

John Coltrane



Lesson Plan

OBJECTIVE: *To understand and appreciate the contributions of John Coltrane to the history of North Carolina and the United States.*

Social Studies Objectives: 9.02

Social Studies Skills: 1, 2, 3, 5

Language Arts Objectives: 1.03, 1.04, 2.01, 5.01, 6.01, 6.02

Resources / Materials

- Biographical sketch
- Internet access (optional)
- *Activities* page
- Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians

Procedures

- Students will read and discuss the summary of John Coltrane independently, as a small group or as an entire class.
- Students will complete the *Activities* page.
- Students will complete one or more projects from the Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians.

Evaluation

- Student participation in reading and discussion of John Coltrane
- Student performance on *Activities* page
- Student projects from "Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians"

Bibliography

Marshall Bowden. "Jazzitude Impressions of Coltrane: His Life and Music." 9 March 2003. <http://www.jazzitude.com/trane.htm>

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"John Coltrane the Experimental Musician." <http://www.cyberessays.com/Arts/41.htm>

WAER Jazz. "John Coltrane." 9 March 2003. <http://www.waer.org/coltrane.html>

"John Coltrane's Life and Work, His Harmonic Structure In Giant Steps, and its Expansion." 9 March 2003. <http://www.jazzreview.com/articledetails.dfm?ID=386> (link no longer active)

Dave Wild's Wild Place. "A Brief Biography of John Coltrane." 3 March 2003. http://home.att.net/~dawild/john_coltrane.htm

John Coltrane

Biographical Sketch



The AFRICAN
AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE
in North Carolina

North Carolina Freedom Monument Project

John Coltrane was born September 23, 1926, in Hamlet, North Carolina, to what some have called a “typical” African American family. With religion and family tradition strong components of his upbringing, John enjoyed a happy childhood. He spent the early years of his life in High Point, North Carolina. His talent for music was recognized early in his youth and can be attributed to the musical interest of his parents, John and Alice Coltrane. John’s father, who worked as a tailor, was also accomplished at playing many musical instruments. The family’s love of music also had its roots in the church. John Coltrane’s mother was a member of the church choir. Both of Coltrane’s grandfathers were ministers. Coltrane’s love for music began to flourish as he attended many worship services.

Young Coltrane studied music and learned to play the alto horn, the clarinet, and the saxophone while listening to artists such as Woody Herman, Lester Young, and Theolonious Monk. Coltrane’s love of music turned into a passion when he heard the great Johnny Hodges playing with Duke Ellington on the radio. At this point, Coltrane began to concentrate solely on becoming accomplished in playing the alto saxophone. Tragedy struck the life of Coltrane at the age of 13 when he lost every important male influence in his life—his father, his uncle, and his minister. The loss of these people would later have an impact on his music.

After graduating from high school in High Point, he moved to Philadelphia and studied on scholarships under Mike Guerra at the Granoff Studios and the Ornstein School of Music for one year. According to Mr. Granoff, “Very, very few students could do improvisations as this young man did. From the very moment he learned his instrument, he wanted to revolutionize it.” In 1945, his studies in Philadelphia were interrupted when he was inducted into the navy during World War II and sent to Hawaii. While in the navy, he joined the Navy Band. After his return from Hawaii, Coltrane began his musical career by playing in many small bars and clubs around Philadelphia. Negative comments from critics about the music he was playing in clubs and bars contributed to his growing lack of self-esteem.

In the late 1940s, Coltrane became very depressed and turned to using heroin, a highly addictive drug that was widely used among musicians—particularly African American musicians—at the time. In 1949, he joined the band of Dizzy Gillespie and stayed with the band for one year. Although involved in the bands of Earl Bost, Johnny Hodges, Jimmy Smith, and Bud Powell, Coltrane lived through these years in a deep depression, and used drugs and alcohol to try to cope with his feelings. Rehabilitation and professional guidance helped him get his life back together. He studied Eastern philosophies and married Juanita Grubbs, a Muslim woman who took the name Naima. She helped Coltrane pick up the pieces of his life and focus on his talent—music.

Continued on the next page

John Coltrane

In the late 1950s, Coltrane was invited to play with the acclaimed Miles Davis and his quintet. This partnership would change his life. At this time, he acquired the nickname “Trane” which remained with him throughout his life. Coltrane’s association with Davis allowed him to start developing a style of his own. This period became known as the “sheets of sound period.” Coltrane would play the scales of the saxophone at a speed no one else before him had accomplished. This style of music would usher in the “cool jazz” of the 1960s. Coltrane enjoyed the experimentation and freedom of this music, but sadly he relapsed, allowing drugs and alcohol to again take control of his life. Davis fired him from the band. In 1957, Coltrane had a spiritual awakening, through which he kicked his additions to heroin and smoking. Many consider his best album, *A Love Supreme*, to have been recorded after he experienced this spiritual renewal.

Having been terminated from the Miles Davis band, he joined Thelonious Monk and his band in 1957. With Mr. Monk, Coltrane further developed his creative style and had the opportunity to play at legendary jazz locations in New York. In 1958, Coltrane rejoined the Miles Davis band and added even more chord combinations at high speeds. Deciding to form his own group, he left the Davis band for the last time in 1960. In 1965 Coltrane married his second wife, Alice McLeod.

The jazz music of the 1960s was rooted in the music of John Coltrane. Coltrane’s jazz did not include the structured sounds of earlier jazz styles. It was uniquely different—innovative and intense and characterized by random improvisations. The John Coltrane Quartet became one of the most creative groups in jazz history. However, Coltrane’s search for new and different sounds caused tensions in the group and by January 1966, the Quartet had disbanded. Coltrane then formed a new band of younger members. He learned from them and taught them his style of music. Coltrane demonstrated he could play the classical music as well as his style of jazz, and his popularity continued to increase.

John Coltrane’s career covered the twelve years between 1955 and 1967. His growth as a musician reflected his search for meaning in life. He became obsessed with trying to communicate his musical vision, as well as searching for meaning in life. Coltrane’s spirituality was based on a belief that all things are united and come from a common essence. It was this essence that united things. On July 17, 1967, John William Coltrane died of a liver ailment at the age of 40. John Coltrane, a creative genius, was one of the most influential musicians in the evolution of modern jazz. His influence is echoed today in the recordings of almost every young jazz musician.

John Coltrane



Activities

Personal Response

John Coltrane was a very talented musician but suffered from drug addiction. Why do you think talented people of today so often turn to drugs?

Analyzing Information

1. Describe Coltrane's early life and the musical influences in his younger years.
2. Interpret the phrase from one of Coltrane's teachers, "Very, very few students could do improvisations as this young man did."
3. Identify the reasons why Coltrane's partnership with Miles Davis changed his life.
4. Assess the impact of Coltrane's music on the jazz music of the 1960s.

Interpreting Meaning

Directions: Find the term in the passage. Use context clues and/or the dictionary to understand the term. Select a term for each analogy. Write the term in the blank.

Terms: intense, usher, influence, concentrate, accomplish, reflect, quintet, disband, improvisation

1. to focus is to _____ as relax is to rest
2. obtaining a goal is to _____ as studying for a test is to success
3. five is to _____ as four is to quartet.
4. vaccinate is to inoculate as _____ is to escort
5. break up is to _____ as dependable is to reliable
6. reduce is to lessen as to think seriously is to _____
7. inherit is to receive as _____ is to have power
8. _____ is to serious as a clown is to laughter
9. making jokes on the spur of the moment is to comedians as _____ is to musicians

Creative Response

1. Select an activity from the list "A Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians."

2. NCFMP: The Education Wall in Raleigh is a public artwork that is 30 feet tall by 90 feet long. On this granite wall are carved a number of illustrations and quotations from North Carolinians that pertain to education. John Coltrane's work is represented on the Wall, partly because Vernon Pratt, the artist who created the wall, played the saxophone himself and loved Coltrane's music. How would you represent Coltrane's work on a large wall of granite?

Pratt reproduced several bars of John Coltrane's composition, "Lonnie's Lament," in large scale on the Education Wall and stood next to the musical notations carved in granite as he played the song at the Wall's dedication ceremony.

John Coltrane



Activities ■ Answer Key for Teachers

Personal Response

John Coltrane was a very talented musician but suffered from drug addiction. Why do you think talented people of today so often turn to drugs?

Responses will vary.

Analyzing Information

1. Describe Coltrane's early life and the musical influences in his younger years.

John Coltrane grew up in a family of musicians. His father was accomplished at playing many musical instruments. His mother was a member of the church choir. Both of his grandparents were ministers and Coltrane's love of music began to flourish as he attended church services.

2. Interpret the phrase from one of Coltrane's teachers, "Very, very few students could do improvisations as this young man did."

Coltrane's teachers were impressed that he could learn to play an instrument and then create compositions of his own very quickly.

3. Identify the reasons why Coltrane's partnership with Miles Davis changed his life.

Coltrane's association with Davis allowed him to start developing a style of his own.

4. Assess the impact of Coltrane's music on the jazz music of the 1960s.

John Coltrane's jazz did not include structured sounds of the earlier jazz styles. It was innovative and intense and was characterized by random improvisations. Because of this uniqueness, Coltrane influenced a change in the evolution of jazz.

Interpreting Meaning

Directions: Find the term in the passage. Use context clues and/or the dictionary to understand the term. Select a term for each analogy. Write the term in the blank.

Terms: intense, usher, influence, concentrate, accomplish, reflect, quintet, disband, improvisation

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Creative Response

Select an activity from the list "A Menu of Activities for North Carolina African American Musicians."

Responses will vary.