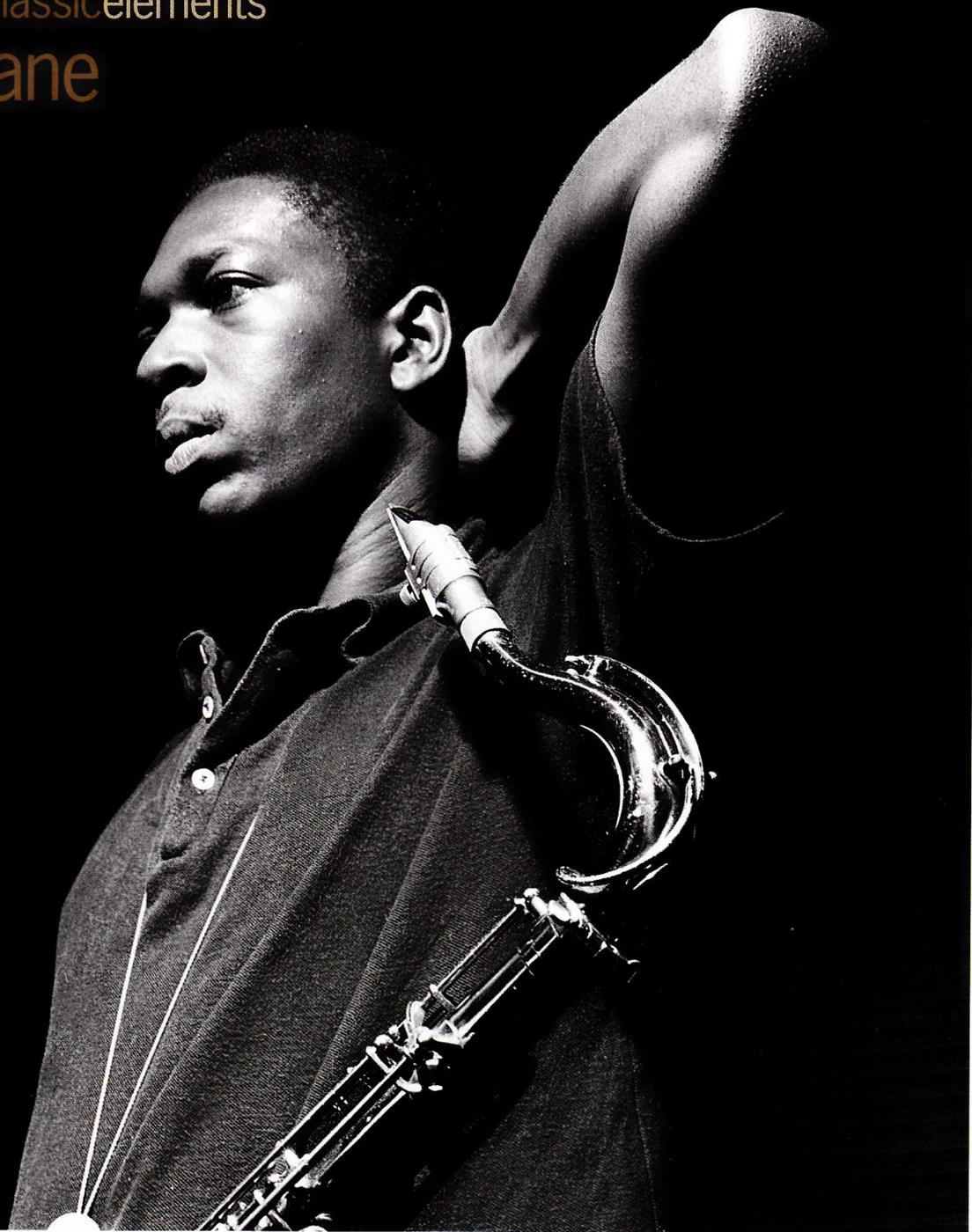


john coltrane



'For saxophonists, his influence is monumental. For listeners, he is the essence of all that is good and true and personal in music'

"I disdain/John Coltrane/Of True Jazz he's the bane/Surely he must be quite insane/And his 'music' the result of a pain/In the brain?/Let us kick him down the drain!"

Thus American poet Geoff Aldan casually dismissed the expansive, extraordinary music of saxophonist John Coltrane. But in the less-than-radical early Sixties he was not alone. A *Melody Maker* critic left a 1961 London concert "baffled, bothered and bewildered". An American writer described one of Coltrane's colossal solos as "monotonous, a treadmill to the Kingdom of Boredom". And arch-reactionary Philip Larkin, then jazz critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, wrote: "After Coltrane, of course, all was chaos, hatred and absurdity."

If the passage of time seems to have blunted such prejudices, Coltrane's music continues to provoke strong reactions. It is 30 years this July since the great man died of liver cancer at the age of 40, but many still find his work, especially the late free-jazz albums, dense and complex to the point of being unlistenable. And they may have a point. In contrast to his calm, often introverted demeanour and relaxed appearance, an album like 1965's *Ascension* is a wild and visceral outpouring, a collective assault on the senses.

But to his legions of fans – devotees who straddle the worlds of jazz and rock – Coltrane is almost beyond criticism. For saxophonists, his influence is monumental; he is the most imitated jazz musician of the past 25 years. And for listeners, he is still a touchstone, the essence of all that is good and true and personal in music. A master improviser and consummate musician, Coltrane created a sound so all-consuming, so beguiling, that he seemed to be stretching the very sonic possibilities of his instrument.

And, if anything, interest in his music seems to be increasing. A number of biographies (mostly lamentable) have been published over the past few years; Impulse!, a label for which he recorded many of his great Sixties albums, has recently released a selection of stylishly packaged mid-price CDs (beginners should start with *A Love Supreme* or *Ballads*); and there is even a burgeoning Church of St John Coltrane in San Francisco dedicated to celebrating the more spiritual aspects of the man and his musical journey.

"I don't know what I'm looking for – something that hasn't been played before," Coltrane said during his tenure with Miles Davis. He may not have lived long enough to have found any answers, but for the open-eared, the Trane ride is as exhilarating as anything in modern music. **Philip Watson** ■

