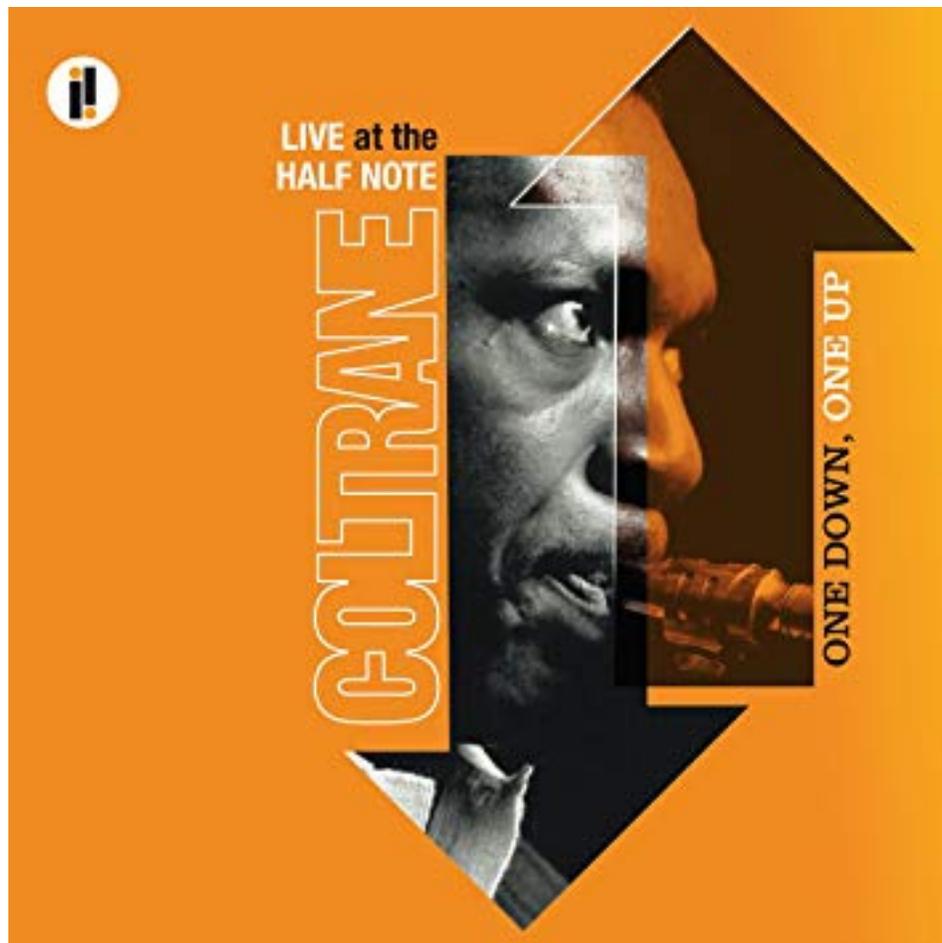


# John Coltrane's Solo on "One Down One Up" Live at the Half Note

A Brief  
Reflection on Process  
and  
Study of Content  
in  
Extended Solo Transcription

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## INTRODUCTION

Solo transcription is an interesting topic of discussion among jazz pedagogues. While some preach its necessity in the process of achieving fluency as an improviser, others would attest to the exact opposite. Whether the benefits of transcribing can be measured, musicians have utilized the process for as long as jazz has existed, and for mainly one reason – to learn the science behind improvised content creation.<sup>1</sup> There are other benefits to transcribing, such as for the purpose of ear training or for technical exercises, but overall, transcribing deals with the musical application of tangible, surface-level sonic phenomena.

Must the benefits of transcribing cease where the note-heads end, however? What if through the medium of solo transcription, an improviser could actually connect with the person playing, and not just with *what* they played? Taking that further, could the process of transcription itself potentially serve as a channeling device, and bring us closer to etherealities that inform the player's music-making; emanations of the human spirit, like intention, energy, and will? While I have done much transcribing over the years, and also much spiritual work, I hadn't had the thought to attempt to combine the two in such a way; until recently.

Throughout my doctorate degree here at CU, I have made it a point to challenge myself in every project that that has served toward its fulfillment. I've pursued projects dealing only with music-related work that hold the most powerful spiritual significance to me. As a result, among other artists, I have devoted many hours to the study of John Coltrane, and the essence behind his music, philosophy, personhood and religious disposition. Once I settled on the idea of a transcription project for my final recital, a specific Coltrane-penned solo came to mind – one that I never thought I'd even consider transcribing in its totality: his twenty-seven-minute-long solo on "One Down, One Up" from *One Down, One Up live at the Half Note*.

Over the years, I dabbled with the idea of transcribing select content from this solo, but I felt that even if I had spent time learning some of my favorite lines, and analyzing their makeup,

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<sup>1</sup> By content, I am referring to the notes, rhythms, and other sonic components that come together to create what we perceive as musical vocabulary.

it wouldn't be enough to unite me with the greater forces that I felt were omnipresent within the totality of the solo. Experiencing the solo while contemplating it was already so profound and inspiring. I felt that by gutting and dissecting it, I would tarnish its sacrality and counterfeit its grandeur. So, for the past six or seven years, Coltrane's solo on "One Down, One Up" remained un-transcribed, never ceasing to be one of my most treasured recordings.

While transcribing particular *parts* of this solo didn't appeal to me, for some reason the idea of transcribing *all of it* felt different. This solo to me is a definitive example of Coltrane's transition into his exploration of the musical plane for the purpose of reaching beyond the physical limitations of sound and form. Because of this, coupled with my pre-acquired knowledge of Coltrane, I concluded that he was in the midst of a spiritual transition. This theory, combined with how I perceived the sheer length of the solo working in favor of my goal, led me to believe that by transcribing it in its entirety, I would be able to share in that experience - one that he was having as a musician and person during this time period.

I decided to embark on the journey of transcribing one of the longest John Coltrane solos ever recorded, if not *the* longest— and after 50 hours and over 1,600 written measures later, I can confidently say, it was all worth it. While there is much to share in regard to the experience of working towards the completion of the project itself, in this paper, I will not elaborate on that aspect. Instead, I will be sharing a brief account of some of the musical devices Coltrane fancied throughout the solo.

## CONTENT

As saxophonist Ben Wendel once said, humans are addicted to stories. Every movie, book, piece of art, or song we have ever loved has left a lasting imprint on us because of them, and every memory we have is the result of events that took place which we have internalized as such. Therefore, we can conclude that a solo, just like any musical piece, regardless of length, will be ineffective if the soloist (the story-teller) does not find ways to keep the musical story

engaging. The more engaging a story, the more mastery of the art of tension and release the story-teller has employed. Tension and release in the context of a shorter solo looks more like the arch mentioned earlier: generally, there is a long buildup of tension, which comprises perhaps 85% or 90% of the solo, and then a release of that tension, which then concludes the solo.

In an extended solo, we see not just one arch, but multiple arches. In the case of this solo, as reminiscent of other extended solos I have studied, Coltrane employs the ebb and flow of two main musical devices which craft the solo, serve in the process of extended development using tension and release, and keep the solo moving forward. Those two devices are Line Playing and Motivic Development, and they are often intermixed with one another. Below, I have done my best to isolate the two devices, as there are specific techniques that Coltrane employs within his line construction which lend to their effect. Similarly, I have selected some examples of passages which utilize extended motivic development but that are non-linear, as these too have their own function. Finally, I will present some examples of how the two devices work together.

## LINES

First let's look at the glue that holds our episodes of tension and release together, and that moves us from one chapter into the next: Coltrane's eighth-note lines. His lines are often preceded or succeeded by the development of motivic ideas, and sometimes emerge from or into held notes, usually whole notes or longer, but sometimes as short as dotted quarter notes.

Whenever Coltrane's lines are broken by rests or notes, we usually see the existence of a motif which then informs the next linear phrase. Coltrane's lines can be grouped into two main harmonic categories, listed in order of most abundant to least (names to be elaborated on with supporting examples): Polytonal and Whole-Tone/Dominant. Most of the time, Coltrane mixes and matches these two.

1. Lines emerging out of held notes: Hal Galper once said that lines are really just long-note connectors, and that a player who has true mastery over their line playing can choose to sustain any note within a line at any time, allowing the line to continue in their heads, before choosing to

continue the line in real time. Whether or not this approach is being employed by Coltrane throughout the solo, I will say that his ability to emerge lines out of sustained notes certainly suggests the sort of control over line playing Galper is referencing.

Example 1A: mm. 161-188: In this example we see how Coltrane incorporates held notes and motifs within his line playing. I will be featuring Coltrane's use of motifs in the next section, but it makes sense to highlight them here as well. Here, Coltrane begins a chorus on a held note (with grace note preceding). Out of that sustained tone, a line spawns and continues through m. 166. As a pick up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> A of the chorus, Coltrane sustains again, and this time leads to a motif (Motif A) or fragmented line (can be perceived as either), which he then develops for 4 more beats. He then introduces a new motif (Motif B), which he eventually alters and uses again. Coltrane references an augmented mutated Motif A in m. 179. He employs the use of held notes for purposes of either beginning a line or breaking up a line several more times during the example.

3:01  
161

165

169

173

177

181

185

2. Polytonal: I'm using this term to describe lines that feature two or more key centers. Throughout the solo, Coltrane creates a line that weaves through super-imposed chord changes,

which he eventually resolves to a consonant tonal center either by way of sustained notes or linearly. Sometimes these superimposed chord changes will be variants of “Trane Changes”<sup>2</sup>.

Example 2A: mm. 245-248. This phrase occurs during the last 4 measures of the B-section, with no defined chord progression being provided by rhythm section. Coltrane alternates between the Gb augmented scale and the G<sup>+</sup> tonality within m. 245. In m. 246 he is implying Gb<sup>07</sup>. In m. 247 he employs the D whole-tone tonality and resolves to a D<sup>-7</sup> arpeggio.

Example 2B: mm. 411-416. This phrase is over a last A-section. Coltrane seems to be employing a variation on “Trane Changes” here. (m. 412 – Gb<sup>Maj</sup>, m. 413 – D<sup>Maj</sup>, Bb<sup>Maj</sup> (delayed), resolving to F<sup>9</sup>).

Example 3B: mm. 924-930: Perhaps an even more obvious example of “Trane Changes” being employed. In this example Coltrane super-imposes a chord progression found in “26-2”. The 1<sup>st</sup> half of m. 924 clearly defines Gb<sup>Maj</sup>, which leads to a clear G<sup>7</sup> in the second half of the bar. This tonality sustains thru m. 925, eventually resolving to C<sup>Maj</sup> in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of m. 926. The second half of that bar implies Eb<sup>7</sup> which he resolves between m. 927 and the 1<sup>st</sup> half of m. 928. The 2<sup>nd</sup> half of m. 928 implies B<sup>7</sup>, which he finally resolves going into m. 930.

(Example 3B on Next Page)

<sup>2</sup> “Trane Changes” as they are often referred to by jazz musicians, is short for “Coltrane Changes” (also a jazz-musician term). “Coltrane Changes” is a term that jazz musicians coined which describes a specific chord progression that made popular by Coltrane on the recording of his original composition, “Giant Steps.” Used in its original context, the “Trane Changes” chord progression serves as substitution for the ii–V–I progression. The progression features major third and minor third root movements (either up or down) as opposed to more conventional movements of 2nds, 4ths, and 5ths. For examples of these changes please refer to the lead sheets to “Giant Steps” and “26-2.”

28<sup>15:22</sup>  
921

925 (G7) C Eb7 Ab B7

929 (B7) E

3. Whole-Tone/Dominant: These lines are constructed using either the whole tone scale, the augmented scale (which is constructed using two augmented triads separated by  $\frac{1}{2}$  step), some sort of Dominant 7 tonality, or the combination of two or more of them. The reason I have chosen to group these three harmonic categories together, is because they complement each other very well harmonically, and can be easily mixed and matched. Concurrently, they each are tension-creators, and in different ways. A dominant chord is a tension creating chord because of its structure, tonal gravity, and to an extent lack of tonal center. The whole-tone scale and augmented scales are also tension-creators because they are a-symmetrical and have no clear tonal center.

Example 3A: mm. 234-236. This phrase takes place during the first 4 bars of a 2<sup>nd</sup> A section. The overall tonality being employed is  $\text{Db}^{7+}/\text{Db}$  Whole-Tone with the addition of some passing tones. I have chosen to label certain implied chords as  $\text{B}^7$  and  $\text{A}^+$ . These chords are interchangeable with  $\text{Db}^{7+\#11}$  and sonically it is not clear which he is implying, if any. I have chosen to label them as such to compliment the root-notes of the groupings.

4:13  
233

237

aprx.

3 3 3 3

Example 3B: mm. 285-292. Here we have the last 4 bars of a chorus leading into the first 4 of another. Coltrane utilizes the  $\text{Bb}^{7+}$  scale and  $\text{Bb}$  Whole-Tone tonalities and scales with some approach tones (approach tones labeled with prentices). There are other ways of perceiving what is being played from a theoretical standpoint. For example, mm. 291-292 can be seen as part of the  $\text{C}^{7\text{alt}}$  tonality or  $\text{Eb-}$ .

5:05  
285 Bb+

289 Bb7 123

## MOTIVIC DEVELOPMENT

In the context of this solo, a motif is defined as a recurring musical idea. Ideas can be of any length as long as their rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, directional structure or overall shape can be recognized to repeat. We see motivic development occur when a melodic idea, lasting for about one measure (give or take), copied and planned across barlines. Again, an idea can be harmonically and/or rhythmically mutated as long as its basic shape or essence is maintained. As previously mentioned, in this solo, any form of motif, whether extensively or minimally developed, usually leads to a line or in some cases to an entirely new melodic idea. There are cases where the Coltrane delays that process and develops a motif for many measures, sometimes choruses on end. Harmonically, Coltrane's employment of tonal spaces that have no root or tonal center (such as using the whole-tone and/or augmented scales), and that are more circular, add to the ease of the motivic development process. There are three general categories of motivic development that can be found throughout the solo (listed in order of most to least abundant): using melodic fragments, using linearity, and using "sheets of sound."<sup>3</sup>

4. Motivic development using melodic fragments: Coltrane often will develop a melodic motif over the course of many measures. Most of the solo that does not feature lines or sequences of lines lasting for at least 4 bars is comprised of this device.

Example 4A: mm. 257-284. This is an example of extended motivic development using a melodic idea. This passage is a good example of this type of motivic development because Coltrane starts from the beginning of a chorus, taking 32 bars to play with one short idea. Throughout the passage he is combining and alternating between augmented scales and whole tone scales, so generally there is no tonal gravitational point. This actually helps the process of

<sup>3</sup> Sheets of sound was a term coined by jazz critic Ira Gitler to describe a certain improvisational approach unique to John Coltrane. Gitler describes the term in the liner notes to *Giant Steps (Deluxe Edition)* as "multinote hailstorms of dense textures that sound like a simultaneous series of waterfalls." | <https://web.archive.org/web/20020817175952/http://www.rhino.com/features/liners/75203lin.html>

motivic development because there is no tonal resolution, so it keeps things moving. The important thing to note about this example is the symmetry he employs over the direction of linear motion. Note the downward-moving groupings he couples with upward-moving ones. These directional gestures are what give the motivic development its identity.

4:37 9  
257

261

265

269

273

277

281

Motif A

Motif A Mutation 1

Set-up A

Motif A Mutation 2

Motif A Fragment 1

Motif A Extended 1

Set-up A

Motif A Extended 1 Mutation 1

Motif A Extended 1 Mutation 1

Motif B

Motif B Mutation 1 Extended

3

Motif A Fragment 2

Motif A Modulated

Set-up B

Motif A Extended 1 Mutation 1 Modulated

Set-up A

Motif A Fragment 3

Motif B Mutation 1 Extended Fragment w/ Modulation

Motif A Extended 1 Mutation 1

Motif A Extended 1 Mutation 1 Continued

Set-up C

Motif C

5. Motivic development using linearity. Slightly less abundant than his use of short fragments as motifs, but still very present throughout the solo are Coltrane's use of lines as developmental devices.

Example 5A: mm. 325-352. Here, 4 measures after the start of a chorus we can see how Coltrane mutates the phrase at m. 325-326. The important thing to note about this is the overall trajectory and shape of the line. One of the sonic properties that distinguishes this motif is its high point of around A or B $\flat$ . The other component is the upward direction used to arrive there. Coltrane toys with different ways of getting there, which is also important, as the variety of ways he ascends add to the interest of the development. However, ultimately it is the top of the phrase that is anchoring the process (the A or B $\flat$ ). He finishes the chorus on a B natural, which is  $\frac{1}{2}$  step higher than the previous high point of the chorus, which implies a sense of competition.

(Example on Next Page)

5:45  
325

Approach 1 Motif A Approach 2 Motif A Extended

329

Approach 2 Mutated Motif A Extended & Mutated Response 1 Approach 2 Mutated #2 Motif A Extended & Mutated #2

333

Approach 2 Mutated #2 Extended Motif A Extended & Mutated #2 Fragment Approach 2 Mutated #2 Extended #2 Motif A Extended & Mutated #3

337

Approach 3 Motif A Extended & Mutated #4 Approach 3 Mutated & Extended

341

Approach 3 Mutated & Extended continued Motif B Motif B Mutated Motif B Mutated #2 & Extended

345

Motif B Mutated #2 & Extended continued Motif B Mutated #3/ Approach 4 Hybrid

349

Motif B Mutated #3/ Approach 4 Hybrid continued Motif A Extended Motif B Motif A Extended & Mutated #5

V.S

6. Extended motivic development using “sheets of sound”: This employment of motivic development is probably a bit less sonically obvious than the others previously mentioned. It also will be even less obvious if the observer just views the written transcription without associating it with the recording.

Example 6A: mm. 1394-1429. In the example below, while listening to the recording in conjunction with viewing the transcription will assist in the process, it is clear that Coltrane is beginning most of his sheets-of-sound figures with upward motion. I have labeled these instances as ‘Motif 1,’ and it’s variation (i.e. “Motif 1A”, “Motif 1B”, etc.). There are only two instances

out twenty-one throughout this passage where he does not start a phrase using upward motion. Coltrane varies the direction in which he ends these phrases (either upward or downward). I have labeled the upward phrase endings as “Motif 2” and “Motif 4”, along with their variations (i.e. “Motif 2A”, “Motif 4B” etc.). The variance of directionality in itself is a tension and release device. In addition to the overall effect sheets-of-sound as motivic development yields. The starting motif Coltrane fancies the most is “Motif 1A” and the ending motif he fancies most is “Motif 4A.”

22:40  
42<sup>1394</sup>

1397

1400

1403

(Continued on Next Page)

1406

Motif 3A Motif 4A Motif 1C

1409

Motif 3A motif 1A Motif 4A motif 1A

1412

Motif 3A motif 1A Motif 4A

1415

motif 1C Motif 3A motif 1A

1418

Motif 3A Motif 1A Modulated Motif 3A Motif 1A Modulated

1421

Motif 3A Motif 1C Motif 4A Motif 1C

1424

Motif 3A Motif 4A 23 Motif 3A

1427

motif 1A Motif 3A motif 1A3 Motif 3A

(Go to Next Page)

## CONCLUSION

As stated, the purpose of transcribing this solo was not content analysis. However, the process of intentionally studying the content-related ways in which Coltrane sustains and develops a 27-minute solo over an AABA form has been rewarding. While my findings not related to content analysis are difficult to describe, I am able to articulate some of the analysis-based takeaways. Playing through the content itself has served toward further development of my own playing.

Through playing and studying Coltrane's lines I came upon some new and challenging possibilities of how to navigate linearly. Utilizing "Trane" changes which contain sonic gravity as a means of improvising over pedal points is something I really hadn't thought to do. At first, when playing through the abundance of lines which imply the type of chord movement associated with "Trane" changes, I did not recognize it even occurring- it appeared as merely chromatic linearity. Of course, Coltrane is certainly employing chromatic approach tones, which lend to the ambiguity of chordal rhythm. However, by looking specifically for these progressions, I now can re-approach the study of the 4-note cells which comprise those types of lines from a more informed perspective.

One of my favorite things about Coltrane's language and tonal preferences that he employs often on many 'classic quartet' period records is his use of the whole-tone scale as a way of navigating a dominant tonality or pedal-point. It happens to be one of the tonalities that I find most intriguing and effective in creating tension over a pedal point or over a dominant chord, and it is because of Coltrane. However, studying the ways in which he utilizes this tonality along with the augmented scale has been refreshing. The augmented scale is quite useful and there is a lot of ways of utilizing it which can be applied to many different chord types. Seeing Coltrane wield these two tonalities along with his chromatic dominant chord bebop vocabulary has certainly been eye-opening.

Throughout this staggeringly long solo, Coltrane saves his use of volume for only the most appropriate of moments. This is incredibly profound, because it is a testament to his

emotional control but also his ability to continuously create content that is driven by theoretical elements more so than by the emotional. Studying the content itself yields a clear understanding of how it's possible to build a solo without using sheer power and volume, but instead, using interesting, polished, sophisticated and well-timed content.

Another interesting thing that occurred, was throughout the process of this transcription I found myself not needing to even play certain things on my own instrument to check to see if they were correct. My relative pitch definitely received a huge workout and my ability to hear series' of notes noticeably sharpened, especially considering the lack of predictable harmony behind them. Taking the time to dig into what is actually happening within the sheets of sound, writing them out and witnessing the construction unfold also was eye-opening. Prior to this, sheets of sound was something I never wanted to transcribe. However, forcing myself to do it, note by note, and then seeing it all play out in time while hearing it was quite astonishing. Of course, trying to execute that material at tempo is another story, but there are definitely some things that I can dissect and apply in the short term.

Finally, after having transcribed the entire solo, listening to it while being able to read along is a true pleasure. This activity has been mind-opening in itself, even without the act of analyzing the content as it goes by. It's like watching a flip book story of an entire movie. Usually flip-books are fairly short, due to the time it takes to create each page. In this case, I committed to completing the entire flip-book, and getting lost in it is quite an enjoyable reward.