

## Chasing Trane: A Review, An Appreciation, A Spiritual Awakening

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It is the day after Thanksgiving here in the States and one of the things I am grateful for is the new John Coltrane documentary **Chasing Trane**, written and directed by John Scheinfeld. I was fortunate to see this film on the closing night of **DOC NYC**, the New York documentary film festival. It was a week ago last Thursday and it has had a deep emotional impact on me that is still resonating, which I will discuss in a bit. But first let me tell you about the film.

First off, Scheinfeld is a terrific documentary filmmaker, IMHO. I am a huge fan of two of his earlier movies, *The U.S. vs. John Lennon* and *Who is Harry Nilsson . . . ?* I knew virtually nothing about Nilsson when I watched that film and I've since recommended it to all of my friends and family, and now to all of my readers here at Jazz Collector. Perhaps because of Scheinfeld's reputation, the Coltrane family welcomed him to do this film and gave him access to Coltrane's music, archives and even home movies.

In *Chasing Trane*, Scheinfeld has created a moving and inspirational tribute to one of the great musicians and spiritual influences of our times. He uses film footage and photos of Coltrane, some never before seen, interspersed with comments from a wide range of friends, family, fans, biographers and other admirers. I was personally moved by the comments from Coltrane contemporaries and close friends, Jimmy Heath, Benny Golson and, especially, Sonny Rollins. And I was surprised and impressed

by the depth of knowledge and connection to Coltrane's music and spirit expressed by former President Bill Clinton. But I was not surprised by how often some of these commentators were at a loss for words to describe Coltrane's music or his influence because, as Sonny says, the only way to truly understand and feel the music is to experience it.

And, of course, there is Coltrane's music, ever-present as a soundtrack to the film. Scheinfeld spoke at the viewing I attended, and he said it contains 48 pieces of music from all eras of the Coltrane canon. There's the first audio clip of Trane doing "Hot House" when he was 20 years old in a U.S. Navy Band, and there's a really nice video that I had never seen of Trane playing "I Want to Talk About You." And there are moments when you hear the music and it is almost impossible not to well up in tears, particularly the scenes surrounding "Alabama" and, for me, just hearing the opening notes of "A Love Supreme."

The movie does not follow a straight chronological path. It starts with a conceit that puts Coltrane at a turning point in his life: It is early 1957 and Coltrane has just been fired from the Miles Davis Quintet because his addiction to heroin has made him too unreliable. He has a wife, Naima, and a step-daughter, whose comments about Trane in the movie are particularly poignant and moving. As the film frames it, Coltrane can follow one of two paths: He can quit heroin and turn his life around or he can follow the path of his hero Charlie Parker and die a young and tragic death.

Coltrane, as we all know, quits cold turkey and emerges as a new man, thankful to God for the gifts of this world and determined to express his appreciation and devotion in the only way he knows how, through his music. And of course, he then goes on a

creative, artistic and spiritual quest the likes of which we have perhaps never seen over a 10-year period by any artist in any medium. Clinton eloquently compares Coltrane's output to Picasso's, while pointing out the brief period of time Coltrane had to explore and express his genius. Thankfully, we can all chronicle and awe at Coltrane's incredible growth and musical output through his records, which, of course, are what we normally talk about here.

Most of you, our community at Jazz Collector, know the stories and the music from this period, and I would bet that many of us own every Coltrane recording from that era, as I do. Even with that, however, Scheinfeld takes us on an unexpected ride, particularly towards the end of the movie when the setting shifts to Japan. But I will stop here because I know you will all see this film and this aspect is central to the second part of this story, which I am about to tell. In summary, I know you will all love this film and feel blessed and grateful that Coltrane's story was put in the care of a fine craftsman and artist in Scheinfeld.

In terms of when you may be able to see *Chasing Trane*: It sounded as if the producers are still working out distribution arrangements and it probably won't be available for public release until later next year, perhaps in the autumn. You can all take a look at the [Web site](#) for details and be sure to view [the trailer](#).

### **Chasing Trane: Beyond the Film**

And now, for those of you still with me, I would like to talk about my personal connection to this film and why I found it to be so profound and moving, to the point where I cannot even talk about it without getting emotional. I know this is not our normal format at Jazz Collector, and this post is really two posts in one, hence

the subtitle above. But as we know so well from Coltrane, it's perfectly okay and, in fact, vitally important that we break through the normal conventional boundaries whenever it is necessary.

I was in a very bad emotional state when I saw Chasing Trane. I had been following the election coverage obsessively. I don't want to get into politics here, but in the course of the election I had reached certain conclusions about Donald Trump that made me fearful of what might happen if he became President. None of my fears may be true, nor may they fit in with anyone else's narrative, but it was what I believed to my absolute core. So, when he was elected president I was truly shaken. I turned the television off at 9:30 on election night and have not turned it on since. I stopped reading the newspapers because I was angry at and distrustful of the media.

Then I went into a real tailspin. I couldn't sleep. I went deep into the rabbit hole and had visions of Apocalypse. First, that Trump and his cronies were going to take away our democracy and we would never again have a legitimate election. Then I went even bleaker: that Trump would purposefully or inadvertently begin a nuclear war that would end the world. For three nights after the election I didn't sleep and didn't share my fears with anyone. Finally, on Saturday morning, I broke down.

Many of you may recall that my wife, whom we affectionately refer to here as The Lovely Mrs. JC, is a psychotherapist, and thank God for that. I was despondent, in deep despair. I had another sleepless night on Saturday. On Sunday we went to a meditation group and I broke down once again in front of everyone, sobbing uncontrollably. I had two more sleepless nights on Sunday and Monday, my mind absolutely convinced that the

world was coming to an end and there was no way to stop it. When The Lovely Mrs. JC woke up on Tuesday morning I broke down again and said, please, I need help.

She reached out to a psychiatrist that she knows and I reached out to a psychotherapist I had seen before. The psychiatrist said he would be able to see me on Wednesday evening, the next day. Knowing that I was going to get some help, I was able to focus on work on Tuesday and make it through the day. I had another difficult night on Tuesday, but I found it comforting to have turned off all media, so I was not exposed to the fear and hatred that I believed had been fomenting in the days following the election. I met with the psychiatrist at 5 p.m. Wednesday. For 45 minutes he patiently listened to my stories of sleepless nights and Apocalypse, of my distrust of the media, of my anger and disappointment and, most of all, my fear and sense of impending doom.

He said it was clear that I would need medication to help me deal with the anxiety, to help me begin sleeping again. In thinking aloud about which medication may be best for me, he said he also observed that I may have obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I smiled. I am, after all, the man with 8,000 jazz records, the man who had to quit playing Fantasy Football because I had become too consumed with making every perfect decision, to the point where on my vacation in Italy last fall I set my alarm for 2:30 in the morning on both Monday and Tuesday to listen to football games on my iPad. Yes, I figured, the doctor probably knew what he was talking about.

He prescribed Xanax. I went to the pharmacy immediately after my session and picked up the bottle. I took a pill, .5 MG, when I got home. I slept for 10 hours, straight through. It was my first

moment of peace in a week. On Thursday I felt much better when I woke up. I was still avoiding all television, newspapers, social media, everything. Then I went into the elevator in my building to walk Marty the dog at 8 a.m. Sometimes there is no escape. There's a television in the elevator and I saw a 20-second clip of that vile woman Kellyanne Conway. I could immediately feel the anxiety forming in my guts and in my chest. It was a physical reaction. I went back to my apartment, took half of a Xanax and meditated for 20 minutes. I felt much better, no angst in my gut. I went to work and was fine the rest of the morning.

I saw my son, Michael, later that day and it was a huge help. He has been a great source of help through this ordeal, as has been my daughter Sharon and son-in-law Justin. At a time of trouble, it is wonderful to know that people you love are there for you, and that's how they made me feel, not just my wife and children but good friends, especially my business partner Mike, and my friends DeeDee and Chris and Danny and Rocco and Carol and Steve and others. Even if I didn't reach out to all of my friends, knowing that they were there was a source of comfort.

Michael and I had been talking a lot about the election. He was equally concerned, but he was coping with it much better than I was. That day — it is now Thursday, November 17, nine days after the election — we planned to spend together. Michael's friend had made a movie that was being shown at a documentary film festival in Greenwich Village. So it was lunch and the movies for us. We had a great conversation over lunch that gave me a lot of comfort, even though it was a very dark discussion. I won't get into the whole thing here, but two points Michael made really resonated. One was that he was not really that afraid of a nuclear Apocalypse. He wasn't dismissing my fear at all; he was just saying, hey, if we all go, we all go. If there's nothing left, there

won't be anyone or anything to miss. I don't know why, but it made me feel better. Then I was saying that I was so afraid of losing our democracy that I was willing to give them Roe V. Wade or healthcare or even gay marriage, just as long as we can still vote and fix these problems sometime in the future. Some would call it the bargaining stage of the five stages of grief. Michael said to be careful with that thinking – that's how they get us. We get so consumed with fear that we let them take our rights away a little bit at a time. That's why we have to be vigilant. It's what terrorism is all about, isn't it?

This also made me feel better. Not that I was less concerned about what will happen, but somehow it made me less afraid. Then we went to the movies. Michael's friend Lorenzo Pisoni made a movie called **Circus Kid**. I'd only met Lorenzo a couple of times, but Michael had told me about his fascinating life. His father owned a circus and Lorenzo started performing from the time he was two. I was really looking forward to the movie. Michael and I were sitting there waiting for it to start, chatting a bit. On the screen they were promoting other movies from the DOC NYC festival.

"Hey Dad," Michael said. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"It looks like there's a Coltrane documentary."

"Really," I said. I didn't think much of it.

"I must have seen it already," I said. "With Jazz Collector, I'm on a lot of distribution lists. If there was a new Coltrane documentary I'm sure I'd know about it."

Michael pulled out his cell phone. "Let me look it up," he said. And then he did.

"I think it's brand new," he said.

"Really?"

"Yes, and tonight is the only performance. Seven PM."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I have plans for tonight," I said. I was supposed to attend a small event at Lincoln Center at 6:30 PM.

Then I thought for a few seconds. And I turned to Michael.

"You know how I feel about Coltrane," I said.

"Of course," he replied.

"He's been a tremendous influence on my life."

"I know."

"You know," I continued, "Two, three hundred years from now, if the world survives, I think Coltrane will be remembered as one of the three seminal figures of jazz, the way we now remember Mozart or Beethoven or Bach."

"Who are the others?"

"Again, this is just my opinion, but it will be Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane."

"Interesting," Michael said.

Then we sat there for a couple more minutes, quiet.

Then I finally said: "You know, I should really go to this Coltrane documentary."

"Of course you should," Michael replied.

Then Lorenzo's movie started and it was wonderful. Very moving, a fascinating story, extremely well told. And it wasn't really about growing up in a circus. It was about growing up, period. It was about family and fathers and relationships and life. I loved it and was thrilled that Michael had suggested it. We said hello to Lorenzo after the movie, wished him great success and headed towards the subway. I got home, immediately went on line and purchased a single ticket for *Chasing Trane*. I felt my body surging with excitement. I hadn't thought about the election in hours.



I got to the theater around 6:30. There was a long line to get in. I was surprised. "Is this all for the Coltrane documentary?" I asked at the box office. "Yes." It was a huge theater, but it seemed as if it was nearly sold out. When I got in, I took a seat towards the middle of the auditorium. I looked around. "Wait a second," I could hear me thinking to myself as I looked to my left at a short black man sitting in the next row. "Is that Jimmy Heath? Really? Is that Jimmy Heath?" And then I answered: "Yeah, that's Jimmy Heath." I smiled a big smile. I'm seeing a John Coltrane documentary with Jimmy Heath. Wow, how cool is that!

There was a technical glitch and to fill the time the filmmaker John Scheinfeld shared some stories about how he came to do the film and how he was able to find some rare footage that had never been seen before. It just whetted my appetite and heightened my anticipation even more. Then, finally, the film started.

There was the first sound of Coltrane's music. And some interesting illustrations and then a photograph of Coltrane himself. My eyes filled with tears. It was such an emotional moment for me, it is hard to describe in words. I felt as if I was experiencing something deeply spiritual. I didn't understand it at first, but then I remembered moments, little snapshots in my life where Coltrane was simply there for me.

I was 17. My high school girlfriend had just broken up with me. Most of my friends had gone away to school. I didn't get into a single college to which I applied, so I had to go to Queens College. I had only two close friends still at home, Paul and Danny. It was also the time I discovered jazz, thank God, which was like a lifeline and a story I shared previously at Jazz Collector in the memoir [Song For My Father](#), the only other post on this site that in any

way resembles this one.

I was depressed and felt all alone. I must have been suffering from some kind of social anxiety as well because I felt that everyone was staring at me all the time, wherever I went, all of them keenly aware that I was this very lonely, very sad teenager. The times between classes, when I had nothing to do and no one to talk to, were the most difficult of all. Then, through my best friend Dan Axelrod, I discovered that Queens College had an extensive music listening library. It was a very weird little place, as I recall, almost underground, where they had about eight turntables in the front of the room and maybe 20 or 30 listening stations where you could put on headphones and listen to any of the records that were playing on the turntables. In front of each turntable was a little stand where they would put the front cover of the record so you could decide which record to hear through your headphones.

Whenever a class would end and I would have a break until the next class, I would walk with great purpose to this music listening library, as if I had an appointment I had to keep and someone very important was waiting for me. And I would get there and every single day, every single time, with no exception, perhaps hundreds of times over the course of two years, I would ask for one record: John Coltrane, *My Favorite Things*. And the person behind the counter would pull the record from its jacket, put the jacket on the stand facing the room and put the record on the turntable. And I would take a seat, put on the headphones and listen and escape from my sadness, escape from the world. The music somehow transformed me and gave me enormous hope. I can't tell you why, I can't tell you how, just as it is impossible to describe the music. I can only tell you that it touched my soul and helped to heal me. It got to the point where I couldn't wait for a class to end, so I could spend time with my friend and healer, John

Coltrane.

There were times when I would listen to both sides of *My Favorite Things* and there would be more time to kill before my next class. I would ask the person behind the counter to either start it again from side one or get another record for me. The only two other records I ever chose were *Giant Steps* or *A Love Supreme*. At that time in my life, probably the lowest I had ever felt, the only music I could turn to, the only person, was John Coltrane, and I was so thankful that he was there for me, that he was the person he was, the musician he was and that the music he made was preserved on record to comfort me in a time of need.

I have felt this feeling about Coltrane many times since, throughout my life, through difficult times and, just as importantly, through joyous times. I can't tell you how often I sit in front of my record player listening to a Coltrane album just being in awe at the creativity, inspiration and genius before me. Coltrane has also been a major part of my experience here at Jazz Collector over the past 10-plus years, where all of you have been so generous in providing me with the forum and the community to share our love for this music and the great musicians that have created it. And, at the risk of sharing too much information and embarrassing The Lovely Mrs. JC, I know without question that I have made love more often with Coltrane in the background than any other music – *Ballads, John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman, Settin' the Pace*, and others. When we got married, the Lovely Mrs. JC and I chose "Every Time We Say Goodbye" as our wedding song, the second song on the first side of *My Favorite Things*. Coltrane, who died in 1967 when I was just 14 years old, has been there often as a critical companion in some of the most intimate moments of my life.

And all of this came flooding into me as I sat there watching this wonderful tribute to this man who was such a hero of mine. And the film carried me with it on this journey and at some point it comes to *A Love Supreme*, and, as I said, just hearing the first notes of the album and knowing what it meant to Coltrane, and to me, and to all of us who love and appreciate his music, it brought tears to my eyes once again.

As far as I was concerned Scheinfeld could have stopped the movie right there. I would have been thrilled and I would have felt blessed. But then he took a strange, unexpected and dramatic turn. One of the next images on the screen was the atomic bomb blast in Nagasaki, Japan. He lingered on the image. The full mushroom cloud in all its horrific glory. And then he showed images of the victims, the devastation, the destruction, the indescribable inhumanity that human beings are capable of inflicting on one another. And I felt myself shifting uncomfortably in my seat. For days and days I had been lying awake in bed fearing just this kind of Apocalyptic vision. Just hours before I had been sitting in a French bistro on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village with my son Michael, talking about what we both believe is the very real possibility of nuclear devastation. I was having a hard time seeing these images and worried, seriously, that I would have to leave the theater because it was too much for me to contain.

And then the images and the story went back to Coltrane. When he was booking his tour to Japan he insisted that Nagasaki be included on the schedule. When he arrived in Nagasaki after a long flight, his driver came to pick him up and take him to his hotel. Coltrane said no. He had to go immediately to the Nagasaki Peace Park Memorial. And the movie then lingers on an amazing photo of Coltrane standing in prayer in front of a memorial,

perhaps the Peace Statue, perhaps something else. I don't remember the exact story from the film, I wasn't taking notes, I was totally absorbed, but this is what I took away from it: Coltrane apparently stood in front of the memorial for a considerable length of time, perhaps as much as two hours. When he was done, the driver asked him why. He replied that he needed to feel the pain, hear the sound, feel the heat, hear the cries, experience, as best he could, what the people of Nagasaki experienced when the blast actually occurred.

Again, something stirred inside me. As I had intuited all of my life, this was not an ordinary man. This was a man who had achieved a level of spirituality that few humans can ever achieve. Sonny Rollins says it so beautifully in the movie. He talks about Coltrane being at a higher level, not just musically but spiritually. As far as Sonny is concerned, Coltrane is still there. We need not mourn his passing from this world, Sonny says, because he is and has always been in another world, a world few of us can ever experience or even know about. And the movie closes with a beautiful video of Coltrane, the man, at home on Long Island, enjoying life, enjoying his family, smiling a smile of sheer contentment.

For me it is now a week later and this film is still affecting me deeply. When I met with my psychotherapist this week I broke down crying just telling him about the effect *Chasing Trane* had on me. Same thing happened when I told my son Michael about it. The film has helped to move me in a direction that I never thought was possible, towards being a more spiritual and spiritually aware person.

But, of course, it's not the film. It is John Coltrane. And for that, and for him, and for his music, and for his presence in my life, I say Thank You on this blessed Thanksgiving weekend.