



Coltrane: A Biography

Cuthbert Ormond Simpkins

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During his lifetime John Coltrane, through music, moved many people to more meaningful lives. Coltrane: A Biography captures the feeling and facts of Coltrane's life and music. It places Coltrane's creative efforts within the tumultuous socio-economic and cultural context that spanned his lifetime. Coltrane: A Biography employs an experimental writing style that for many readers exemplifies Coltrane's music. Commenting on this style, a reviewer for Cadence Magazine wrote, "Parts of the book move along, gathering momentum, exploding much in the manner of a Coltrane solo." Further commentary on the writing of Coltrane: A Biography was made by Baltimore poet Barbara DeCesare in an interview given to the Anti - Man Press, "There's a biography of John Coltrane written by C.O. Simpkins, where the narrative is very poetic. It almost seems to emulate Coltrane's music in it's rhythm, tone and phrasing. He takes a lot of liberty with standard narrative form, and I think what makes the book so satisfying is those elements of poetry present in the storytelling."

In many instances within the book direct recorded quotes from interviewees are woven into the narrative because the goal is to enable the reader to know Coltrane on both an intellectual and emotional level. Coltrane: A Biography is written in a variety of styles in order to uncompromisingly transmit the complex creative force of the man and his time.

Several writers have noted the link between Coltrane's music and the time in which he lived such as reviewer, David Feld of the Berkley Barb who wrote, "Simpkins never demeans his subject by simplifying or pigeon-holing Coltrane's work, Rather, he lets the facts and compositions speak for themselves; through the medium of his writing, he allows us to get close to Trane. Because Simpkins respects as well as loves Coltrane, he insists on our seeing the man as he was.

This respect manifests itself in a number of ways. Most importantly, it has enabled Simpkins to portray Coltrane as a figure in history. "His story begins with his ancestors," the author says, and this view pervades the book. We are always made to see the political and cultural context in which Trane lived. Blues, religion, black power, Africa---all of these elements of Coltrane's life and Simpkins' biography.

In reading it one not only learns about Trane, but senses what it was like to hear him, to be alive with him."

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Scott Settle:

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