



CHASING TRANE: THE JOHN COLTRANE DOCUMENTARY

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES GUIDE

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FILMMAKER STATEMENT

I confess that I was not an obsessed John Coltrane fan when work began on *Chasing Trane*. Like many others, I had been introduced to his remarkable work through his recording of “My Favorite Things” and later came to know and be inspired by *A Love Supreme*. But the more I read about him, the better I understood his was a special and unique story.

We’ve all heard the cliché tale—a young artist with awesome talent explodes on the scene, has great success, makes a lot of money, abuses one substance or another, and as a result dies young. Coltrane was the antithesis of this. He had his challenges early on but, by sheer force of will, he overcame them and began his journey to greatness before succumbing to the ravages of cancer. To me, this was an inspiring and uplifting story, one that I simply had to tell.

From the outset, it was important that this be a film for *everyone*, not just Coltrane fans or jazz aficionados. The goal for me and my creative team—producer Dave Harding and editor/co-producer Peter Lynch—was to produce a portrait of a remarkable artist and to explore the critical events and influences that shaped him and his art. Some people know Coltrane, some don’t. Some know his story, others are familiar with the photos of a serious artist on record covers, and still others may only be vaguely aware of his name. For all those people and many more we wanted to bring Coltrane alive as a 3-dimensional human being in all his richness and complexity. We wanted to show Trane as he was then and now: an outside-the-box thinker whose boundary-shattering work continues to impact people around the world 50 years after his tragic death in 1967.

After seeing *Chasing Trane*, I would hope people would be inspired to research, explore and discuss many topics. Whether it is having the courage to confront one’s own demons...the importance of following one’s dreams irrespective of what others may say...whether it’s the importance and persistence of vision...even history of the civil rights movement or the history of music in the 20th Century... there are so many aspects of Coltrane’s life and extraordinary body of work that are worth talking about.

- John Scheinfeld, Director, *Chasing Trane: The John Coltrane Documentary*

SCREENING CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

John Coltrane, affectionately known as Trane, is a legendary musician whose influence is still felt today. His creative contribution to the arts transcended barriers of race, religion, geography, and generation. Coltrane's music changed his own life, and it inspired many others. Your screenings are an opportunity to launch the Indie Lens Pop-Up season with an inspiring conversation about the transformative power of art. The strategies in this guide help to meet these engagement goals:

- Celebrate music and the arts in general, and appreciate the power of creative expression to entertain, inspire, and transform.
- Encourage audience members – especially younger generations – to be inspired by and learn from the life and creative genius of Coltrane.
- Educate viewers about music history and the important role jazz, and music more generally, played in American history.

RELEVANT TOPICS AND ISSUES

- Creativity and innovation
- Mentorship
- Resilience
- Music history
- Jazz
- Civil rights history
- Substance abuse and recovery

POTENTIAL AUDIENCES

- Jazz and all music lovers
- Concert goers
- Regular PBS viewers and NPR listeners
- American history buffs
- Student musicians
- Spiritual, faith-based communities



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the early 1900s, African American musicians in New Orleans were creating a truly innovative sound. They combined the rhythms of the African Diaspora, brought West by their ancestors via the slave trade, with the instruments of European immigrants. The melting pot of music all around them provided additional inspiration for what would later be called jazz. A discerning listener could hear the call and response of work songs from former slaves, the deep emotion of spirituals from the Black churches, the steady beat of Blues music, the fast-moving rhythms of ragtime, and the up-tempo of brass funeral processions.

Jazz music was revolutionary because it rejected the highly orchestrated, predictable rhythms of classical European music. Instead, it embraced improvisation and extended soloing – characteristics that reflected the American ideals of freedom and individualism.

At the time, Reconstruction, which was the federal government’s attempt to transition the South out of the slave economy after the Civil War, had deteriorated. In its place arrived the segregation laws known as Jim Crow. Black musicians were barred from playing or patronizing music venues in the white parts of town, yet white musicians were known to come listen to jazz at the notorious brothels and gambling dens that hired Black musicians.

The harsh reality created by Jim Crow segregation prompted widespread migration of southern Blacks to northern industrial cities in search of economic opportunity. As its musicians migrated north, so did their music. Cities like Chicago, New York, and Kansas City became jazz cities. And while most jazz musicians were Black at the time, it was the all-white Dixieland Original Jazz Band that recorded the first jazz album in 1917 and introduced the genre to the masses.

Jazz was wildly popular through the Jazz Age of the twenties, the Big Band era of the thirties, and bebop craze of the forties. Before Coltrane, there was pioneering jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong and pianist Duke Ellington, the “King of Swing” clarinetist Benny Goodman, famous crooners including Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra, and bebop trailblazers saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie.

By midcentury, heroin had established itself as a destructive menace on the Harlem jazz scene in New York City. Great musicians like Holiday and Parker fell victim to addiction and died young. Heroin continues to plague music communities of all genres to this day.

It was legendary trumpeter Miles Davis and eccentric pianist Thelonious Monk that kept the sound of jazz relevant through the fifties, and it was with Davis and Monk where Coltrane would hone his craft. Coltrane’s awe-inspiring technical ability and boundless creativity spawned his own style of jazz music in the sixties, sometimes called free or avant-garde jazz. Highly innovative and experimental, its sound had mixed reviews from fans to musicians alike.

After Coltrane’s untimely death in 1967, jazz began to evolve into and give way to other popular musical genres. Contemporary music such as soul, R&B, rock and roll, and hip hop all draw on elements of jazz music.

Source:

- Ward, Geoffrey C. and Burns, Ken. *Jazz: A History of America’s Music*. New York: Kopf, 2000.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

1926 - Born September 23rd, the only child of John and Alice Coltrane in Hamlet, North Carolina. Picks up music at an early age from his father who played several instruments.

1938 - After the successive deaths of his aunt, grandparents, and father, turns to music to cope. Switches from the clarinet to the alto saxophone in high school.

1943 - Moves to Philadelphia after high school to be with his mother and studies music at Granoff Studios and the Ornstein School of Music.

1945 - Sees Gillespie and Parker in concert for the first time. Enlists in the U.S. military during WWII and plays for the U.S. Navy Band stationed at Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i for the next year.

1949 -1951 - Tours with Gillespie and practices obsessively. Begins to experiment with drugs.

1955 -1957 - Marries Naima and adopts her daughter, Antonia. Begins playing with Davis and developing a name for himself. Coltrane's heroin addiction worsens and Davis asks him to leave his quintet.

1957 - Quits drugs cold turkey, and undergoes a spiritual awakening that he would infuse into his music. Begins to play and record with Monk.

1958 - Rejoins Davis and develops a new style of playing multiple notes at once, dubbed 'sheets of sound.'

1959 - Records the album *Giant Steps*, the first exclusively featuring his own compositions.

1960 - Forms his own quartet. Debuts his soprano saxophone on the album *My Favorite Things*, which includes his first hit song - the popular Broadway musical tune by the same name.

1963 - Meets Alice, who he would later marry and have three children with. After four children are killed in the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, he writes the song "Alabama" patterned on the eulogy delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. at the funeral.

1964 - Records his seminal album, *A Love Supreme*, a tribute to the power and glory of God. It would later be certified gold for selling more than 500,000 copies in Japan.

1965 - Forms a new quintet and begins experimenting with a new, avant-garde sound.

1967 - Coltrane dies of liver cancer at the age of 40. Posthumously, he receives a Grammy for his solo performance on his album, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, and a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Sources:

- Scheinfeld, John. *Chasing Trane: The John Coltrane Documentary*. Los Angeles: Crewneck Productions, 2016.
- JohnColtrane.com official website, <http://www.johncoltrane.com/biography.html>.



FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Chasing Trane is an opportunity for Indie Lens Pop-Up partners to launch their season with a celebration of the arts. The film will likely attract loyal jazz fans, who may have even grown up with Coltrane’s music. As you are planning your event, think about ways to expand your audience to musicians of all genres, younger generations, or creative types that will be drawn to Coltrane’s innovative spirit. Look for more recommendations below in the “Potential Partners and/or Speakers.”

Jazz music at its roots is an African American innovation born out of the resilience of Black communities. Consider paying tribute to this heritage by designing an event that educates audience members about African American history and/or highlights Black artists in your community.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Your *Chasing Trane* DVD features the following conversation starter on the menu screen before the film starts:

How has music influenced your life?

Project the conversation starter before the film begins as guests are taking their seat at your venue. Prior to the film or your panel discussion, encourage participants to turn to a person sitting near them to share their answers for two to three minutes including any recent examples that come to mind. If time permits, invite a few people to share with the entire group.

POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

Invite speakers from one or several of these suggested categories below to discuss the themes in the film with your audience. If your speaker is affiliated with an organization or has a following in your community, ask them to invite their supporters to your event to participate in the discussion and make sure to provide all the necessary materials to help them promote.

- Invite **local musicians or artists** to join a panel discussion to talk about their creative processes. They do not necessarily have to be directly influenced by Coltrane; you can draw on themes in the film by asking them to speak about the ways family, community, culture, religion, or current events influence their art. Check your local music festival line-ups, weekend entertainment listings, music venues, galleries or museums for ideas on well-known musicians in your area that can also help to turn out fans for your screening. Check the local business listings in the Yellow Pages: <https://www.yellowpages.com/>, or on Yelp: <https://www.yelp.com>. You can also search for a member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences: <http://www.aes.org/member/search/>. Or look through the artist community on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com>, or SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/> by searching for your city and other keywords like jazz.



- Invite **historians and historical societies** to share more about music history or well-known musicians that came from your community. Look to nearby universities for subject matter experts in departments such as History, Music, Ethnomusicology, American Studies, or African American Studies. Your state or regional historical society may be able to localize the discussion; find a historical society near you here: <http://bit.ly/2gcKjap>.
- Ask **music teachers or students** to share their ideas on what it takes to be a musician. Leverage the inspiration your viewers will feel after watching *Chasing Trane* to discuss topics such as tips for developing good practice habits or how to book your first gig. Look to your local schools or university music departments for teachers or students, or search the National Association of Schools of Music directory: <https://nasm.arts-credit.org/directory-lists/>.
- There will likely be music buffs among your local **entertainment writers or radio DJs**. Inquire at your community newspaper or radio stations if anyone can speak about your local music scene. Developing partnerships with your newspapers and radios may help with your promotional efforts as well.
- **Faith leaders and/or choir directors** from local Black churches may be interested in discussing the connection between music and spirituality that Coltrane felt. Search for Black churches in your state here: <http://theblackchurches.org/churches/>.
- Invite an **art therapy professional** to discuss the mental health benefits of creative expression. See if your guest speaker can connect the discussion to experiences in Coltrane's own life, such as using music to overcome grief or harnessing art to manage addiction. Search for a chapter of the American Art Therapy Association near you: <https://arttherapy.org/chapters/>.
- Alcohol and drug abuse is an all-too-familiar problem in the music industry. See if there are **substance abuse counselors** near you that have experience working with musicians. Ask them to share prevention tips for musicians just starting out and recovery resources for those that may need support. Look for providers through SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration): <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Arrange a moderator to facilitate a discussion with your panel of speakers or with your audience members. These questions could be adapted for either type of discussion. It's a good idea to review questions with your moderator and speakers before the event and select discussion topics accordingly.

- What do you admire about John Coltrane – his life and his music? What other artists have inspired you and why?
- How do you define greatness? What about John Coltrane makes him a great artist? Why do you think he inspires such devotion from fans?



- Dr. Cornel West says in the film, “Black music was the Black response to being terrorized and traumatized.” What does he mean by this? In what context did jazz music develop? What other genres of music developed out of African American experiences?
- How was Miles Davis a mentor to John Coltrane? What did he do that helped Coltrane improve his art and his life? What do you think makes someone a good mentor?
- Drugs and alcohol are an all-too-common problem across all genres of music. Why do you think this is? What can musicians do to avoid the pitfalls of addiction?
- In the film, Carlos Santana says about Coltrane: “Some people play jazz, some people play reggae, some people play blues... he played life.” What examples of this did you witness in the film?
- From where did Coltrane draw his artistic inspiration? How did he use a diversity of influences to create a truly original sound?
- Why do you think spirituality is often intimately connected with music? What about the history, community, or teachings of various religions inspire musical expression?
- How did Coltrane prepare himself in his early years for the innovation he would achieve in his later years? What does it take to be an innovator?
- In Coltrane’s own words, he believed his purpose was to “make others happy through music.” In your opinion, what is the purpose of art? What value does art and music specifically bring to our world?

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES BEYOND A PANEL

These activities can help to further create an engaging and memorable experience for your audience. They can be organized in addition to or instead of a traditional post-screening panel discussion.

- Incorporate music into your event. Some musicians may want to receive payment for appearing. If you do not have a budget for booking talent, you could approach a local business to sponsor your event or see if you can arrange a trade for publicity, such as a spot on your public radio station.
 - Invite **musicians** to play at your venue before or after the screening.
 - Book a **DJ** that mixes the Coltrane favorites with contemporary music, such as R&B or hip hop.
 - Host a **vinyl night** where audience members bring their own vinyls to play at your event. Designate a volunteer to manage a sign up list and post a few rules, such as how long each participant can play their selection or any limitations on what people can play.
 - Showcase **young musicians** from a local school or university at your event. You could also take your screening into the classroom and host a special event for music students.



- Share the **music playlist** being created by *Independent Lens* by playing it at your event or posting it on social media as part of your promotions. Check the *Independent Lens* website for a forthcoming link and/or information about the film's official soundtrack:
<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/chasing-trane/>.
You can also create your own playlist featuring Coltrane and other musicians from the film:
 - Charlie Parker
 - Dizzy Gillespie
 - Miles Davis
 - Kamasi Washington
 - Common
 - Carlos Santana
 - The Doors
- Add an **art or photography exhibit** to your event to build on viewer appreciation for the arts. Local photographers or historical societies may have collections of music-inspired photos from your community. Incorporate music at your exhibit (see recommendations above) to add to the ambiance. You could also provide refreshments to encourage audience members to linger and socialize after the screening. Reach out to local galleries to inquire about artists and photographers, or find a historical society with a photography collection near you here: <http://bit.ly/2gcKjap>.
- Ask your audience members to record **oral histories** about their music memories through the StoryCorps app: <https://storycorps.me/>. Make sure you have a Wi-Fi signal for people to download the app if they choose to participate. Post the Wi-Fi login and the app URL near the entrance of your event, and designate a quiet spot in your venue for people to record their oral history before or after the screening. Make sure to ask people to tag their recordings with #IndieLensPBS to help with locating them after the event. You can also provide a few recommended questions to get the conversation started:
 - What was the first album you ever owned?
 - Tell me about the first concert you ever attended?
 - Have you ever played a musical instrument?
 - What musicians have had an influence on you?
 - What does music mean to you?
 - We just watched the Indie Lens PBS documentary *Chasing Trane* together. What inspired you most about the life and music of John Coltrane?.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/chasing-trane/> - The companion site created by *Independent Lens* for *Chasing Trane* with additional content to support Indie Lens Pop-Up screenings and the PBS broadcast.

<http://www.coltranefilm.com> - The website created by the filmmakers for *Chasing Trane: The John Coltrane Documentary*.

<http://www.johncoltrane.com/> - An online resource for John Coltrane and his family foundation, which includes media and merchandise.

<http://www.pbs.org/arts> - PBS programs that celebrate the arts.

<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/shows/list/> - Find programs from the PBS Black Culture Collection.

<http://www.pbs.org/show/jazz/> - Collection for Ken Burns' PBS documentary series, *Jazz*.

<http://www.jazz.org/> - Jazz education, events, and media from Lincoln Center.

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/smithsonian-jazz> - Smithsonian Jazz creates exhibitions and educational materials to facilitate jazz appreciation.

<http://monkinstitute.org/curriculum/jazz-resource-library/> - The Thelonious Monk Institute provides a number of helpful resources including a historical timeline and a must-listen list.

CREDITS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. For more information, visit itvs.org.

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter @IndependentLens.