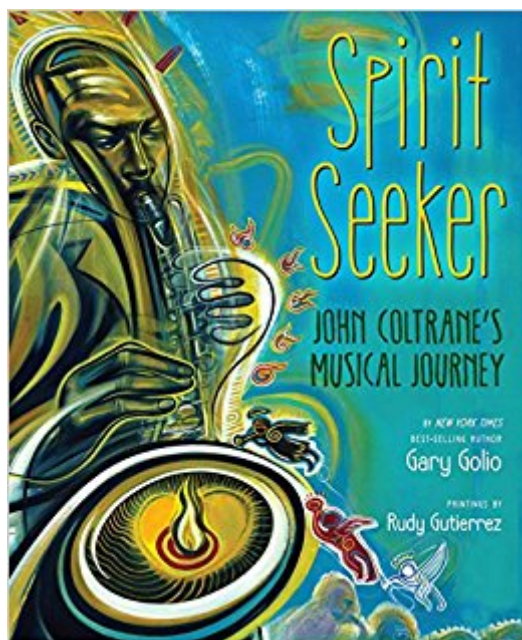


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# Spirit Seeker: John Coltrane's Musical Journey



## Synopsis

Growing up, John was a seeker. He wondered about spirit, and the meaning of life. And whether music could be a key to unlocking those mysteries. Like his grandfather's preaching and his parents' songs, could John's music bring people closer to God? Told in moving prose and powerfully illustrated, this is the story of a shy, curious boy from a deeply religious family who grew up to find solace and inspiration in his own unique approach to both spirituality and music. John Coltrane—a legendary jazz musician whose work shattered boundaries and continues to influence countless artists to this day.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 12 years

Grade Level: 5 - 7

## Customer Reviews

Gr 4-6-A well-conceived marriage of art and text breathes life and passion into this picture biography. Swirling strokes of vibrant colors give the book an almost cinematic quality, animating Coltrane's passionate journey from a joyous, nurturing early childhood with a loving extended family to the despair of losing too many loved ones in a short time. The music that had always been a part of the family's life and a strong involvement in the church sustained him as he struggled to find his way. As he grew older, his musical talent developed and led him to a career that became legendary, performing with greats like Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk. But the demons of loss and despair

always haunted him. While a traveling professional musician, he began drinking, and when things became overwhelming, he succumbed to drugs. He looked for guidance in philosophy and world religions. Eventually, through intense determination inspired by the help of his second wife, Alice Coltrane, herself a musician, he managed to leave drugs behind. Coltrane's musical accomplishments and short career proved intensely significant in the history and development of jazz and bebop. Though technically a two-dimensional format, this unique selection has a kinetic and animate quality that envelops readers and honors the vibrancy of Coltrane's place in music. An afterword, author's note, and artist's note augment the book's perspective. A list of varied resources, both print, audio, and a website, offer additional opportunities for further examination.-Renee Steinberg, formerly at Fieldstone Middle School, Montvale, NJ

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That the titans of modern jazz—Parker, Monk, Coltrane, and others—have become the recurring subjects of children's picture books remains a curious phenomenon, one that perhaps says more about the tastes of the books' creators than it does about the musical leanings of today's young people. Still, the complex harmonies and unconventional melodies of modern jazz have certainly given wing to the imaginations of illustrators. That's the case in this account of John Coltrane's evolution as a musician. The Pura Belpré Award-winning Gutierrez (Papá and Me, 2008) uses acrylic paintings and mixed media to layer bright, vibrant colors across swirling, flowing lines that effectively mirror Coltrane's legendary "sheets of sound." Wisely, Golio lets the pictures carry the melody while his text supplies the backbeat, moving quickly from Coltrane's childhood in a churchgoing family awash in music, through his musical coming-of-age in Philadelphia (nodding at the attendant drug and alcohol problems), and on to his triumphant spiritual and musical breakthroughs in such records as *A Love Supreme*. Afterwords provide more detail on Coltrane's life and discuss musicians and drug use. As an impressionistic introduction to a jazz giant, this should whet appetites to learn and hear more. Grades 4-7. --Bill Ott

This was an interesting book, both in the story as well as the art. I purchased it because my saxophone playing 4th grader had to do a presentation on a biography. In my search for an influential saxophone player, *Spirit Seeker: John Coltrane's Musical Journey* turned up. It isn't a happy book because as it turns out, John Coltrane didn't live the happiest of lives. However, it is written in such a way that it isn't an unhappy book either. It's focused on what he accomplished,

how he persevered through his many hard times by leaning on his faith, and how he played a vital role influencing Jazz music in America.

Artist Rudy Gutierrez facilitates a very condensed version of the John Coltrane story with his exceptionally beautiful illustrations. This is a beautiful introduction to John Coltrane that makes an excellent gift or just a 'must have' for Coltrane fans.

John Coltrane's life is lovingly portrayed in this "children's" book by Gary Golio. His story is a poignant and relevant study of the life of musical genius, socio-economic injustice, substance abuse and great love, all told in a poetic, flowing language suitable to all ages. The illustrations by Rudy Gutierrez are pure perfection - especially for art lovers. The images and colors swirl through the pages with the same intensity that the sound of a well composed jazz composition swirls through the air. A must-have for every coffee table collection and children's library.

This is brilliant writing, art, movement, music in book form. I have never been so engaged. One does not have to be a child to love this book. This should sit on the coffee table of everyone's house - especially those who love jazz.

Is there any complicated hero with a past so full of darkness that their life cannot be recounted to children? This is the conundrum of any author who takes it upon his or herself to tell the stories of people who didn't grow up happy, live lightly, and die laughing in their beds. The most interesting stories are sometimes the ones about folks who look into the eye of the devil and walk away the wiser. Trouble is, it can be hard to figure out whether or not theirs is a story kids need to know. They might love the life of Charlie Chaplin, but do you bring up his penchant for the very young ladies? Bob Marley did great things in his life . . . and consumed great amounts of drugs. Do you talk to kids about him? In the end, it all comes down to the skill of the biographer. The person who sits down and turns a great man or woman into a 32-48 page subject, appropriate for kids too young to watch PG-13 films on their own. To do it adequately is admirable. To do it brilliantly, as it's done in "Spirit Seeker: John Coltrane's Musical Journey" is worthy of higher praise. He led as perfect a childhood as any African-American kid in the late 1930s could hope for. A loving family, two grandfather preachers, a great musician for a dad, the works. But all that came before the deaths. First his grandfather, then his father, then his grandmother too. Things grew dark for John, but an opportunity to learn the saxophone for free arose. It became John's new religion, and the void inside

him was easily filled by drugs and alcohol. He was brilliant at the instrument but was his own worst enemy when his addictions held sway. Golio tells the tale of how one young man bucked his fate and went on to become a leader in more ways than one. An Afterward, Author's Note, Artist's Note, and Sources and Resources appear at the end. In any picture book biography (and this applies to bio pics on the silver screen too) the author needs to determine whether or not they're going to try to cover the wide swath of their subject's life, or if they're going to select a single incident or turning point in that life and use that as the basis of their interpretation. Golio almost has it both ways. He's certainly more in the wide swath camp, his book extending from John the child to John the successful and happy (relatively) adult. But within that storyline Golio takes care to build on certain images and themes. Reading through it you come to understand that he is showing how a happy child can become a brilliant but cursed young man, and then can escape his own personal demons, inspiring others even as he inspires himself. Under Golio's hand Coltrane's early exposure to religion reverberates every time he seeks out more spiritual knowledge, regardless of the sect. He loses so many people he loves (to say nothing of financial stability) then grows up to become the perfect melding of both his grandfather and his father. Just as Golio builds on repeating images and themes in his text, so too does artist Rudy Gutierrez make a go of it in his art. The author/artist pairing on picture book is so often a case of an author writing a story, handing it over to their editor, that editor assigning it to an illustrator, and the illustrator working on the piece without any interaction with its original creator. It seems like a kind of crazy way to make great picture books, and many times the art and the text won't meld as beautifully as they could. Then you'll see a book like "Spirit Seeker" and though I know that "Gary Golio" is not a pseudonym for "Rudy Gutierrez" (or vice-versa) it sure feels like the two slaved together over each double-paged spread. I suppose the bulk of that credit lies with Gutierrez, all fairness to Golio's text admitted. Gutierrez explains in his Artist's Note at the end of the book that Coltrane was such an "artistic angel" to him that he fasted for two weeks so as to best focus, meditate, pray and paint this book. The result is a product that looks as though someone cared and cared deeply about the subject matter. Mind you, the book will do kids and adults little good unless they like Gutierrez's style. I happen to find it remarkable. He strikes the perfect balance between the literal and allegorical representation of certain aspects of Coltrane's life. Some artists fall too far on one side or the other of that equation. Gutierrez isn't afraid to attempt both at once. You've the energy of his lines trying to replicate the energy of the music, John's grandfather's preaching, his spiritual journey, etc. There are moments when you can actually sit a kid down and ask them something like, "What do you think it means when that single curving line moves from John's father's violin to his son's heart?" At the same time, you know that Gutierrez

is doing a stand up and cheer job of replicating the faces of the real people in this book time and time again. The melding of the two, sad to say, does turn a certain type of reader off. Fortunately I think that a close rereading can allay most fears. In my own case, it took several rereadings before I began to pick up on Gutierrez's repeated tropes. Golio begins the book with a description of John sitting in his grandfather's church, his mother at the organ, the words of the sermon making a deep and lasting impression. That passage is recalled near the end of the book when John does his own form of "preaching" with his horn. As the text says, he was, "a holy man, shouting out his love of man to the whole human race." You could be forgiven for not at first noticing that the image of John's grandfather at the start of the book, hunched over a pulpit, the curve of his body lending itself to the curve of his words, is recalled in the very similar image of John's and his saxophone, the curve of HIS body lending itself to the curve of his saxophone's music near the book's end. Notice that and you start jumping back to see what else might have passed you by. The image of the dove (my favorite of these being when John meets Naima and two doves' tails swirl to almost become a white rose). There's so much to see in each page that you could reread this book twenty different times and make twenty different discoveries in the art alone. I've mentioned earlier that there are some folks that don't care for Gutierrez's style. Nothing to be done about that. It's the folks that object to doing an honest bio of Coltrane in the first place that give me the willies. I have honestly heard folks object to this story because it discusses John's drug use. And it does. No question. You see the days when his deep sadness caused him to start drinking early on. You see his experiments with drugs and the idea some musicians harbored that it would make them better. But by the same token it would be a pretty lackadaisical reader to fail to notice that drugs and alcohol are the clear villains of the piece. Gutierrez does amazing things with these light and dark aspects of John's personality. On the one hand he might be looking at the symbols of countless world religions. Then on the facing page is an opposite silhouette of John, the borders little more than the frightening red crayon scratchings of a lost soul. Read the book and you discover what he did to free himself from his trap. Golio even goes so far as to include a lengthy and in-depth "Author's Note: Musicians and Drug Use" to clarify any points that might confuse a young reader. Let's just say, all the bases are covered here. These two guys know what they are doing. If there is any aspect of the design of the book that makes me grind my teeth to a fine powder it's the typeface of the text. I'm not a typeface nerd. Comic Sans does not strike a chord of loathing in my heart as it does with others. That said, I do harbor a very strong dislike of this horrendous LA Headlights BTN they chose to set this story in. It fails utterly to complement the writing or the tone or the art in any way, shape, or form and makes the reading process distinctly unpleasant. They say that in some cultures artists will include a single

flaw in a work because otherwise that piece would be perfect and only God is true perfection. With that in mind, I'll consider this the single flaw that keeps "Spirit Seeker" from attaining a higher calling. The reason Coltrane works as well as he does as a subject is that his is a story of redemption. Not just the redemption of a life freed from the power of drugs and alcohol, but a spiritual redemption and reawakening as well. It would pair beautifully with books like "Malcolm X: A Fire Burning Brightly" by Walter Dean Myers which perfectly complement this idea. It is the only real picture book bio of Coltrane worth considering, and a kind of living work of art as well. Melding great text with imagery that goes above and beyond the call of duty, this is one biography that truly does its subject justice. Complex in all the right ways. For ages 6 and up.

In this new book by author Gary Golio, he adds John Coltrane to his growing collection of picture book biographies of musical greats. Earlier books profiled Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan. While these musicians might not seem like typical fodder for children's picture books, this format, with its striking and inspirational illustrations, is in fact ideal for stimulating young people's interests in these iconic musicians. The book's title page features the following quote from Coltrane: "My music is the spiritual expression of what I am...I want to speak to their souls." We first meet John Coltrane as a young boy, in North Carolina in 1938, listening to his grandfather preaching on a Sunday morning about the power of the Spirit. John's life was "like a little slice of heaven," with plenty of food, games, and a loving family surrounding him. His father, an amateur musician, filled the house with his singing and tunes from his ukulele and violin. But at the age of 12, John lost his two grandfathers, his grandmother, and his father in rapid succession. Turning to music for consolation, he was fortunate to receive a used alto sax, which he soon took everywhere, practicing for hours and hours. Moving to Philadelphia, he began playing with big bands and blues groups, and absorbing the music of jazz greats like Charlie "Bird" Parker. Although he was achieving success, life on the road was lonely, and John turned to alcohol and drugs for company, turning away from his spiritual underpinnings. Soon "he had to choose, between the dead end of drugs or a life rich with music." Will he find the strength to get clean and regain his inspiration? Golio's narrative features Coltrane's spiritual journey front and center, in which he used music in his attempt to "unlock the mysteries of life." Coltrane's spiritual explorations culminated with his masterpiece, *A Love Supreme*, which Golio poetically describes as the "song of the human heart reaching up to heaven." In addition to being an accomplished author, Golio is a licensed therapist who specializes in treating addiction problems, which may be part of the reason he feels comfortable interpreting the stories of musicians such as Coltrane and Hendrix for young people. The book's afterword includes a note on musicians and

drug use, in which Golio explains that while musicians are no different from other people who use alcohol and drugs to deal with their emotions, they may be even more vulnerable to addiction due to the demands of touring and performing and the belief many artists have that drugs can make a person more "free" or "creative." Golio has a gift for expressing music with words, just as Coltrane turned feelings into sounds. But it is impossible to discuss this work without highlighting the outstanding illustration by Rudy Gutierrez, a Pura Belpre Honor-winning artist who has also designed album covers and clearly has an affinity for music. In an artist's note, he explains that he fasted for two weeks and meditated, much as Coltrane did when he composed A Love Supreme, to seek inspiration for illustrating Golio's tribute to Coltrane. The illustrations include acrylic paintings and mixed media pieces done with colored pencils, crayons, and acrylics. The dream-like compositions, dramatic movements and use of contrasting and complementary colors evoke the energy of Coltrane's music.

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