

# John Bachar, Rock Climber, Dies at 51; Daredevil With Uncompromising Style

By MICHAEL BRICK

John Bachar, a rock climber who inspired awe as a daredevil, condescension as an anachronism and eventually respect as a legend, fell to his death Sunday from a rock formation near his home in California. He was 51.

After years of climbing without protection, sustaining his only major injuries in a car wreck, Bachar was confirmed dead by the sheriff of Mono County, Calif., where he lived in the town of Mammoth Lakes.

"He was an artist," said Dean Fidelman, a contemporary who has climbed with him for decades. "He transcended the sport."

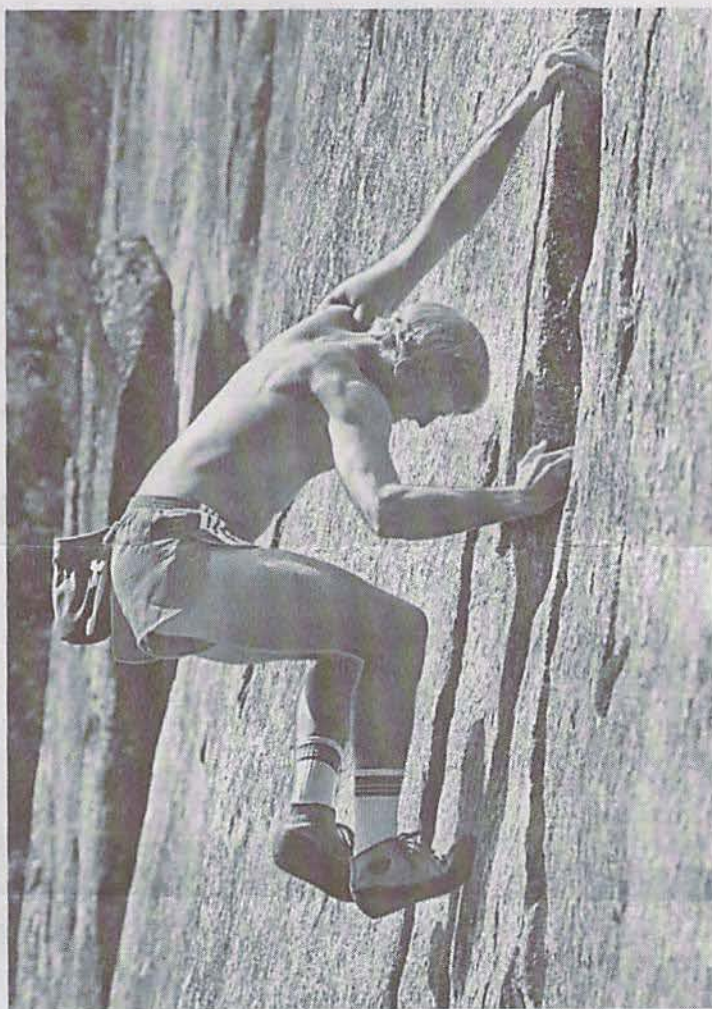
Bachar left his mark across the Yosemite Valley, the worldwide focal point of elite climbing in the 1970s, by making terrifying ascents of spectacular rock formations like El Capitan.

To critics, Bachar cut a stubborn, self-righteous figure, uncompromising on matters of daring style and minimal gear. To admirers, he represented the vanishing purity of a simpler age, a time when rocks and mountains were to be ascended only from the ground up, without advance rigging. For about half a decade at his prime, Bachar enjoyed a reputation comparable only to that of Royal Robbins in the 1950s.

"Since Bachar, I don't think there was anybody you could say was the greatest, most influential climber in the world in his time," said Pete Mortimer, a Yosemite stalwart known among climbers.

In the early 1970s, Bachar arrived in the Yosemite Valley with a pair of boots, an alto saxophone and a stunning physique, joining a group of brash young climbers known as the Stonemasters. The big-wall climbing styles of the 1960s were making way for a style known as free climbing, whose practitioners sought to minimize their gear, using ropes only for protection. Bachar took that kind of self-reliance to levels that could appear dangerous.

"If ever a Stonemaster carried the name on his sleeve (and he scribbled it on his boots as well), it was John Bachar, Grand Templar of the entire movement," wrote John Long, a founder of the group, in an online history. Bachar once spent an entire season climbing without using a rope. He offered \$10,000 to any-



LOS ANGELES TIMES

John Bachar free-climbing in the Yosemite Valley in 1984.

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one who could keep up with him for a day. He found no takers.

His exploits soon gained notice in the American Alpine Journal, where one diarist wrote that "his extraordinary free-climbing talent, coupled with an awesome physique, polished by the mental discipline of years of experience, place him at a level few attain."

As the sport splintered into ever narrower specializations in the 1980s, Bachar fell from grace among some climbers. Some adapted his unharnessed physical techniques to the safe confines of boulder climbing, while others sought to scale more difficult pitches with bolts and other gear that could sometimes permanently mark the rock formations.

"John never really pushed his ethos on anyone, but because he was so good and made no bones about it, he was often attacked —

simply because he represented something so different than the changing mainstream," said John Middendorf, a climber based in Australia. "He was really quite Zen in this regard."

Bachar's vision of purity found renewed interest in the 1990s, as a new generation of climbers took issue with bolting and other practices they perceived as unnatural, irresponsible or even cheating. He found work designing climbing shoes, establishing himself as a mentor.

In 2006, while driving through Nevada at night, Bachar flipped his car; his business partner, Steve Karafa, died in the wreck.

"He definitely felt, after that, that Steve's death was on him," said Nathan Smith, a friend and climbing photographer. "He was the one driving. I think he felt responsible for it."

Bachar returned to climbing while still recovering from his own injuries in a neck brace.

Around noon Sunday, he fell from a formation called Dike Wall, not far from his home. He is survived by a son, Tyrus. He also leaves climbing routes bearing his name across the Yosemite Valley.

## ONLINE: NOTABLE DEATHS

A slide show highlighting the lives of some of those who died this year.

[nytimes.com/obituaries](http://nytimes.com/obituaries)



# Revisiting an Old Boss Named John Coltrane

The pianist Steve Kuhn can play John Coltrane's music meaningfully without sounding as if he lives by it. That shows self-possession, for a couple of reasons.

**BEN  
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**MUSIC  
REVIEW**

Coltrane was the most influential jazz musician in the late 1950s and 1960s, when Mr. Kuhn got started. And Mr. Kuhn, now 71, also has something many of his peers don't: a small but significant association with Coltrane on the bandstand.

He played with the first version of Coltrane's quartet, in the spring of 1960, during a long gig at the Jazz Gallery in the East Village before McCoy Tyner took over to finish the run. And that was it. Later Mr. Kuhn's music followed a path very different from Coltrane's, one of stricter harmony, piano-trio subtlety and endless curiosity about ballad standards.

Nearly 50 years later he has released a quartet record of Coltrane's music, "Mostly Coltrane" (ECM). On Tuesday at Birdland he played some of it — elegantly — in a group that put the saxophonist Joe Lovano alongside Mr. Kuhn's regular working trio, with David Finck on bass and Billy Drummond on drums.

Mr. Kuhn has gone about this project with nearly awesome counterintuition. Coltrane's music went through radically different phases, sometimes cutting his audience into sections; bravely, Mr. Kuhn has chosen a lot of Coltrane music from phases after the one he knows best.

On Tuesday he dipped into a kind of free improvisation that's not completely native to his band and did it well. Sometimes he played a kind of strumming effect on a chord, rolling it lightly. Possibly he was invoking Alice Coltrane's arpeggios. But as with everything else he played, it came through his voice; he was in no

**Steve Kuhn Quartet  
Birdland**

danger of fully giving way to Coltrane's style.

He sounds almost nothing like McCoy Tyner or Ms. Coltrane, the pianists who helped shape that style. Mr. Kuhn doesn't pin you to the wall with fourth chords; he accompanies other soloists sparingly, sometimes using small melodic ideas. On Tuesday he largely stayed away from the sustain pedal; he let his instrument sound dry and to the point.

He connected with Mr. Drummond through subtle phrasing and accents; piano, bass and drums lined out the songs like a machine of understatement, giving Mr. Lovano room to float his improvisations on top. And in 75 minutes the archetypal Coltrane-quartet groove — the seductive, slow-to-medium tempo feeling from records like "Crescent" that became widely copied in jazz — made only one appearance.

The songs in the set included a few from around the time of Mr. Kuhn's stint with Coltrane, "Fifth House" and "Like Sonny," but most of it was given to later Coltrane. There were songs from the months before Coltrane's death in 1967: "Configuration," with a wriggling upward chromatic scale and a place for a saxophone-drums duet; and "Jimmy's Mode," a bass solo framed by a microsong. And there was a rubato ballad, "Welcome," from 1965, with Mr. Drummond's rolling tom-toms and Mr. Lovano improvising in rolling phrases through what was basically one long exposition of melody, with a broad, detailed sound.

A difficult balance was achieved here: the feeling of loose, natural expression inside discrete parts of a quiet, controlled set.



The pianist Steve Kuhn accompanied by the saxophonist Joe Lovano at Birdland on Tuesday evening.

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