

THE COLTRANE PROJECT AT FOUNDRY 616

Reviewed by Ian Muldoon*

Artists:

Andrew Robson, alto; Peter Farrar, alto; Paul Cutlan, tenor and sopranino; Sandy Evans, tenor; Simon Ferenci, tpt; Tom Avgenicos, tpt; Alister Spence, piano; Lloyd Swanton, bass; Jacques Emery, bass; Toby Hall, percussion; (Jacques Emery was a late replacement for Jess Dunn).

[This performance took place at Foundry 616, Sydney, on Saturday, July 6, 2019. This review was submitted on July 9, 2019.]



Ian Muldoon (right) with bandleader Paul Cutlan at the gig on July 6, 2019...
PHOTO CREDIT RHYS MULDOON

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

This programme consisted of five works performed in two sections. The first section opened with a duo improvised performance by Hall and Cutlan mining late Coltrane, with a distinct nod to drummer Rashied Ali, followed by the only original composition of the night, *Three Channels* by Sandy Evans. Then *Ole* (Coltrane) and concluding the first half, *Dahomeny Dance* (Coltrane) the former by a septet, the latter by all members of the band, both compositions being from the Atlantic album *Ole*. The second half of the evening was dedicated to the performance of a single piece *Ascension*, which was recorded by Coltrane in July, 1965.



Toby Hall: a brilliant contribution made by him from beginning to end... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

The Music

Music is sound, but it is also a language which may be a complex universe of cumulatives, of history, of feelings, of cultural baggage, that can evoke in the listener a range of thoughts and feelings unique to that individual. A work such as John Coltrane's *Ascension* is such a work, and each of us will find ourselves responding on multiple levels to it, and bringing to it in turn our own personal experiences, knowledge and feelings. At the time of its release, notwithstanding the work of Ornette Coleman and others, *Ascension* was greeted with let me allow Dave Liebman to tell us*.

For those closely charting Coltrane's progress, for whom each successive album competed with his previous release, A Love Supreme was neither explosive nor surprising - impressive, certainly, but not as immediately jolting as the titles that preceded it. 'In those days in New York, it was like, A Love Supreme was just one album ...Ok, what's next?', says saxophonist Dave Liebman. 'I don't think it had the effect on the musicians as it might have had on the public a little bit later. I don't remember a gigantic buzz about it as much as would come with Ascension. I mean, Ascension blew everybody out of the water.'

*As related in Ashley Kahn's book "A Love Supreme: The Creation of John Coltrane's Classic Album", p 156, Granta Books, London, 2002.



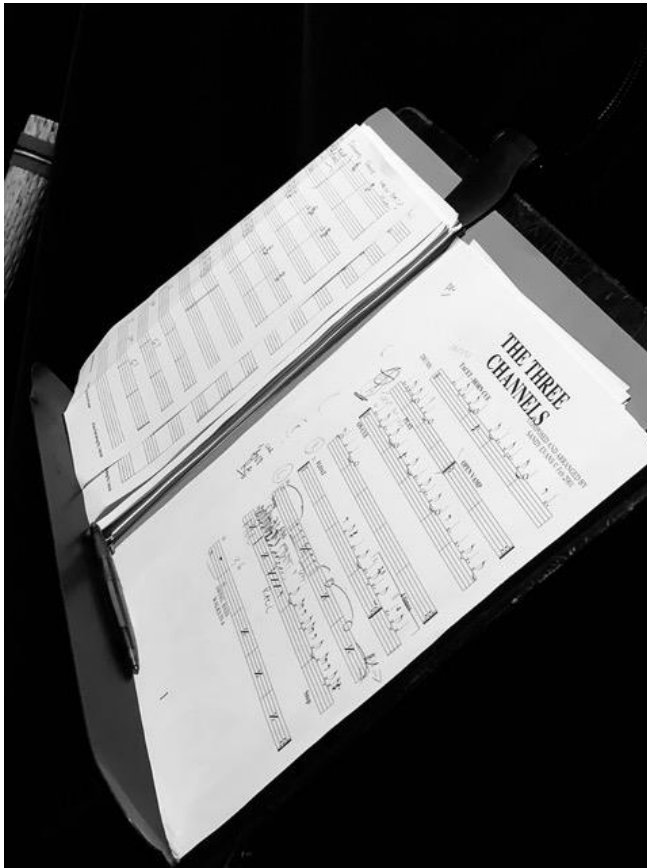
A Martini cocktail at Foundry 616, with (in the background) Andrew Robson, Sandy Evans, Toby Hall... PHOTO CREDIT RHYS MULDOON

Ascension was composed by John Coltrane and first recorded on 28th June, 1965 by Rudy Van Gelder and produced by Bob Thiele for Impulse!, with the following line-up: Freddie Hubbard and Dewey Johnson (trumpets); Marion Brown and John Tchicai (alto saxophones); John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Archie Shepp (tenor saxophones); McCoy Tyner (piano); Art Davis and Jimmy Garrison (double basses); Elvin Jones (drums). Ashley Kahn again:

Ascension had been released in the final weeks of '65 and was gathering momentum of its own. The collective tour de force culled largely positive critical reaction....and as Liebman recalls, 'was the torch that lit the free-jazz thing. I mean it literally begins with Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman in '59, but *Ascension* was like the patron saint saying, 'it's OK - this is valid.' I think that even had much more of an effect on everybody than *A Love Supreme*. Yet it also had a divisive and alienating effect. Coltrane's saxophone sound was changing dramatically,' writes

*Lewis Porter, pointing to 'a richer tone, with fuller vibrato...he also extended his altissimo range.. didn't hesitate to produce squeals ...(and) increased his control of multiphonics.' Dissonance and atonality were the new hallmarks listeners came to expect from his horn.'**

A B Spellman wrote of *Ascension*, "it begins on a plane at which most performances end and builds to a higher plane than the average listener considers comfortable."**



Sandy Evans' music stand, Foundry 616, 6th July 2019... PHOTO CREDIT RHYS MULDOON

I am not qualified to provide a musical analysis of the work, but can observe that it seems to me to be a perfect example of the confluence of collective improvisation supported and relieved by individual solo contributions by each of the musicians. There is an opening chorus by the group which is based in part on the *Acknowledgement* section of *A Love Supreme* with each solo section being bookended with elements of the chorus. Each solo by each of these astonishing musicians has a structure and logic and surge and release that keeps the whole grounded. It may be described as "free" jazz, but the descriptive "free" does not mean chaotic.

*Kahn, *ibid*, p 182

**Kahn, *ibid*, p 183

As we know, the first jazz bands were rooted in collective improvisations until the individual soloist was liberated by the likes of Louis Armstrong. And the call and response elements in *Ascension* - the solo followed by the glorious cries of the remaining band instruments - are elements that found their genesis in African singing and music, in the blues, in folk music of many cultures, and in antiphony. *Ascension* may have seemed “new” in 1965, but its structure is rooted in the beginnings of jazz.



Marion Brown, the alto saxophonist and composer, was one of the musicians assembled by Coltrane for his almost unbearably intense set of “free jazz”, *Ascension*. He recalls: “We did two takes, and both had that kind of thing that makes people scream. The people in the studios were screaming.”*

The Musicians

Because Coltrane was at the height of his fame in 1965, some five years after his startling January 1960 Atlantic debut *Giant Steps*, which followed the release of Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* in August 1959, on which he played a pivotal role, he had the pick of the cream of the New York modern jazz scene at that time.

* Nat Hentoff, in “Reading Jazz” by Robert Gottlieb (Ed), Pantheon Books, NY, 1996 p 626)

With the exception of Dewey Johnson, all the musicians on *Ascension* had world-leading roles in the music over subsequent years. Jimmy Garrison died of lung cancer at 42, and Coltrane died of liver cancer at the age of 40.

Paul Cutlan, composer, multi-instrumentalist, and the driving force behind the presentation of The Coltrane Project, might properly be called a modern artist (musician) rather than “jazz musician”, which seems today a limiting description of modern music masters such as Cutlan. Indeed, the name of one of the most influential “jazz” recording companies, Editions of Contemporary Music (ECM) may have nailed the zeitgeist in this regard. ECM began in 1969 with the recording of Mal Waldron’s *Free at Last*.



Composer & multi-instrumentalist Paul Cutlan: the driving force behind the presentation of The Coltrane Project... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

I recall some years ago at a chamber recital at the Art Gallery of NSW, ostensibly by “classical” musicians, that the music was contemporary and seemed neither “jazz” nor “classical”. Other musicians in the Coltrane Project such as Sandy Evans (known for her interest in Indian music); Lloyd Swanton (minimalist group The Necks); Toby Hall (master percussionist); Alister Spence and his work on film; and Andrew Robson’s mastery across a range of genres as well his international footprint; attest to the wide-ranging artistic interests of the contemporary musicians involved in this project.

Added to these established Australian masters were some younger rising stars: Peter Farrar (alto), Simon Ferenci & Tom Avgenicos, (trumpets); and Jacques Emery (double bass).

The Time: 1965

Operation Rolling Thunder, the USA starts bombing Vietnam.

Voting Rights Act, votes for minorities, by Lyndon Johnson, which the Department of Justice called the most significant anti-racist legislation ever (but not in those words).

Malcolm X assassinated.

Bob Dylan wrote “It’s alright Ma, I’m only bleeding, it’s easy to see without looking too far, that not much is really sacred.”

Sylvia Plath published *Ariel* which included the poem *Daddy*: “There’s a stake in your fat black heart; and the villagers never liked you.”

Possibly the most distinguished theatrical actor alive Laurence Olivier, played *Othello* in black face.

Archie Shepp released *Fire Music*.

Wayne Shorter released *JuJu*.

A B Spellman published the poems *Beautiful Days*.



Yours truly, snapped at the entrance to Foundry 616... PHOTO CREDIT RHYS MULDOON

The performance

In the context of 1965, Coltrane was composing and playing at a time of considerable social and political turbulence whilst confronting the personal challenges of African American racism, both structural and personal, as well as suffering ongoing health problems. It was within this crucible that *Ascension* was born. Coltrane had every reason to feel the rage of the time as was expressed in music by Mingus and Shepp, but anger was never Coltrane's driver. Passion yes, anguish, yes, yearning and pain, but no anger. The yearning for freedom and the beauty of the music and love and his spiritual beliefs drove him.



John Coltrane: the yearning for freedom and the beauty of the music and love and his spiritual beliefs drove him... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Paul Cutlan had one rehearsal of the musicians for the Coltrane Project. Paul spoke of the way Coltrane used modes and scales and strove for the stars in his playing. He created mystical sounds and different colours in his playing.

The night began quietly with the familiar shakers and sounds that Rashied Ali had used in his kit and moved into a duo performance with Cutlan. The night ended with the two bass players together in musical conversation, a high pitched ending, a held silence, and smiles.



Alto saxophonist Peter Farrar: his unique tone reminded us of the great Eric Dolphy... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

In between, highlights included the captivating contribution of Peter Farrar with his unique tone, reminding us of the great Eric Dolphy; the opening bass solo by Lloyd Swanton on Evans's *Three Channels*, which was as fine a few minutes of bass playing that anyone is ever likely to encounter; beginning at the very bottom of that instrument with such feeling and intonation, then referencing the late Jimmy Garrison, was enough to bring tears to the eyes; the harmony between Robson and Evans on soprano saxes in their contribution to *Ole*; Cutlan's soprano solo on *Ole* which he dedicated to the memory of Roger Frampton, playing on Frampton's now restored instrument; and to me the brilliant contribution made by Toby Hall from beginning to end; I had to marvel at the stamina of the man.

Each of the musicians gave his all this night in this performance and it showed. *Ascension*, meaning "ascent into heaven" indeed it was, but perhaps not exactly as intended by the great John Coltrane.