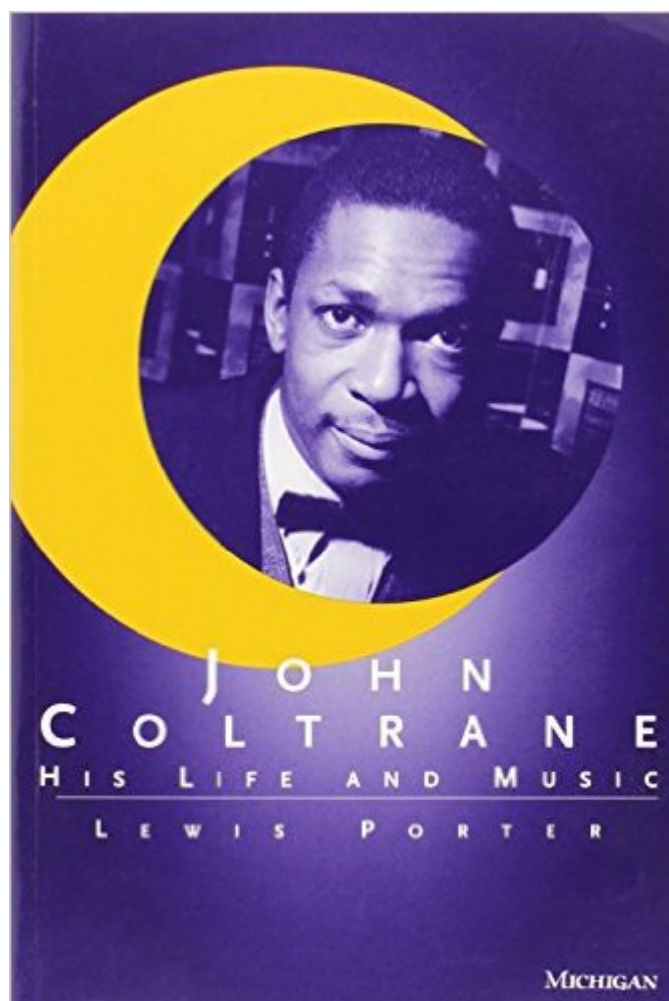


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# John Coltrane: His Life And Music (The Michigan American Music Series)



## Synopsis

John Coltrane was a key figure in jazz, a pioneer in world music, and an intensely emotional force. This biography presents interviews with Coltrane, photos, genealogical documents, and musical analysis that offers a fresh view of Coltrane's genius. It explores the events of Coltrane's life and offers an insightful look into his musical practices.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

John Coltrane - His Life and MusicI have probably read nearly every biography on John Coltrane that is available in the hope of finding writing that is worthy of the scope of this jazz master's genius. Most of the reading I've done has been fairly disappointing...more like glorified fanzine articles rather than serious discussions of the man and his music. Eberhard Jost in his book Free Jazz does do some pretty in-depth analysis of the music of Coltrane, but almost all other books focus more on gossip and life details and leave the musical analysis to vague lofty sounding phrases that have very little meaning on a real level. So Lewis Porter's book is a breath of fresh air, not just in writing about Coltrane, but also in jazz scholarship in general. Porter's is the first jazz biography I've read that is a really musicological biography and worthy to stand up to the biographies written about classical music figures. Rather than create a portrait with personal meditations, as J.C. Thomas did in Chasin' the Trane, or beating a predetermined ideological drum, as Frank Kofsky did in John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the '60s, or create a fanzine kind of portrait, as Bill Cole did (by

far the best of the pre-Porter bios, but still lightweight musically) or create a sort of modern day hagiography, as Eric Nisenson did in *Ascension*, John Coltrane's *Quest*, Porter gives us a straight biography, with little personal interjection, and a lot of penetrating insights based on the actual music Coltrane produced. Porter's book has the benefit of more years of research into Coltrane's life and legacy. Increasingly, as the years since the 60s have worn on, it has become clear that the influence of Coltrane is perhaps the biggest single influence on all facets of jazz, arguably equaling or maybe even exceeding the influence of Charlie Parker. His is certainly the most all-pervading voice since Bird and the influence doesn't seem to be waning as the millennium turns. Porter's book relies on the best of the earlier biographies. He quotes Thomas and Cole with some frequency. But he also relies on a welter of recorded interviews with Trane, interviews with those who knew Trane, and with surviving family members, including much precious information about Trane's early years from his cousin Mary and from many of his childhood and Philly friends. The picture that emerges is not radically different than the picture we get from earlier biographies. All of the elements of the Coltrane mystique are there; the obsessive practicing, the drive to succeed, the drug addicted years, the dramatic kicking of the habit, the later search for musical and spiritual Truth, and the sudden and tragic death. But devoid of interpretation, these facts lose some of the legend surrounding them. To me, this can only be a good thing. Coltrane would not have wanted the worship that has developed around him. The details of Trane's life as outlined by Porter show a man who was deeply gifted, haunted by childhood loss, driven to perfect his art, and yet also daunted by lingering addictions and the physical havoc that he had played on his body early in his life. This Trane is no less worthy of honor than the legendary Trane, and a bit more loveable and human. Where the Porter biography has it over all others is in the copious musical examples. Porter analyzes many recorded solos in detail, including *Giant Steps*, *My Favorite Things*, *A Love Supreme*, and perhaps most impressively *Venus*, from Coltrane's last recorded album. Porter's skill as a musicologist is quite impressive and a gift that is rarely given to jazz literature. He analyzes Trane's changing improvisational technique, from the early "sheets of sound" period, where pattern after pattern of complex, harmonically based scales are piled over chords, to the more melodically based modal material, based on the manipulation of short melodic cells. Porter gives us a glimpse into the mind of a genius here, showing the amazing logical processes behind Coltrane's font of inspiration. Also, for those who don't want this type of musical analysis, the chapters are located at dramatic breaks in the biography, and are easily skipped without loss of any significant information. This makes the book still accessible for the non-musician. This is not a perfect book. Porter does occasionally make himself known as an author, something which is not usual in scholarly

biographies. This usually happens when he interjects the phrase, in my opinion. It's not a real fault, but in a book of such scholarly aspirations, these comments probably should have been edited out or reworded so that they didn't jar quite as much. More serious is the chapter that discusses the medical issues with Trane's death. Much nonsense has circulated about Trane's death, which Porter attempts to correct. Unfortunately, he does so with poorly drawn medical arguments. For instance, cirrhosis of the liver has very little if anything to do with liver cancer, and while he is correct that for cirrhosis to occur the patient has to be an active alcoholic or drug abuser, some studies indicate liver cancer can be affected by abuser, even years after the patient stops using. The causes of Trane's death are probably complex and may never be fully explained, but Porter should have checked his medical sources a bit more carefully or steered clear of this potential minefield. But despite those fairly small points, this is a major step forward in Coltrane scholarship and in the whole field of Jazz Studies. Porter has set a new high for jazz writing; one that I hope will be met by a new crop of scholars. If any American art form deserves this kind of scrutiny, jazz is it.

I just completed review and reading of Porter's Bio. on Coltrane and I must agree with most of the positive comments on this book. I also found the comments regarding Dr. Simkins book to be a little unfortunate, because I spent a lot of time verifying much of Simkins work. However, I believe this to be the best book on Coltrane I've read. It compares with Bill Coles book which I also think is particularly good with respect to the musical analysis. As a musician, I was fascinated by the explanations on Coltrane's musical formulas and use of wonderful motifs. I have numerous transcriptions from Andrew White, but without the discussion of some of the mechanics it was difficult to understand how to apply the works. I wish Mr. Lewis would have included additional photos. I believe there is a wonderful opportunity for someone to issue a photo Bio. on Coltrane which would be well received. I consider myself a Coltrane expert and own almost all legally published materials (some bootlegs too) on "Trane", but I actually learned some new "stuff". I recommend Lewis' book wholeheartedly. This book will give you a real opportunity to appreciate Coltrane and understand how "bad" this "cat" really was.

Porter's book is easily the most meticulous and rigorous historical and musical assessment available of the life and music of John Coltrane, the most influential and fascinating jazz saxophonist of all time. Porter has read everything, talked to everyone, and knows musical theory inside and out. The latter virtue will--at times--leave behind some readers (such as myself) who are less educated in the technical aspects of music. But one may skip over these sections without destroying the flow of

the book. The book engages in little cultural or biographical interpretation and instead is more of a detailed chronicle and analysis of Coltrane's life and incomparable music. Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Philosophy Denver Seminary

Lewis Porter deserves praise for his outstanding work on John Coltrane. Once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down! I was interested to learn about his family background and musical influences that developed into his unique signature style. I enjoyed the Chapters devoted to "Giant Steps" and "A Love Supreme." I agree with one reviewer's comment that the musical theory was difficult to absorb. This book is well referenced with footnotes for further readings and study. After reading this book, I have a better understanding of what Coltrane was trying to achieve as an artist and ambassador for humanity. Mr. Porter, thank you for taking me on this journey!

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