To begin at the beginning, a caveat for the casual listener. Be advised that this record cannot be loved or understood in one sitting, and that there can be no appreciation at all in two minutes listening to an arbitrary excerpt in a record store. In fact, there is no casual approach to be taken to this record. It is truly modern; it is as advanced as the most advanced contemporary jazz is and, the communications scene being as retarded as it is, the kind of event which *Ascension* is will be unfamiliar to anyone who has not made it a serious avocation to search out and understand the new jazz.

What this is is a plexus of voices, all of different kinds, but most belonging to that generation which grew up on Mingus, Monk, Taylor, McLean, Coleman, Coltrane, the human rights struggle, and nuclear weapons. *Ascension* is at the same time a reevaluation of the old song formal values and a positive assertion of the heretofore unconsidered values of what is called nowadays the New Emerging Forces.

One problem for the casual listener in getting next to this record is the relatively high level of intensity at which it begins. In that respect it's like Wagner—it begins on a plane at which most performances end and builds to a higher plane than the average listener considers comfortable. As Marion Brown said, "You could use this record to heat up the apartment on those cold winter days."

For the listener who has lived with and enjoyed Coltrane's work in Chasin' the Trane (*Coltrane Live at the Village Vanguard;* Impulse A-10) or Out of This World (*Coltrane;* Impulse A-21) *when they were happening* this is a guaranteed soul rinsing. It is in several parts, as it allows solo space for all the participants, but its total emotional weight is about that of a live performance of Coltrane's when he is in the mood to empty his own and his audience's spiritual reservoir. There is impact and release, communion and response; the emphasis is on the unmentionable, on what I call the Marvelous: it is not intended that *Ascension* will be background music for polite dinner conversation.

Beginning with the beginning, *Ascension* is, or has, one tune, a line used by Coltrane in the opening and repeated in the ensemble passages. There is no breakdown into separate bands or movements, which should not be interpreted as a lack of structure, but as an attempt to make a totality of the group performance.

Each soloist is given a few choruses with the rhythm quartet, and each solo is followed by free blowing ensemble passage.

Speaking of the total effect of *Ascension,* Archie Shepp said, "It achieves a certain kind of unity; it starts at a high level of intensity with the horns playing high and the other pieces playing low. This gets a quality of like male and female voices. It builds in intensity through all the solo passages, brass and reeds, until it gets to the final section where the rhythm section takes over and brings it back down to the level it started at." By that time your nervous system has been dissected, overhauled, and reassembled.

Archie said, "The idea is similar to what the action painters do in that it creates various surfaces of color which push into each other, creates tensions and counter tensions, and various fields of energy."

Marion Brown approached it another way: "In the ensemble sections you get a different idea of what harmony is, or can be. Certain chords were used, but they were stretched out and orchestrated." Which has been the basis of John Coltrane's solo work in the years since he left Miles Davis.

Again quoting Archie Shepp: "The ensemble passages were based on chords, but these chords were optional. What Trane did was to relate or juxtapose tonally centered ideas and atonal elements, along with melodic and non-melodic elements. In those descending chords there is a definite tonal center, like a B flat minor. But there are different roads to that center.

"In the solo plus quartet parts there are no specified chords. These sections were to be dialogues between the soloists and the rhythm section. The whole work, beginning with Trane's solo was keyed, especially in McCoy's playing, to a minor blues."

Marion Brown described the session as "wildly exciting. We did two takes, and they both had that kind of thing in them that makes people scream. The people who were in the studio were screaming. I don't know how the engineers kept the screams out of the record."

"Spontaneity was the thing. Trane had obviously thought a lot about what he wanted to do, but he wrote most of it out in the studio. Then he told everybody what he wanted: he played this line and he said that everybody would play that line in the ensembles. Then he said he wanted crescendi and decrescendi after every solo. We ran thru some things together, until we were together, and then we got into it."

Archie added, "The emphasis was on textures rather than the making of an organizational entity. There was unity, but it was a unity of sounds and textures rather than like an A B A approach. You can hear, in the saxophones especially, a reaching for sound and an exploration of the possibilities of sound."

There is, as Shepp points out, considerable precedent for *Ascension.* The most obvious precedent is Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz,* which Shepp says "becomes more and more important every year. *Free Jazz* created a new form, and *Ascension* is a further step in the development of that form. John is approaching a group concept of playing—you'll notice that he took no more solo time than anybody else. That's because he didn't want any stars on this record, he wanted a group effect. That's the kind of thing Sun Ra has been working on for years, and it's a damn shame that Sun Ra's been ignored for so long. Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor have both done a lot of this—setting up the horns so that they play things against as well as with each other. The precedent for what John did here goes all the way back to New Orleans, where the voicings were certainly separate even though the group idea held. This is like a New Orleans concept, but with 1965 people."

Another thing which John Coltrane has accomplished with *Ascension* is the introduction of several of the most vital of the new voices in jazz. Some of these musicians have recorded, some not. Most are, at this time, unknown outside downtown New York, but *Ascension* should help to rectify that.

The soloists are, in the order of their appearance, John Coltrane, Dewey Johnson, Pharoah Sanders, Freddie Hubbard, Archie Shepp, John Tchicai, and Marion Brown. Give them a hearing. Give them a few.

A. B. SPELLMAN

SIDE ONE

ASCENSION (PART 1) 18:35

SIDE TWO

ASCENSION (PART 2) 19:15

(John Coltrane)
John Coltrane Orchestra

Recorded: June 28, 1965
Produced by: BOB THIELE
Cover and Liner Photos: CHARLES STEWART
Engineer: RUDY VAN GELDER
Liner Design: JOE LEBOW
Cover Design: ROBERT FLYNN/VICEROY
Reissue Supervisor: KEN DRUKER
Reissue Mastering: RYAN SMITH, STERLING SOUND