

## John Coltrane – Ascencion (1965)

Written by bluesever

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### John Coltrane – Ascencion (1965)



1. *Edition II* 2. *Edition I*     John Coltrane — tenor saxophone     McCoy Tyner — piano  
Jimmy Garrison — bass     Elvin Jones — drums     Freddie Hubbard — trumpet     Dewey  
Johnson — trumpet     Marion Brown — alto saxophone     John Tchicai — alto saxophone  
Pharoah Sanders — tenor saxophone     Archie Shepp — tenor saxophone     Art Davis —  
bass

There are a number of pivotal recordings that fostered the early development of free jazz but Coltrane's *Ascencion* remains at the apex. Building on precepts first posited through Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* Coltrane constructed an edifice of unfettered collective expression that still manages to confound as many listeners as it convinces. My first experience with this music was accompanied by emotions of skepticism and even dislike. I'd read and heard plenty of its importance and influence, but after the opening minutes I found myself lost in a sea of cacophonous and seemingly adversarial voices. How could a single piece of uninterrupted, largely improvised music sustain such levels of intensity and focus for over forty minutes? Where were the conventional chordal jazz structures? These questions and many more assaulted my thoughts as the swirling tides of sound invaded my ears for the first time. To be honest my first half a dozen attempts to work my way through to the conclusion were met with defeat. But like anything worth investigating the logic and effulgence of this work eventually started reveal itself with repeated listenings. In the intervening years the elements I first mistook for anger and discord have exposed themselves as those of spirituality and unification. This is music that emancipates both players and listeners- it challenges at the same time it educates.

"*Ascencion*" starts out with an almost Mingusian ensemble statement of polyphonous horns and swaying rhythmic undercurrents. Brass and reeds leap majestically off a melodic edge and soar into collective shout before Coltrane pushes to the forefront for the first solo. Johnson, Sanders, Hubbard, Tchicai, Shepp and Brown follow in succession unstoppering a sustained flow of ideas that crash against the ears in white-capped, frothy waves. Each man steps to the pulpit, speaks his peace and is answered by an ensemble retort. Sanders is the most transcendently ecstatic

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and at the same time his solo is the most difficult to swallow, overflowing with molten overtones and chortling upper register squeaks. In sharp contrast Hubbard's exposition is the linear and restrained though it still feeds from and builds on the locomotive energy of his associates. After the litany of horns it's Tyner's turn and his solo, as in so many other instances during his tenure in Trane's core quartet, works effectively to pilot the battered and buffeted ship to more lyrical, but no less propulsive straits. The bass duet that ensues after another ensemble interlude is simply astounding. Arco and pizzicato meet in a twining pillar of lines that finds Garrison working through the Flamenco patterns that were a trademark of his technique and Davis cleaving off dark resonating streaks through his bow. An ecstatic ensemble reprise of the initial theme closes the piece out. A well placed extended pause prefaces the entrance of "Edition II" before the players start up again and follow a slightly different succession of statements.

Previous to this reissue, both versions of "Ascension" were available on separate discs of an earlier compilation, The Major Works of John Coltrane. The programming of this new offering places them side by side maxing out the disc's running time of just under 80 minutes. Compared to the earlier release the sound clarity, which was already sufficient thanks to engineer Rudy Van Gelder, is also markedly improved and the separation between instruments is better than ever before. Whether this bit of audiophile interest necessitates its purchase is up to the individual listener, but anyone who hasn't heard this music certainly owes it to him or herself to do so. ---Derek Taylor, allaboutjazz.com

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