

# BLUE WORLD

John Coltrane



B0030157-02







Projet: 63866 ID: 64  
Adresse: MM01066  
Type Mat.: Music Masters  
Durée:

Titre Travail: CHRONIQUE D'UNE RUPT  
Titre Definitif: CHAT DANS LE SAC,  
Libelle: Music (Coltrane)



The Canadian filmmaker Gilles Groulx's breakthrough movie *Le chat dans le sac* — depicting two young lovers navigating their relationship in 1964 Montreal — opens with a startling music cue. Barbara and Claude, the two primary characters, have just introduced themselves directly to the camera. They embrace in slow-motion as the film's title appears and, just as they separate, the music of John Coltrane kicks in at top volume: "Naima," the wistful ballad the saxophonist named for his first wife and which was first heard on his *Giant Steps* album five years earlier.

By 1964, Coltrane was a leading jazz figure and certainly well-known among jazz enthusiasts, but his music had yet to reach universal adoration nor was it free of controversy. Opening a movie with the music of John Coltrane — even an independent film like *Le chat dans le sac* — was an unusual choice at that time, and a bold statement in itself.

What's more remarkable, as "Naima" tracks for its full, four-minute duration while Barbara and Claude continue to define who they are (young, searching) and where they are (Montreal), is the realization that this performance of "Naima" is in fact an unheard studio recording featuring his classic 1961-1965 quartet: pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison and drummer Elvin Jones. In fact, throughout the film's 78-minute duration, a number of fresh versions of Coltrane tunes figure prominently on the soundtrack: "Village Blues" and "Out of This World" (here titled "Blue World," a contrafact of the Harold Arlen original).

That Coltrane was approached in 1964 to record music for *Le chat dans le sac* was largely unknown until a few years ago, even by jazz historians and other experts; the date never appeared in the usual record company or studio logs. Another reason is that *Le chat* was an underground art-house hit in its day, its impact limited further by the fact that it was distributed almost exclusively in Francophone territories and on the

festival circuit (winning numerous awards). In the years that followed its initial release, it remained more historically regarded than publicly available.

But by the digital era, the story was hiding in plain sight. One could find *Le chat* streaming online as well as on the website for Canada's National Film Board (NFB), the government agency that produced the film.

Then there are those who have known about the jazz legend's role in *Le chat* since it happened, among them the film's surviving participants like the actor Barbara Ulrich. She played "Barbara" in the film — her first major cinematic role — and she became Gilles Groulx's life companion in real life, uniquely positioning her to know the why and how of Coltrane's contribution. "I met Gilles when I did the screen test for *Le chat* and it turned out we were both jazz fans," she says. "When we moved in together, it turned out we had many of the same albums — jazz was holiness to Gilles and he had every Coltrane album that ever came out. Coltrane to him was an absolute master."

Montreal in the 1950s and '60s was not only a jazz-friendly city but a destination where black Americans could walk and breathe a little easier, away from the prevalent racism south of the Canadian border, as Ulrich relates:

At that time there were a lot of African Americans who had moved to Montreal and there wasn't the same discrimination and segregation as in the States. So all the jazz musicians would come up and play here and Stanley Street was where all the bohemian cafés were, like The Little Vienna Club, and places that specialized in jazz — Rockhead's Paradise and La tête de l'art. I saw all of the groups that came to Montreal — Horace Silver, Art Blakey, just to name a few. Coltrane came, too. I remember Gilles and I saw him with the quartet with Elvin Jones,



McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Garrison. Gilles told me that Garrison helped make the connection to Coltrane — he wanted something special to help him realize his first feature film.

The Montreal-born Groulx shot his first film — an experimental silent — independently in 1954 and eventually joined the NFB to produce documentary shorts exploring such Canadian events as a snowshoe convention and a boxing competition

with minimal narration or interpretation, typical of the “candid eye” aesthetic of the time (*Candid Eye* was the title of an influential Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary series). With an air of dispassion, Groulx’s work also reflected a certain political sensibility, focusing on working-class life and concerns. And, in presenting his films in French, the filmmaker broke significant ground at the NFB, soon reflecting the growing frustration among French-speaking Canadians that would lead to the Québécois separatist movement in the 1960s.

*Le chat*, in fact, had started as a documentary on the general topic of winter. But, in what proved a major career turn for Groulx, he boldly decided to repurpose the bare-boned budget to fund a feature film on the demise of a young relationship, even before gaining permission from his higher-ups. *Chronique d’une rupture* was its working title. The filmmaker pushed forward, eventually gaining proper approval and shot the film using techniques he had helped develop among fellow Québécois documentarians (a style collectively referred to as “Cinema Direct”, much in the same vein as France’s New Wave genre): single, hand-held camera shots, extended takes and minimal edits, voice-overs disassociated from the on-screen action, ‘interviews’ spoken directly to the camera, and improvised dialogue allowing the primary theme of the film (in this

case the unraveling of a romance along lines of contemporary politics and social concerns) to reveal itself in everyday situations at a natural, sometimes desultory pace.

The limited budget, coupled with Groulx’s priority in minimizing the polished, overwrought feel of a studio-produced dramatic film led him to cast two unproven actors as his leads, using their real names for their characters: Claude Godbout as “Claude” and Ulrich. Groulx himself wrote, directed and edited the film, as he had with his documentaries. (Ulrich: “I always say there’s a difference between a filmmaker and a film director. Gilles considered himself to be a filmmaker in the sense that he had a holistic approach.”) He was well into the editing process in the spring of 1964 when Groulx shared with his new partner his intention of reaching out to a favorite jazz musician:

He said, “I think I’m going to ask Coltrane to do the music.” He knew Jimmy Garrison through a woman from Florida — Ruth Eppinger — a recurring figure in his documentary *Voir Miami* [1962]. She introduced them. I remember he told me he was going to ask Coltrane. I said, “Great, fantastic! Do you really think he’ll say yes?” He said, “Well, if I don’t ask I won’t know.”

Groulx’s decision to use jazz fell in line with a number of films associated with the French New Wave: Godard’s *À bout de souffle* (1960) employed Martial Solal to create a fleet-fingered jazz piano soundtrack, while Roger Vadim’s *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1959) used Thelonious Monk and Duke Jordan performances and showed Art Blakey and other jazz musicians onscreen. Most famously, Louis Malle’s directorial debut *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud* (1958) featured a melancholy, modal-based soundtrack created — scene by scene — by Miles Davis leading a small French jazz ensemble. In





contrast, Coltrane did not create music shaped by what he saw; given the technology of the day and again, Groulx's limited resources, the saxophonist did not benefit from seeing any version of *Le chat* before recording the music for it.

The session took place on the afternoon of June 24, 1964 at Van Gelder's studio, with Groulx himself in attendance. Ulrich recalls that Groulx had driven down from Montreal the night before "in a Film Board car because he was on a Film Board assignment," and:

Gilles had a list of the music he wanted and later he told me when he gave the list to Coltrane, Coltrane said, "Okay, I can do this — I can't do that, it's not mine. OK I get it, I know what you want." Then they just started jamming and recorded for several hours. Then Rudy gave Gilles the tape and that was it. When he got back he was absolutely ecstatic. He knew exactly where he was going to use the music in the film. I said, "So how was it?" He was smiling; he showed me the tape and then he took it to the Film Board and I never saw it again.

These new versions, while bearing familiar melodies, offer fresh updates on older material — something the ever-progressing Coltrane hardly ever permitted himself in the studio. From 1959-on, there was always new material to record and new strategies and challenges to explore. For this reason alone, *Blue World* offers a special opportunity, which is the chance to compare these versions with previous perspectives, revealing both Coltrane's personal progress and the interactive consistency and sonic details the Classic Quartet had firmly established as their collective signature by 1964. This signature was so assured and dramatic, so buoyant and different from the sound Coltrane had delivered before.

Notably, Coltrane recorded two other studio albums that year — *Crescent* and *A Love Supreme*. Both pointed to the extended canvases and spiritual vibe that became his musical signature for the remainder of his life; the *Blue World* date was the rare look back at the songs he had written or adapted as he deepened and developed his musical identity: steps that had brought him to the heights of *A Love Supreme* and would continue to propel his music higher.

And what of the relationship between Gilles Groulx and John Coltrane? Ulrich still sees them as two peas in the same creative pod — deep thinkers who worked diligently on recreating their respective modes of expression. Both tall and quiet. Both deeply philosophical and self-critical: "When Gilles finished his films he hated them. He was extremely demanding of himself. But with *Le chat*, he was always terribly cognizant of the fact that Coltrane accepted to do the music and, for him, Coltrane remained one of the greatest."

Ulrich recalls catching the Coltrane quartet at least one more time in Montreal after *Le chat* was released, "...and between sets Coltrane came to sit at our table and so did Jimmy Garrison. Coltrane was a minimal speaker and so was Gilles, so they got along really, really well. Of course, I was so impressionable that I just sat there and didn't know what to say."

Two years later, Groulx and Ulrich received a call. "When John died, his wife Alice phoned us to tell us about it, which goes to show he must have talked about Gilles. It was terribly sad to get the news, and then of course Gilles spoke about his trip to New Jersey. Years later he still talked about that session, how incredible it was. At the end he would always say the same thing. "Oh well, you know, Coltrane didn't talk a lot."

— Ashley Kahn





# BLUE WORLD

## John Coltrane



John Coltrane – Tenor Saxophone  
McCoy Tyner – Piano  
Jimmy Garrison – Bass  
Elvin Jones – Drums

Recorded and Mixed by  
Rudy Van Gelder at Van Gelder  
Studios, Englewood Cliffs, NJ  
on June 24, 1964

Mastered by Kevin Reeves at  
Universal Music Mastering,  
New York, NY

Original recording produced by  
John Coltrane  
*Blue World* produced by Ken Druker  
Executive Producer: Ravi Coltrane  
Executive Producer for UMe:  
Harry Weinger  
All tracks previously unreleased.

Original ¼" analog mono tapes were used for all tracks.  
Minor tape anomalies that may be heard are a by-product of the  
historical nature of this material.

Creative Direction: Josh Cheuse  
Design: House @ Intro, London

Cover Photo: © Jim Marshall Photography, LLC  
Additional Photography:  
© Chuck Stewart Photography, LLC [images provided by Fireball  
Entertainment Group]

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Marketing: Oliver Schrage  
Production & Release Coordination: Eric Neuser  
UMe Business Affairs: Athena Rapis

To view *Le chat dans le sac* in its entirety, please visit:

English: [https://www.nfb.ca/film/cat\\_in\\_the\\_bag/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/cat_in_the_bag/)

French: [https://www.onf.ca/film/chat\\_dans\\_le\\_sac/](https://www.onf.ca/film/chat_dans_le_sac/)

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According to researcher Wolf Schmalzer, the following tracks appear in the soundtrack of the film *Le chat dans le sac*: "Naima (Take 1)" appears 1:54 to 6:17 in the film, and the complete take is used. "Village Blues (Take 2)" appears 6:56 to 9:28 in the film, from the beginning of the track until 2:33. "Blue World" appears in two places in the film, from 41:20 to 42:14 and from 46:30 to 49:20.

Special thanks to Michele Anthony, Chris Butler, Michael Cuscuna, Chris DeVito, Eric Fillion, Michael Frisch, Yasuhiro Fujioka, Claude Godbout, Jane Gowen, Sir Lucian Grainge, Mary Graziano, Jamie Krents, Dr. Lewis Porter, Bruce Resnikoff, Wolf Schmalzer, Dickon Stainer, Barbara Ulrich & David Wild

Special thanks to filmmaker Gilles Groulx (1931-1994) whose tenacity and love for the music of John Coltrane made this recording possible.

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