John Coltrane Essay, Research Paper

John William Coltrane John Coltrane was one of the major innovators of contemporary jazz and the New Wave, which was a movement of more freedom in improvisation. John William Coltrane, b. Hamlet, N.C., Sept. 23, 1926, d. July 17, 1967, is considered one of the most influential jazz musicians of the past 35 years (only Miles Davis comes close), one of the greatest saxophonists of all time, and a remarkable innovator. Coltrane is a very interesting person because he traversed many styles of playing through the changing phases of his career. He began his career in big bands, played with Miles Davis in the late 1950s, and formed his own quartet in 1960. He became one of the leaders of a jazz movement, called the New Wave, that sought greater freedom from harmonic and thematic restrictions in improvisation. Coltrane created incredibly sustained periods of improvisation within the confines of a single chord or scale pattern– a style related strongly to Indian musical practice. His influence on modern jazz is considered second only to that of Charlie Parker ( John Coltrane Grolier). John Coltrane s free jazz style of the sixties was a sort of reflection of the mood of society. The turmoil in the world has been said to voiced through his improvisations (Anderson). Coltrane said, “I’ve found you’ve got to look back at the old things and see them in a new light” in a 1960 Down Beat magazine. The liner notes of his 1965 album Meditations noted that Coltrane sought to uplift people, as much as I can. To inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living meaningful lives. Because there certainly is meaning to life. He said, My goal is to live the truly religious life, and express it through my music (Hartman). His searching style of playing on a single chord for lengths thought not possible by critics and fellow musicians characterized him as a true leader of the decade. Nat Hentoff noted that Coltrane s trademark was his unique sound which bespoke a relentless search for perfection yet was always, even in the most elevated realms of abstraction, compellingly passionate and alive. (Severson, Keith s John Coltrane Page) This free jazz and avant garde he experimented with were two overlapping styles. The latter has more structure and sometimes follows arrangements. Free jazz, on the other hand, threw out conventional rules of pitch, rhythm, and development. Free jazz could be recognized by the musician s imagination and willingness to try almost anything. His early career really didn t kick off until joining the Miles Davis Quintet in 1955. Miles had confidence in the young tenor player, who battled such players as Sonny Rollins for accolades in the music community. In 1957 Coltrane was booted because of his heroin addiction. His first wife, Naima, converted him to the teachings of Islam and he quit the habit and joined Thelonious Monk s Quartet, during which time he recorded Blue Train (his first great successful album). When he rejoined Miles Davis in 1958, he was the most important tenor in jazz (Yanow). This period of his career was named sheets of sound by Ernest Hemingway in conversation with Jack Kerouac (Voyager). The sounds coming out of his horn were played at ripping speed. Arpeggios of chords flew forth faster than any before. Coltrane said himself, Monk was the first to show me how to make two or three notes at one time on the tenor…Monk just looked at my horn and felt the mechanics (Hartman The Trane Station ). During the rest of the fifties Coltrane signed with Atlantic and began recording classics like Giant Steps and Naima . Coltrane s sheets of sound phase was marked by his vertical and sailing lines. He played three chords in place of one and the notes would be so fast all that would be heard was an allusion of notes. He was a musical genius who understood scales and could play one chord with many substitutions, making for an endless possibility of solos. Examples of his changing styles during the sixties were truly evident through his performances of the song My Favorite Things by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein from the musical The Sound of Music. The song was performed at almost every concert Coltrane gave, making it a piece that tracks his development up until his death in 1967 from liver cancer. The personnel consisting of the Coltrane s quartet were: Coltrane on saxophones, McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass, Elvin Jones on drums, and occasionally Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet, flute, or alto sax. These performances were dubbed anti-jazz by several important critics. John Tynan said: I listened to a horrifying demonstration of what appears to be a growing anti-jazz trend exemplified by these foremost proponents of what is termed avant garde music (Ostransky 243).

His first, and only, studio recording of the song was in 1960. It was an interpretation and example of the new modally-based free jazz and avant garde styles(Anderson). His music became more than music; it was a religious experience, which was noted by Norman C. Weinstein (Anderson). The next performance of My Favorite Things by Coltrane s group was at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1963. His style here was seemingly not very different from the 1960 recording. The only difference in his solos was that they were more harmonically complex and variable than in 1960, but nothing like they would be later on (Anderson). The last performance by Coltrane s classic quartet at the Newport Jazz Festival was in 1965. Here, Coltrane s improvisations along with McCoy Tyner s piano playing are much more sophisticated and complex than in the past. Coltrane uses greater numbers of chord substitutions and different sax sounds, like multiphonics and altissimo. A fourth performance of My Favorite Things was made in Tokyo in 1966 by a new group. This group consisted of Alice Coltrane on piano, Rashied Ali on drums, and Pharoah Sanders as a second saxophone. Jimmy Garrison on bass and Coltrane were the only survivors from the classic quartet. This performance showed Coltrane s exploration of more freer styles. His solos last long amounts of time, as do the rest of the groups . As mentioned above the piece My Favorite Things tracks Coltrane s style change perfectly through the sixties. Jimmy Cobb, a one-time drummer for the Miles Davis Quintet said, . . . Coltrane would play all night, and come off in the intermission and go somewhere and play stand in a corner or something. You know, Miles had to make him stop, because be would play an hour solo himself, and we were only supposed to be on the stand for forty minutes or something. He had incredible chops he couldn’t stop. Miles used to say, “Man, look, why don’t you play twenty-seven choruses instead of twenty-eight?” Coltrane would say, “I get involved in this thing and I don’t know how to stop. (Hartman The Trane Station ) This was the true John Coltrane, he loved jazz so much he practiced until he was better than perfect. Coltrane was continually analyzing his playing and listening to others also. He would change when he felt like trying a new challenge and would express how he felt through his style. Critic Martin Williams said that Coltrane grew and developed more than any other horn man in jazz history (Erlich 230). Coltrane was in the public eye for only twelve years, but his impact is still being felt. Long time drummer for Coltrane Elvin Jones said If there s any such thing as a perfect man, I think John Coltrane was one. And I think that kind of perfection has to come from a greater force than there is here on earth. (Severson, John Coltrane) Young musicians still try to copy his innovations in the jazz field, but still can t be a part of the music as Coltrane was. His original approach to jazz has not been rivaled as of yet.

Anderson, Scott T. John Coltrane – My Favorite Things. n. pag. Online. Internet. 9 May 1997. Available: www1.sanderso.org/sanderso/ coltrane.html.Erlich, Lillian. What Jazz Is All About. 3rd ed. New York: Julian Messner, 1979.Hartman, Bruce W. Jr. The Trane Station. n. pag. Online. Internet. 9 May 1997. Available: geocities .com. Jazz . 1996 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia. CD-ROM. Grolier Interactive, Inc. 1996.Ostransky, Leroy. Understanding Jazz. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1977.Round About Midnight. n. pag. Online. Internet. 9 May 1997. Available: voyagerco.com/cdlink/voyager/miles/miles.html.Severson, Keith. Keith s John Coltrane Page. n. pag. Online. Internet. 9 May 1997. Available: www.acns.nwu.edu/jazz/artists/coltrane.john/.—. John Coltrane. n. pag. Online. Internet. 9 May 1997. Available: sdnet. com/ bydesign/coltrane.john/.Yanow, Scott. John Coltrane. n. pag. Online. Internet. 9 May 1997. Available: allmusic.com.