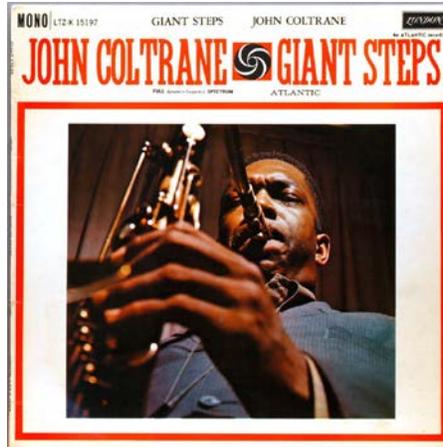


“Giant Steps”—John Coltrane (1959)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Carl Woideck (guest post)*



Original album cover

“Giant Steps” is saxophonist/composer John Coltrane’s first LP (long-playing vinyl disc) as bandleader for Atlantic Records. Recorded in 1959 and released in 1960, “Giant Steps” is iconic in part because it contains the first-issued recording of one of Coltrane’s most important compositions, also titled “Giant Steps.” It is also significant because it was Coltrane’s first LP to be released that was comprised solely of his own compositions. In 2004, it was added to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Preservation Board’s National Recording Registry. “Rolling Stone” magazine has twice named “Giant Steps” as one of the “500 Greatest Albums of All Time” (most recently #103 in 2012). It has been listed as an essential or recommended recording in many guides to jazz.

Coltrane’s compositions on “Giant Steps” include a ballad (“Naima”); two blues with a swing beat (“Cousin Mary” and “Mr. P. C.”); a swinging piece built on an existing form (“Countdown,” based on “Tune Up”); and three swing pieces created on original forms (“Spiral,” “Syeeda’s Song Flute,” and “Giant Steps”). The best-known piece on the LP is the title composition, “Giant Steps.”

The difficult chord progression of “Giant Steps” marks a high point in Coltrane’s pursuit of greater and greater harmonic complexity. At the time of the recording, and well into 1960, Coltrane was fascinated with playing music based on challenging chord sequences. Earlier jazz musicians such as Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker (all of whom influenced Coltrane) had already raised the level of harmonic complexity in jazz through improvising upon such complex progressions.

The first half of “Giant Steps” begins with a sequence of five chords that visit three major (as opposed to minor) keys that are related in an unusual, symmetrical way. Soon, five chords visit the same keys in a different order, bringing the piece back to the original key. The principle

underlying this chord progression became known as “Coltrane Changes.” (Chord progressions are often called chord *changes*.)

The composition’s relentless changes of key create a harmonic obstacle course that is difficult to navigate, more so at this rapid tempo. On the recording, Coltrane sprints through this challenging chord progression with authority, although he understandably employs some well-prepared melodic formulas. At least one unissued 1960 live recording exists of Coltrane playing “Giant Steps,” and a jazz scholar who has heard it reports that, in the ensuing year, Coltrane had learned to navigate the obstacle course with greater spontaneity and fewer prepared formulas.

Beginning on a B major chord (as does “Giant Steps”), the archetypical “Coltrane Changes” sequence unfolds like this:

B D7 G Bb7 Eb F#7 B

The sequence begins in B major and along the way cadences into the keys of G and Eb before returning to the opening key of B. The major keys of B, G, Eb and again B lie (enharmonically) a uniform major third (four half steps) below the previous key, creating an unusual symmetry that appealed to Coltrane.

Coltrane was not the first to use this distinctive chord progression. It is found in the verse to composer Jerome Kern’s 1917 song “Till The Clouds Roll By” (using the same chords as would Coltrane in “Giant Steps”), and Duke Ellington used the sequence in his 1956 composition “Blue Rose.” Not recognized at the time, the second half of “Giant Steps” was taken directly from a passage in theorist Nicolas Slonimsky’s “Thesaurus Of Scales And Melodic Patterns” which visits the same three keys that the first half of Coltrane’s piece does.

Soon after composing “Giant Steps,” the saxophonist started inserting Coltrane Changes into his arrangements of pop songs like “Body And Soul,” “But Not For Me,” and “I Can’t Get Started,” and into the jazz original “Tune Up” that Coltrane retitled “Countdown” and included on the album “Giant Steps.”

At the time of recording the LP “Giant Steps,” Coltrane was a member of Miles Davis’s group. Ironically, just as Coltrane was reaching a height of chordal complexity in “Giant Steps,” Davis was pursuing simplification through what is called modal organization of music, a system in which compositions are based on scales (often called *modes*), not chords. In 1958, Davis spoke of the rewards of improvising modally: “When you go this way, you can go on forever. You don’t have to worry about [chord] changes and you can do more with the [melodic] line. It becomes a challenge to see how melodically innovative you can be.” But Coltrane needed to finish his exploration of difficult chord progressions such as “Giant Steps” before fully acting on the implications of Davis’s explorations. That came in 1960, when Coltrane began recording pieces that were organized by modes, not chords. In a 1960 interview, Coltrane acknowledged the versatility of modal organization: “This approach allowed the soloist the choice of playing chordally (vertically) or melodically (horizontally). . . . Miles’ music gave me plenty of freedom. It’s a beautiful approach.” By 1962, Coltrane would look back and say, “There was a

time when I was going through a 'chord' phase, that was the period that I recorded 'Giant Steps'; now I'm in my modal period."

Although Coltrane is now lauded by critics and listeners as one of the most important and influential jazz artists of any era, he was, at the release of the LP "Giant Steps," a controversial artist. His metallic tenor sax tone quality was unconventional, and his rapid, complex improvisations were too intense for some. In 1958, critic Don Gold published a review that characterized Coltrane as an "angry young tenor." (The same year, Coltrane said of his playing, "If it is interpreted as angry, it is taken wrong.")

Upon "Giant Step's" release, not all critical reaction was positive. Writing in "Metronome" in 1960, H.A. (Henry) Woodfin said that on the title composition ("Giant Steps"), Coltrane's improvising showed "rhythmic stiffness and melodic tameness," and that Coltrane's arpeggios did not create a melodic line. He criticized three other pieces as "exercise[s] on the chords." He found two other selections to be better because they more resembled Coltrane's earlier work. He only fully enjoyed the "delicacy" and "nuances" of the ballad "Naima," and concluded that the album showed "cautiousness that is alien to his [Coltrane's] art." Coltrane's saxophone timbre was "almost flat and colorless" compared to his earlier recordings. (In fact, Coltrane was now recording in a different studio with a different engineer and with different equipment than most of his earlier recordings.)

Writing in "Down Beat," also in 1960, Ralph J. Gleason took issue with the notion that Coltrane was a "harsh-sounding player to whom [it] is difficult to listen," and argued that Coltrane's timbre on the LP is at times "soft, lyrical and . . . pretty." He had no problem with "the usual Coltrane forceful playing," and praised two of the pieces ("Giant Steps" and "Countdown") that Woodfin criticized. Writing the same year in "The Jazz Review," Mait Edey also discussed Coltrane's then-controversial timbre, and found his tone quality to be more varied than before. His favorite selections were "Giant Steps," "Cousin Mary," and "Spiral." Edey was perhaps the first critic to identify "Giant Steps" as an essential jazz LP, writing, "Everyone, including those who have had reservations about Coltrane, should have this set."

A contemporaneous Atlantic Records advertisement for the LP "Giant Steps" used Coltrane's then-controversial status as a selling point: "Adventurous, imaginative, daringly experimental throughout, 'Giant Steps' is the kind of album that involves, ears, mind and heart. It is a pace-setter and certain to be one of the most talked-about LPs of 1960." It went further than the reviewers to say that the LP's essential place in jazz was already established: "Powerfully moving, this is a masterwork, a modern classic . . . 'Giant Steps' indeed."

Young musicians have long transcribed and learned to play Coltrane's improvised solos from the LP, especially the title composition "Giant Steps." A quick internet search will reveal players on various instruments and also vocalists performing Coltrane's "Giant Steps" solo note-for-note. But merely reproducing Coltrane is not enough; being able to improvise upon the song's difficult

chord progression is now viewed as an essential skill for many young jazz musicians. Coltrane's other compositions on the LP "Giant Steps" such as "Mr. P. C." and "Naima" are still in most professionals' and many students' repertoires.

Attesting to its lasting importance, "Giant Steps" continues to be popular with listeners whether via streaming, digital download, compact disc, or vinyl LP. The iconic standing of "Giant Steps" in jazz history is assured, as is the standing of the once-controversial John Coltrane.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.