thought in the formation and augmentation of his musical and spiritual conceptions, it is difficult to find literal uses of Indian musical ideas in his compositions and improvisations. He drew from a wide diversity of musical models, from which he forged a unique and deeply personal style. There are instances, however, where the parallels in his music are strong enough to suggest a possible Indian source. Some of the structural elements of his music suggest at least a partial Indian derivation, including the use of a drone, ideas of melodic development, and rhythmic and metric elements.

As suggested earlier, Coltrane's connection to modal jazz provided an opening for him to integrate musical ideas that would not have worked in a complex set of chord changes. He first began to explore modal jazz with Miles Davis in the late 1950s, and by the time he recorded 'My Favorite Things' in 1960, it was apparent that this harmonically static approach to improvisation was becoming a crucial element in Coltrane's evolving style. In later recordings such as *Om* (1965) or *Ascension* (1965), he seemed to abandon conventional concepts of harmonic structure entirely. During this time, his music expresses a kind of transcendent religious ecstasy, sometimes incorporating prayers or chants.

The Indian use of the drone was a significant influence on much of Coltrane's music after the late 1950s. He makes use of this concept as early as 1959 in his composition 'Naima', which Coltrane describes as being 'built...on suspended chords over an Eb pedal tone on the outside. On the inside—the channel—the chords are suspended over a Bb pedal tone'.<sup>9</sup> Cole (1993: 110) observes that 'the tonic and dominant are used in the drone from which improvisations are developed, just as in the music of India'. Indian classical music, which features the drone accompaniment of the *tanpura* playing sustained roots and fifths, stands out as a likely model

9. From Nat Hentoff, *Giant Steps*. Quoted in Cole (1993: 110).

for these innovations. 'India' (1961, *Live At the Village Vanguard*) provides a more overt reference to the Indian drone. In this piece, which is probably derived from an Indian Vedic chant (Porter 1998: 209),<sup>10</sup> a G pedal point is used throughout. Coltrane uses this drone-like pedal point in other tunes as well, such as 'Psalm' (1964, *A Love Supreme*), 'After the Rain' (1963, *Impressions*), and 'Chim Chim Cheree' (1965, *The John Coltrane Quartet Plays*).

Coltrane often employed a form of structural organization in which he would explore the various permutations of limited sets of notes. This concept is known as *vikriti* in India, and has been integral to Indian music since the Vedic period (1500–500 BC).<sup>11</sup> Coltrane was using this concept as early as 1957 while playing with Thelonious Monk. Miles Davis noted that Coltrane would 'play five notes of a chord and then keep changing it around, trying to see how many different ways it can sound' (Nisenson 1993: 53).<sup>12</sup> This shared stylistic element between *vikriti* and Coltrane's use of permutations suggests an early affinity with Indian music.

The *alap* of North Indian music also seems to have inspired Coltrane in some of his work. *Alap* is the free-meter introductory portion of a performance of Indian classical music. In the development of the *alap*, the performer explores the various ways he/she can arrive at the successive notes of the *raga*. At times, Coltrane would similarly focus a portion of his improvisation on a single note. In 'Psalm' (1964, *A Love Supreme*), the entire piece is somewhat reminiscent of an Indian *alap* both in its free-meter presentation over a bass drone and its tendency to continually return to the tonic. While this concept is not uniquely Indian, the drone and free-meter presentation point to the Indian *alap* as a likely inspiration.

'Song of Praise' (1965, *The John Coltrane Quartet Plays...*) also exhibits features of Indian *alap*. Lewis Porter (1998: 246) observes that this piece shows an affinity with the 'recitation tone' used by black American preachers. While this is a valid interpretation of this passage, it is also useful to consider how the passage connects to Indian music. Coltrane's style was so eclectic that pinpointing any single source for any of his ideas is difficult

10. This composition, according to Bill Bauer, may be based on a Vedic chant from the Folkways album *Religious Music of India* (New York: Folkways 4431, 1952, recorded by Alain Danielou). See also Soniya K. Brar's elaboration of this concept in her Master's thesis 'Transculturalism and Musical Refashioning: The Use of Hindustani Musical Element in the Works of John Coltrane' (Austin: University of Texas, 2000): 72–79.

11. George Ruckert, personal correspondence, September 2000.

12. Apparently quoted from an interview by Nat Hentoff with Miles Davis, though Nisenson provides no further information about the interview.

or impossible. One can certainly hear a multiplicity of styles reflected in Coltrane's performance. However, given the numerous other Indian inspirations in Coltrane's life and music (and specifically in 'Song of Praise'), one must consider Indian music as at least a partial source of the structural approach to this piece. Porter himself notes that Coltrane 'was a Methodist and may not have grown up with this [Black American recitation] kind of preaching. Somehow he picked it up'. Given the degree to which Coltrane was investigating Indian music and thought, the idea of *alap* as a structural source should not be overlooked.

Like 'Psalm', the entire piece is presented in free meter over a bass drone. 'Song of Praise' creates a further parallel with the first part of a North Indian *alap*. In Hindustani *alap*, the performer employs a kind of note-by-note development in which he or she first establishes the tonic, then systematically introduces each important note in the *raga* until the middle-register tonic is stated. In this form of development, many other notes are employed, but one note serves as a point of emphasis for each phrase or section. In Example 2, which shows how the first part of 'Song of Praise' reflects this feature of *alap*, Coltrane's performance is divided into numbered phrases, each of which cadences to the circled note (the phrase number can be found over each circle). As with the Hindustani *alap*, he first emphasizes the tonic D in the lower register in line A phrase 1. Phrase 2 resolves to G a fourth above D. Phrase 3 returns to the lower D. Phrase 4 reintroduces the G first emphasized in Phrase 2, which forms an integral part of the ascending line; phrase 5 states the fifth (A); phrase 6 establishes the major seventh (C#); and phrase 7, after touching the high G, resolves to D in the middle register. Thus he has used the notes D, G, A, and C# to establish an internal structure resembling that of Hindustani *alap* development.

Beginning at line C phrase 8, Coltrane repeats the systematic note development of lines A and B, as can be seen from the circled notes in phrases 8 through 14. This time, however, the cadences are more elaborate and embellished, and culminate on the upper register tonic in line D phrase 15. After this second systematic development, he explores the highest register of the instrument and treats his phrases and cadences in a much freer manner over the instrument's full range. This repetition of the ascending note development is suggestive of the typical progression of a full presentation of *alap*, in which note-by-note development is repeated with increasing intensity.

Very slowly, very loose free time John Coltrane

Example 2: Excerpt from John Coltrane's solo in 'Song of Praise'  
(transcribed by Carl Clements)

A further structural element in 'Song of Praise' that parallels Indian music appears in bassist Jimmy Garrison's free-meter introduction. This solo makes extensive use of pedal point in several ways. Of particular interest is his alternation between moving lines and pedal point, as shown in Example 3a. This bears a close resemblance to the use of *bol* patterns played in the *jor* section of *alap* by players of the Hindustani *sitar*, as shown in Example 3b. In this excerpt from Ravi Shankar's performance of Rag Malkauns (1965, *Sound of the Sitar*), he maintains a C# pedal and, as is typical of this style of playing, alternates rhythmically between stroking the fixed pitch *chikari* drone strings and playing melodic patterns on the main strings.

Example 3

a. Excerpt from Jimmy Garrison's solo in 'Song of Praise'  
(transcribed by Carl Clements)

b. Excerpt from Ravi Shankar's Jor in Malkauns  
(transcribed by Carl Clements)

Some of Coltrane's rhythmic ideas also seem to be inspired by Indian music, particularly his use of unconventional time signatures. *Tala* is the guiding rhythmic principle of the classical music of India. According to Jairazbhoy, 'the term *tala*, perhaps best translated as "time measure", is conceived as a cycle' (Jairazbhoy 1995: 33). This cycle may theoretically consist of any number of beats, and *tala* consisting of five, seven, or ten beats are very common. In Coltrane's 1965 recording of 'Nature Boy' (1965, *The John Coltrane Quartet Plays...*), the tune is first stated in free meter, then the rhythm section begins to play in 10/4 meter for the improvisational sections. The regular use in Indian music of odd meter *talas*, such as the ten-beat *jhaptal*, is a likely source of inspiration here. The broad cyclical feeling of this ten-beat cycle is suggestive of the Hindustani music of Ravi Shankar, to which Coltrane was listening seriously by this time. Indeed, many of Coltrane's performances around this period convey a strong sense of cycle. Salim Washington asserts that Coltrane's most important contribution to the use of elements of Indian music in jazz was his 'expansion of [the] time frame for improvisation, spiritual intensity and ethos'.<sup>13</sup> Elvin Jones plays an important role in establishing this feeling, and this aspect of his playing is probably a large part of the reason for Coltrane's preference for this ground-breaking drummer.

While Coltrane was probably the most influential jazz musician to explore Indian ideas in his music, he was not the only jazz musician of his time to do so. In fact, in 1960 Coltrane himself states: 'I like Eastern music; Yusef Lateef has been using this in his playing for some time' (Coltrane and DeMichael 1960: 27). He does not clarify whether or not this 'Eastern' music is specifically Indian, but Nicholson writes that Coltrane's early interest in Indian music was 'probably because of Yusef Lateef's influence' (Nicholson 1998: 86). John Mayer led a group called Indo-Jazz Fusions, which released its first album in 1966, and Harihar Rao and Don Ellis were co-leaders of a group called the Hindustani Jazz Sextet. According to Farrell, both bands were operating in the mid-1960s (Farrell 1997: 192). It is difficult to say whether these groups were directly inspired by Coltrane, but it is probable that they were aware of his interest in Indian music. In the case of Indo-Jazz Fusions, it is noteworthy that the record company EMI approached John Mayer, a composer trained in Western classical music and Indian music, to put a band together for this project (Farrell 1997: 193). The fact that the idea was not a natural outgrowth from the musicians, but a

13. Personal correspondence with Salim Washington, March 4, 2009.

calculation by a record company implies that EMI was seeking to capitalize on a pre-existing public interest in Indian-inspired jazz. It would seem that the most likely sources of this public interest were John Coltrane and Ravi Shankar.

Shankar had been interested in jazz since the late 1930s, and had met many jazz musicians over the years (Shankar 1999: 53). Clearly, he was an important figure for many jazz musicians including, as previously mentioned, John Coltrane. In 1961 he recorded the album *Improvisations & Theme from Pather Panchali* (1961), on which he used jazz musicians Bud Shank (flute), Dennis Budimir (guitar), Gary Peacock (bass), and Louis Hayes (drums). In 1965, he recorded the album *Improvisations* (1965) with Paul Horn (flute), Bud Shank (flute), Ustad Alla Rakha (tabla), and Kanai Dutta (tabla). Coltrane had recorded 'India' in 1961, and 'Om' in 1965, so it may be that Shankar, who had provided a model for Coltrane, was in turn inspired by this revolutionary saxophonist.

Some other of Coltrane's contemporaries who used elements of Indian music in their playing and/or compositions were most probably following Coltrane's lead. Among these were Miles Davis, Pharoah Sanders, and Alice Coltrane. Miles Davis' excursions into Indian music are perhaps the least extensive of the three, and he might have been the least inclined to admit to emulating Coltrane. Nonetheless, he was very aware of Coltrane's own excursions into Indian music, and used Indian instruments on his albums *Big Fun* (1969) and *On the Corner* (1972/73). Sanders and Alice Coltrane were clearly inspired by John Coltrane, as they both played in his bands during his final years. Sanders has since gone on to make several recordings using jazz and Indian instruments, such as *Wisdom Through Music* (1972) with Indian percussionist Badal Roy; *Pharoah* (1976), which Alan Lutins describes as 'very raga-like' (Lutins: online); and *Save Our Children* (1998), which uses virtuoso Indian percussionists Zakir Hussain and Trilok Gurtu.

Alice Coltrane, who was John Coltrane's widow, gravitated very strongly toward Indian music and spirituality after her husband's death. While Lutins claims that Alice Coltrane first started using Indian music in her own music while studying under guru Sri Chinmoy (Lutins: online), it seems likely that this was the continuation of an interest fostered during her life with John Coltrane. She first met the saxophonist in 1963, after which she put her own music career on hold to travel with him on his tours. Due to John Coltrane's complications with ending his previous marriage, John and Alice did not marry until 1966. However, they had their first child together in 1964, and in 1965 they named their second child Ravi after Ravi Shankar. She began

actually performing with John Coltrane in 1965 (Porter 1998: 272). In a 1971 interview she said: 'All of my music is John. It's John's influence coming out on piano...' (Porter 1984: 44).

Her connection with her husband was simultaneously musical and spiritual. She says of John Coltrane that 'he always felt that sound was the first manifestation in creation before music. I would like to play music according to ideals set forth by John and continue to let a cosmic principle, or the aspect of spirituality, be the underlying reality behind the music as he did' (A. Coltrane and Rivelli 1970: 22). This statement is full of meaning in that it ties both her and her husband to a fundamental concept of Indian music and spirituality. Ali Akbar Khan refers to *Nada-Brahma* as 'the language of god' (Khan and Ruckert 1991: 247), and his student, George Ruckert, defines it as 'the understanding of sound itself as a divine aspect of cosmic reality' (Khan and Ruckert 1991: 317). To illustrate this, Ruckert quotes a prayer from the thirteenth-century Indian musical text, the *Sangitaratnakara*:

We adore that Supreme Being of the form of sound which is the one bliss without a second, and the light of the consciousness in all beings that has manifested itself in the form of the universe. By the adoration of sound are also adored the Gods Brahma [the Creator], Vishnu [the Preserver], and Shiva [the Destroyer], for they are the embodiments of sound.

After her husband's death, Alice Coltrane continued to play music that employed elements of Indian music and spirituality. On her 1971 album *Journey in Satchidananda*, Alice Coltrane used John Coltrane's former band members Pharoah Sanders (sax) and Rashied Ali (drums), and made use of the *tanpura*, an Indian drone instrument. Many of her subsequent albums similarly made use of Indian instruments and concepts. She also became an advanced disciple of Swami Satchidananda and in 1975, founded the Vedantic Center in Northern California, and continued to maintain a deep connection with India throughout her life (Porter 1998: 297).

Many notable jazz musicians of the next generation also looked to John Coltrane's legacy in their explorations of Indian music. Three prominent examples are John McLaughlin, Dave Liebman, and Jan Garbarek. None of these musicians actually played with John Coltrane, but each acknowledges the significance of Coltrane's music to the development of their individual styles. This would seem to have played an important role in their integration of aspects of Indian music into their own playing and composing. These three musicians provide some sense of the range of Coltrane's influence, as they represent a variety of instruments and national origins.

The British guitarist John McLaughlin is himself a major figure in the fusion of jazz and Indian music. Farrell states that 'McLaughlin's interest in both Indian music and Indian religion goes back to the late Sixties, when he became a disciple of Sri Chinmoy, an Indian guru resident in the United States. He was also learning the *vina* at that time' (Farrell 1997: 195). However, Sri Chinmoy was clearly not McLaughlin's only inspiration in this area. This is evident from the fact that he 'grew up listening to what Miles [Davis] did with Trane [John Coltrane]' and refers to them as his 'personal heroes' (Primack 1996: 29, 31). McLaughlin was intimately familiar with the work of John Coltrane, and it is difficult to imagine that he was unaware of Coltrane's own explorations in the music of India.

Outside of jazz, McLaughlin had a long-standing interest in rock, blues, and jazz-rock fusion music. Early in his career, he played with both jazz and rhythm and blues bands. In 1969, he played on Miles Davis' 1969 albums *In a Silent Way* (1969) and *Bitches Brew* (1969), two recordings that virtually defined jazz-rock. But even his rock background would likely have led him to an awareness of John Coltrane. By the late 1960s, 'amid hip listeners' album collections of The Beatles, Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Country Joe and the Fish, Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Last Poets, and the mandatory Ravi Shankar LP, you were just as likely to stumble across a John Coltrane or Pharaoh Sanders album' (Nicholson 1998: 85). By this point, Coltrane's recognition had transcended the boundaries of jazz, and 'concerns with mysticism and spirituality equally led many rock musicians into the music of John Coltrane... By the middle to late 1960s, the way Coltrane dealt with modal forms had begun creeping into the playing of rock guitarists who were exploring modes as a basis for their long, psychedelic jams' (Nicholson 1998: 85).

Indian music became an increasingly significant component of McLaughlin's music as his career progressed into the 1970s. Both the name of his 1971 group, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, and his use of Indian instruments and ideas, illustrate the Indian element in his early recordings under his own name. The role of Coltrane in these explorations remains apparent in his collaboration with Carlos Santana on the album *Love, Devotion, Surrender* (1972), and Nicholson (1998: 150) describes this recording as 'a series of jams on Coltrane and Coltrane-influenced material'. As McLaughlin's career progressed, Indian music became an even more significant part of his music. In 1974, he formed the group Shakti, in which he was the only non-Indian performer. The other musicians were Zakir Hussain (tabla), Viku Vinayakram (clay pot), and L. Shankar (violin), all of whom were prominent

performers of Indian music in their own right. McLaughlin has continued to play Indian-inspired music to the present day, including a revival of the group Shakti with North Indian flutist Hariprasad Chaurasia replacing L. Shankar, and his 2008 album *Floating Point*, which features a number of Indian musicians.

Saxophonist Dave Liebman has always acknowledged the profound influence of John Coltrane on his playing. 'When I was with Elvin [Jones] and Miles [Davis]', states Liebman, 'I was classified as a Coltrane follower or imitator, and it was true' (Robinson 1994: 40). When Liebman was fourteen, he saw Coltrane perform. He refers to the experience as 'a definite revelation', and says that it was 'really the impetus and the inspiration to want to really play the saxophone in that kind of way: jazz' (Collins 1995: 19). As of 1994, he had recorded four Coltrane tributes (Robinson 1994: 40). Liebman played with former Coltrane drummer Elvin Jones for three and a half years, then joined the Miles Davis group in 1973. Regarding his group, Lookout Farm, he writes: 'Our models were the groups of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, Ornette Coleman, and others' (Lookout Farm 1978: 5).

Lookout Farm was probably Liebman's most overtly Indian-inspired group, in that tabla player Badal Roy is featured on the albums *Lookout Farm* (1974) and *Sweet Hands* (1975). Liebman states that he 'met Badal through a recording session with John McLaughlin, and from the gig with Miles [Davis]' (Lookout Farm 1978: 91). Thus it seems that Liebman was both directly and indirectly (through Davis and McLaughlin) inspired by Coltrane in his use of Indian musical elements. Of the album *Lookout Farm*, Nicholson writes that 'it remains a significant album through its "inclusive" approach by blending jazz-rock and World music elements together in a lyrically convincing way that suggested, perhaps more than Davis or any other group of the time, an important new direction for the music' (Nicholson 1998: 126). His 1975 album *Sweet Hands* also fused Indian and jazz elements. In Liebman's book *Lookout Farm* (Lookout Farm 1978: 89), he makes special note of the role of the tabla in the composition 'Sweet Hand Roy'. He writes that it was written 'specifically to explore the combination of Indian Tal and funk'. He also includes a transcription of the tabla part, along with a brief explanation of North Indian rhythmic syllables and notation. Clearly Liebman had a strong sense of the significance of Indian music for jazz. When asked in 1994 about the future of jazz, Liebman responded that 'we have to look past Europe to Asia—of course!—and then to Africa' (Robinson 1994: 40).

Coltrane also played an important role in the musical development of Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek. In a 1977 interview, Garbarek states that Coltrane was his main inspiration for learning to play the saxophone (Lake 1977: 1). His deep interest in Coltrane's music led him to explore 'the branches that came from him, Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp, and especially Albert Ayler' (Bourne 1986: 27). While one can recognize elements of Coltrane's playing in Garbarek's music, his approach is unique and personal. There is an edge to his sound on soprano saxophone that is somewhat reminiscent of the *shenai*, an Indian double reed instrument, and the bending and slurring in some of his playing resembles the fluidity of Indian music.

Garbarek's borrowings from South Asian music are readily apparent in the instrumentation of his album *Ragas and Sagas* (1990) with Pakistani vocalist Ustad Fateh Ali Khan, Ustad Shaukat Hussain on tabla, Ustad Nazim Ali Khan on sarangi, Indian vocalist Deepika Thathaal, and Manu Katché on drums. This is also the case with his album *Madar* from 1994, with Anouar Brahem on the Middle Eastern oud and Ustad Shaukat Hussain on tabla. The use of Indian elements in Garbarek's playing is particularly overt on the album *Making Music* (1986) by tabla player Zakir Hussain, which also features Hariprasad Chaurasia on North Indian bamboo flute and John McLaughlin on guitar. The tune 'Sunjog' is a clear example of this. In addition to slurring between notes (an Indian technique known as *meend*), Garbarek often adds upper grace notes in ascending musical passages. The effect here is much like the Indian embellishment known as *gamaka*, a term that 'refers to various types of embellishment; either based on individual notes (*svara*) or formed by groups of notes' (Pesch 1999: 308).

On Garbarek's album *Dis* (1976), the composition 'Vandrere' exhibits several characteristics that appear to link it to both Indian music and John Coltrane. The track begins with the sound of a windharp, which is 'an instrument with strings that are brought to vibrate by the wind, thereby creating tones and overtones, which, in turn, are enhanced in a resonant body' (Garbarek 1976). The sound and function of this instrument is very reminiscent of the Indian drone. Garbarek then enters with a series of long, sustained notes that create a feeling quite similar to an Indian *alap*. The first portion of this tune seems to parallel the approach used by John Coltrane on his recording of 'Song of Praise' in its rubato tempo, its use of the drone, and its systematic emphasis of individual notes in the ascending scale. By the time of these recordings there already existed many precedents for the use of Indian ideas in jazz, but it is clear that Garbarek's musical lineage can be traced directly back to Coltrane.

A number of musicians of South Asian origin or descent also point to Coltrane as an important source of inspiration for their own music. In many cases, their own cultural heritage, rather than the efforts of Coltrane, was the primary impetus for them to bring Indian ideas into their music. In the case of Rudresh Mahanthappa, there seems to have been some initial resistance to Coltrane's contribution. Gary Giddins (2009: 74) writes that Mahanthappa 'was wary of Coltrane's use of Indian ragas—ancient scales that, unlike Western ones, are wedded to drones rather than harmony, which doesn't exist in classical Indian music'<sup>14</sup>—and of his attempt to invoke the double-reed *shehnai* with his soprano saxophone'. In the same article, however, Giddins writes that Mahanthappa's tune 'Convergence (Kinsmen)' 'suggests some of the inspired interplay between Coltrane and Rashid Ali' (Giddins 2009: 75). Whether embraced or consciously avoided, clearly Coltrane's legacy remains a powerful factor here.

Rajesh Mehta, an Indian-American trumpet player and composer who lived and worked for many years in Europe, is currently in India working to establish ORKA-M: International Institute of Innovative Music. His goal is 'to create an international musical platform to tap the enormous resources within John Coltrane's music'. Coltrane's music has been an important inspiration for his own collaborations with Indian and Western musicians in his Trio ORKA-M ensemble, which also features Rohan de Saram on cello and Jayachandra Rao on South Indian percussion. For Mehta, 'Coltrane... is the pioneering 20th century instrumentalist whose music most deeply embraces the East-West musical dialogue'. He was influenced early on by Coltrane's recordings with Miles Davis, Don Cherry, and Lee Morgan. Unlike Mahanthappa, he embraced Coltrane's evocation of Indian double-reed instruments, and Mehta's collaborations with South Indian temple musicians inspired him to more deeply investigate 'Coltrane's nageswaram (South Indian double reed instrument used in Temple Music)-inspired phrasings and the Indian spiritual ethos emanating not only from Coltrane's deep understanding of sound but also his equally profound vision of creating modal musical architectures'.<sup>15</sup>

Rez Abbasi is a Pakistani-American guitarist based in New York who incorporates jazz and Indian music into his own style. He initially drew pri-

14. It should be noted, as I point out on p. 156, that an Indian *raga* is in fact much more than a scale, as Coltrane was aware. In Indian music, a *that* is the rough equivalent of a scale. Many distinct *ragas* can be generated from a single *that* through a combination of note emphasis, note omission, differing ascending and descending structures, thematic ideas, and many other variations.

15. Personal correspondence with Rajesh Mehta, March 21, 2009.

marily from Indian rhythms, but later got into ‘the subtleties of the scales’, largely because his wife, Kiran Ahluwalia, is a professional Ghazal singer and composer. He first studied Coltrane’s ‘Giant Steps’ period at the age of eighteen, but later became very interested in Coltrane’s modal period. Abbasi feels that this later period of Coltrane’s music really became ‘his [Coltrane’s] sound’, but didn’t initially hear it as being influenced by Indian music. Having grown up with South Asian music and culture, he had ‘different expectations’, but notes that he ‘can see if you don’t have an Indian background, how his version of “My Favorite Things” can evoke images of India’. Abbasi does not consider the theoretical aspects of Indian music to be particularly strong in Coltrane’s music, but believes that ‘what he did bring from India to jazz goes beyond theory. It is the nurturing of ideas and intent behind the notes. He started to really practice patience on the bandstand and that is an integral part of Indian music. He took his time with building the phrases, his quartet began to play modally and build from there’. Abbasi also notes that Coltrane ‘influenced players like John McLaughlin who took it in a different direction and incorporated odd meters and harmony with the Mahavishnu Orchestra. So it becomes a snowball affect and Coltrane opened the way’.<sup>16</sup>

Sunny Jain, an Indian-American drummer who has established a solid reputation in the New York and international scenes, has been exposed to both jazz and Indian music for most of his life. His influences ‘are primarily from North India because this is where my family comes from and hence, this is the music that I grew up with and still listen to... I utilize these sounds in a variety of ways while composing and performing’. As such, he doesn’t see Coltrane as his inspiration to blend jazz and Indian music. However, he observes that in his early arrangements and compositions, ‘many people would comment on how I was going for a “Coltrane thing”, which I never really was trying to do’. Jain’s first album, which he got when he was around twelve or thirteen years old, was Miles Davis’ ‘Round About Midnight’, featuring Coltrane. Later, when he was seventeen, Coltrane’s ‘A Love Supreme’ had ‘a serious impact’ on him. Jain has ‘no doubt that Coltrane was influenced by Indian music, studied it and absorbed the emotional purpose of the music’, and believes that Coltrane’s music shows many parallels with the Indian compositional forms known as *kriti* (South Indian) and *dhrupad* (North Indian). ‘Coltrane was clearly getting at music using this vehicle of composition...a modal approach to playing in which

16. Personal correspondence with Rez Abbasi, March 9, 2009.

he transformed from not focusing on playing jazz chord changes, but rather on delivering a single emotion, similar to a purpose of a raag'.<sup>17</sup>

Ranjit Barot and Amit Heri are two of the best-known Indian-jazz fusion musicians in India. Barot, a Mumbai-based drummer, composer, and music producer, is featured on John McLaughlin's recent release *Floating Point* (2008). While he comes from a musical family (his mother is Sitara Devi, one of the great Kathak dancers of the twentieth century), he says that he was first exposed to Coltrane's music before he seriously started studying Indian classical music himself. He was aware even then, though, that Coltrane was playing with modes, 'not unlike the raga music structures of Indian classical music...' What he was particularly struck by was 'the freedom that [Coltrane] and his band members could communicate. The aspect of exploring the moment was not so different from the "jam" sessions that took place in my house with some of the greatest musicians and my mother...'<sup>18</sup>

Amit Heri recalls a time when he was attending the Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA. 'I went into Tower records and bought every album of Coltrane I could find'. He 'listened to Coltrane a lot for many years' and dedicated his album *Amit Heri Group-Elephant Walk* to John Coltrane. 'For me', he says, 'Coltrane has the spiritual intensity, searching and connection that is common to many of the master Indian classical musicians that I grew up listening to. It is his energy and approach to life through music that resonates with the way of the Indian spiritual masters. Spiritual attainment through music. Needless to say, we all know the incredible music that came out of this journey'.<sup>19</sup>

While Coltrane was an important pioneer in the use of Indian elements in jazz, his efforts can be seen in the context of a long history of mutual borrowings between the Western world and India.<sup>20</sup> And as Edward Said has made clear in his book *Orientalism*, the appropriation and reinterpretation of non-Western ideas has been shaped by centuries of placing 'things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing' (Said 1979: 41). Indeed, much of the use of Indian music and ideas in Western music has played upon a sense of exoticism, and often misrepresents Indian culture. The often-superficial fashion of

17. Personal correspondence with Sunny Jain, March 22, 2009.

18. Personal correspondence with Ranjit Barot, March 21, 2009.

19. Personal correspondence with Amit Heri, March 23, 2009.

20. Gerry Farrell's book *Indian Music and the West* (1997) details many such exchanges.

appropriating Indian ideas for Western popular consumption that came to a peak in the late 1960s is to some degree still with us today.<sup>21</sup> Jazz musicians have not been immune from trivializing Indian music in their own attempts to capitalize on the popular appeal of the East, and Ravi Shankar himself said that 'from what we hear jazz has only borrowed a flavour. I like it, but truly we think it very childish' (Farrell 1997: 189). Indeed, this statement is true of many attempts at Indian-jazz fusion. Of course, the reverse may also be said in regard to many Indian musicians who have made use of jazz concepts in some of their own creative projects without first developing an in-depth understanding of jazz.

Coltrane's music, however, must be seen in a broader perspective. His understanding of the technical intricacies of Indian classical music seems to have been limited, as he never managed to fulfill his desire for an extended period of study with Ravi Shankar. However, Coltrane's borrowings are very much in keeping with similar appropriations throughout the history of jazz, which has drawn extensively from such sources as Latin American music, Western classical music, and American popular music. Eclecticism has long been a hallmark of jazz, to the degree that hybridity is arguably an essential part of its identity. While Coltrane did employ Indian ideas in his music, he rarely presented them in a literal way. Rather, he incorporated them into his own vision to the degree that they came to permeate his musical and ideological conceptions. He had a very intense and personal sense of spirituality, and much of what he saw in Indian music and thought supported his own vision. Coltrane embraced those elements of Indian music and thought that helped him to bring his music to a higher level. A literal application of Indian ideas would not have made sense within Coltrane's already highly developed style. Unlike the Orientalists, Coltrane did not appear to be making any claims about Indian identity, and by Coltrane's time, one did not have to draw exclusively from Western interpretations of South Asia. By the early 1960s, Indian music was being represented in the American cultural landscape by such towering figures as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan, and the depth and power of this music was something Coltrane could not ignore.

With India's ever-growing international role, its cultural presence is increasingly seen in musics as diverse as hip hop, jazz, Western art music, and background scores for movies and television. As the number

21. For further discussion of this idea, see Farrell (1997: 197), Bellman (1998: 298), and Clements (2005: 126).

of Indian immigrants has dramatically increased since the 1960s, Western perception of Indian culture has begun to move beyond the exotic and into the everyday. Coltrane's pioneering work with Indian conceptions in jazz nonetheless continues to stand out as a major achievement. When one considers his enormous impact on the beginnings of Indian-jazz fusion, it is evident that his spirit pervades the genre. The frequent use of odd time signatures, modality, and other Indian-derived concepts in present-day jazz illustrates how thoroughly his innovations have been integrated into this music. In this area, as in so many others, musicians of diverse backgrounds owe an enormous debt to John Coltrane.

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