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Leonard L. Brown

John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom

Spirituality and the Music

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Spirituality and the Music

EDITED BY LEONARD L. BROWN

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Foreword

T. J. ANDERSON

"You plod up into the electric city—
Your song now crystal and
the blues. You pick up the horn
with some will and blow
into the freezing night:
a love supreme, a love supreme—"

—Michael S. Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane"[1]

A long-awaited testimonial to the influence of John Coltrane, this book includes contributions from several knowledgeable voices, each one articulating a particular aspect of our musical culture.

Why now? What is the importance of these works? At this time, we are experiencing a crisis—the lack of intellectual respect for a culture that has been subjected to both the best and worst of American attitudes. It is particularly significant that these works come directly from African American culture. These writers share with John Coltrane the legacy of slavery, segregation, and personal experiences. The words of the Negro spiritual, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home" echo even now. Yet, the pursuit for the true meaning of America in idealism, democratic liberalism, and civil disobedience serves as a harbinger for what is now. The spirituality of hope sustains these writers. That is why they speak. The music reflects their ideals and spiritualism.

[1]Michael S. Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" from *Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems*. Copyright © 2000 by Michael S. Harper. Used with author's permission.

All creative artists are cultural anthropologists, documenters and interpreters of a culture. Through this prism, the vitality of any age becomes a doorway that can lead to global understanding. In African American life, aesthetics, philosophy, spiritual values, and public protests meld together in enculturation. It is understood that scholars from different backgrounds also contribute to the interpretation of John Coltrane and his musical legacy. But it is a matter of perspective. The contributors whose works appear in this book are immersed in African American lifestyles and come to this moment with a black point of view. This aesthetic is a combination of what is seen, heard, and experienced in both the dominant and segregated society. With an interest in the role of music in a culture, the vision of these contributors is encompassing. Seldom do we hear informed and authoritative voices from within the culture speak in one musical collection. This is an insider's view of the black experience in music and its impact on one musician. The exemplary musician John Coltrane and his performances serve as catalysts for this compendium.

Preface

The musical and spiritual legacies of John Coltrane are some of the most powerful and significant in the history of American and global music. This work provides important insights into these legacies through an eclectic group of essays, personal reflections, and interviews from leading scholars, media personalities, and musicians of our time. These writings and reflections critically examine Coltrane's mastery of and pioneering efforts in the syntax and semantics of black music vernacular, as well as his incorporation of principles of music making from other world traditions. These writings and reflections also examine how Coltrane was and is perceived and defined by our culture, then and now. Collectively, these works provide insight into how and why Coltrane's musical legacy reflects the spirituality that is linked to the legacy of Black America's continued quest for freedom and liberation. Moreover, the themes of spirituality, music, sound, and freedom unite these works.

This endeavor uses an ethnomusicological approach to examine John Coltrane's musical and spiritual legacies within the context of Black American culture. Ethnomusicology is the study of a people's total involvement in

and with music. Within the discipline, there are a variety of conceptual frameworks, approaches, and strategies that may be used to study music within cultural context. This book uses the "insider's approach" because this approach acknowledges and values the study of music in culture as identified and defined in its own terms and viewed in relation to its own society by individuals who can view its field as members of the music culture as musicians and nonmusical specialists. Essential to the purpose of this book is the understanding that John Coltrane's musical and spiritual foundations are rooted in Black American culture.

Portia Maultsby, eminent scholar on black music, has pointed out that those researching Black American culture have a responsibility to first understand how music works in Black American culture and then to use that understanding in conducting and presenting research on Black American music culture.

> Black music is a manifestation of Black culture, and it serves a communication function within this tradition. As such, it expresses the worldviews of Black America. Social and historical environments shape these views, which, in turn, are communicated through music. Black music, consequently, is in a constant stage of evolution and, therefore, encompasses many different genres and styles.
>
> New Black music forms are created when existing ones no longer effectively operate within a given context and when new values alter the cultural significance of old traditions. Changes in cultural values often result from changes in environment; these changes give rise to new contexts for musical expression. Because music exists as a functional entity within Black America, the creation of new styles discloses shifts in values, attitudes, and social needs. These styles do not evolve independently of existing traditions, but rather, they evolve out of them. New forms of Black musical expression are, in essence, new impulses drawn from the environment, blended with old forms and given a new shape, a new style, and a new meaning. The original form persists alongside the new, and remains a vital form of expression within specific contexts.
>
> . . . The lack of systematic efforts to document the Black music tradition as a functional dimension of Black culture has created a void in resource materials that could enhance our understanding of cultural continuity and change.
>
> . . . This void, in part, stems from the use of an inappropriate methodology for research that does not consider music as a manifestation of culture. In addition, conclusions presented by some of these studies are influenced by the biases of primarily white writers, whose cultural orientation limited their capacities to critically assess the social significance of the Black music tradition.[1]

Internationally recognized master musician and educator David Baker spoke of the need to define aspects of Black American culture from the Black American perspective: "Black music must have an articulation and description of its needs from the Black perspective. This is axiomatic. We cannot abdicate from our culture and give it to those who exist outside of it."[2]

Central to the views presented in this volume is the fact that all contributors are insiders. This means all the contributors are Black Americans with extensive knowledge of the roles and functions of Black American music, historical and contemporary. We all grew up in black communities where Black American music culture played and continues to play a central role in how we identify ourselves and how we view the world—past, present, and future. We all have participated in the "doing" of music as a central aspect of our individual personal development, including singing and instrumental performance in church, school, and the community. We all have pursued successful careers and are active as academics/aka "Blackademics" (scholars and researchers), musicians (performers, composers and arrangers), media personalities, writers, and teachers, often functioning in more than one of these capacities. We all are acknowledged authorities in and have made significant contributions to our respective fields, and we all have been "touched," in various ways and to varying degrees, by John Coltrane's sound and his views on music and life.

It is our collective intent that the works in this volume will serve the readers in the following ways:

(1) Acknowledge the continued relevancy and significance of John Coltrane's musical and spiritual legacy in contemporary times.

(2) Provide broad, rich, and possibly new insights and understanding into the roles and functions of music in Black America's continued aspirations for freedom and equality, from then to now.

(3) Contribute to greater knowledge and understanding of how John Coltrane's sound and music are rooted in Black American spirituality.

(4) Increase knowledge and understanding of the majesty of John Coltrane's impact and influence as one of the great master artists and intellectuals.

—Leonard L. Brown

[1]Portia Maultsby, "The Role of Scholars in Creating Space and Validity for Ongoing Changes in Black American Culture," in *Black American Culture and Scholarship: Contemporary Issues*, ed. Bernice Johnson Reagon (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 11–14.
[2]David Baker, "A Periodization of Black Music History," *in Reflections on Afro-American Music,* ed. Dominique-Rene de Lerma (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1973), 159.

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You Have to Be Invited: Reflections on Music Making and Musician Creation in Black American Culture

LEONARD L. BROWN

In the discipline of ethnomusicology, one of the essential considerations in gaining an understanding of the roles and functions of music in human cultures is learning about the process of transmission, meaning how the music is learned and passed on. Applying this consideration to the legacy of John Coltrane provides significant insight to his spiritual and musical growth and maturation.

One of the oldest human methods of passing the music on is the oral/aural tradition, in which musical knowledge and performance practice is carried on through a people's memory and history. In North American music cultures, this tradition is shared between certain old indigenous civilizations and the relatively new Black American culture. Given that Coltrane was a black American and grew up in an American community that was black, it is worthwhile to examine how he learned the music of his community.

The Haudenosaunee are longtime inhabitants of North America's eastern regions, with their civilization dating back thousands of years. Transmission of their beliefs and customs, including music knowledge, is a selective

process. "Haudenosaunee have an expression that means you have to be invited; it implies that only when you are thought to be ready and able to use certain knowledge responsibly will it be shared. It does not imply that knowledge is secret but rather that those entrusted with knowledge must know how it should be used."[1]

This same belief can also be found in Black American communities before and during Coltrane's time. Historically, the musics commonly labeled "blues" and "jazz" were created by black musicians to meet the needs of their people and community. These musicians were a part of the community and shared common experiences as black Americans. As pioneers, they collectively conceptualized and created the performance and stylistic approaches based on black cultural aesthetics. Much of this music was rooted in practices of the African ancestors, and it often reflected adaptations and innovations resulting from black American life experiences. Acknowledgement of life's difficulties and themes of "perseverance," "resilience," "hope," and "freedom" can be found in much of this music. These were oral and aural traditions passed on through mentoring and apprenticeship. Consequently, the musicians had the responsibility of determining to whom, when, and where this knowledge would be passed. There were no "jazz studies" programs at this time. The musicians were the keepers of musical knowledge and controlled its dissemination.

Early Exposure

In Coltrane's case, his nurturing began in the segregated black community of High Point, North Carolina, where, as a child, he learned principles, practices, and aesthetics of music making in various contexts, including singing in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches where his grandfathers were ministers, and hearing music at home, where both his parents engaged in music making—his mother played piano and sang, and his father played violin and ukulele. This exposure and mentoring continued through elementary school and into his early adolescent years, with vocal and instrumental study and performance through high school. He was nurtured by the black American belief that children should be taught to sing; that learning to sing—running sound through one's body—was an essential component in developing to one's full capacity as a human being.

[1]Beverley Diamond, *Native American Music in Eastern North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

The repertoire Coltrane learned during this time included traditional black sacred music as well as exposure to American popular music of the time performed by black and white musicians and European concert music, primarily through records and the radio. In elementary school, he did a research report on the great black concert singer Marian Anderson. But it was black saxophonists that pulled his ear and by his teenage years, Coltrane had become an admirer of Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, and Johnny Hodges, illustrating his affinity for the expressive sound of three of the most innovative and expressive musicians in the history of the music.

Philadelphia Apprenticeships

Upon relocating to Philadelphia in 1943 to be with his family, Coltrane moved into one of the richest urban black music scenes in the country at the time. It was here that his musical exposure, training, and education took giant steps. He met up and became friends with both established and upcoming musicians. The former included older swing musicians such as Frankie Fairfax, Jimmie Tisdale, Charles Gaines, Jimmy Golden, and Bill Doggett, all recognized as accomplished musicians on the Philadelphia scene of the 1940s. The latter included Jimmy Oliver, Bill Barron, Jimmy Heath, and Benny Golson, all of whom became master musicians. Oliver was one of the legendary Philadelphia saxophonists of that period who stayed "at home," rarely traveling outside of Philadelphia to perform. Barron went on to become a leading saxophonist, arranger, and composer, spending time in Sweden, where he recorded and broadcasted, and later serving as chairman of the Music Department and head of the Black Music Program at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. As for Golson and Heath, both developed into outstanding artists of international reputation and have been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts as Jazz Masters because of their superior records of contribution, accomplishment, and achievement.

After attaining a high level of proficiency just three years since his arrival, including studies at both Ornstein's and Granoff's Schools of Music and a one-year stint performing in the U.S. Navy Band, in 1946, Coltrane was recruited by Philadelphia's established black musicians to join their groups. He was invited inside the community, and that invitation signified that the older, established community of black musicians recognized that Coltrane was ready to be exposed to deeper knowledge of the music. They recognized that he had potential to make significant contributions on the bandstand by expressing the aesthetics of the music that was required by the listeners and upheld in the community by the musicians.

The established musicians realized that Coltrane could speak the language in ways that could enhance the tradition. They recognized his attaining a level of musicianship worthy of being invited in. They heard his development to a certain stage of musical proficiency and expressiveness that embraced the established traditions as well as exuding originality. During this period, the cultural traditions of the music were controlled and transmitted by the musicians. The black community had required, even demanded, music of a certain type and feeling—something that expressed their trials and tribulations, hopes and dreams, wants and needs, and that made them want to laugh and cry—on a nightly basis in the 'hood. The musician's role was to understand and express all this through and in the music. This was music that made people want to dance and freed them of the daily hassles of America's segregated practices. It was music that expressed the full range of black life experiences.

The process of transmission of musical knowledge and practices within black American culture in both rural and urban situations had its own belief system that guided and set rules for music making. One of the principal aesthetics of this belief system was to play with a sound and energy that deeply touched the people; to play in ways that connected and communicated. The sincerity and conviction of the sound, the feeling, were two of the most important aesthetics. These performance aesthetics were created by the early black pioneers of the music—women and men, vocalists and instrumentalists. The music had evolved from ancestral legacies of sorrow songs, spirituals, field hollers, shouts, work songs, and sankeys through the blues of deadly Reconstruction into the early- and mid-twentieth-century experiences of black folks migrating north, east, and west seeking, at the very least, a civil living situation not fraught with daily threats of intimidation, dehumanization, humiliation, and death experienced in the American South.

Once he became a member of this inner circle, Coltrane learned the old time ways, the current ways and probably even glimpses into the future. The modern stylistic approaches labeled "bebop" were dominant among the younger musicians with "Bird" and "Diz" having a revered status. In the black neighborhoods, he learned that developing one's own sound was essential and that sound and feeling were paramount over technique. It was there that he learned about maintaining the instrument, selecting and customizing reeds through sanding and shaving, keeping the horn clean, selecting mouthpieces, choosing clothes, and knowing the difference between what to say and what not to say. He learned variations in aesthetic approaches of the different bands for even though they all shared a common root, each group had its own sound in which Coltrane had to fit as well as enhance.

To be invited in, an aspiring musician such as Coltrane had to exhibit these qualities:

–sincere desire to be a musician
–high level of instrumental proficiency
–thorough understanding of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic performance practices, including a strong understanding of improvisational approaches
–potential for continued development and contribution
–the "right" attitude: a thirst for knowledge and a willingness to learn
–respect for previous and existing performance aesthetics and an openness to exploring new realms of possibilities
–knowledge and command of the blues and jazz repertoire of the time
–good practice habits
–creativity in solos
–ability to memorize songs
–focused listening ability—an ear for the music
–ability to get along with others in the ensemble
–"saying something" on the horn—the ability to communicate with the listeners using the aesthetic vernacular of Black culture
–courage to perform in front of others

Coltrane's Philadelphia apprenticeships happened in the "conservatory of the community," meaning live performance throughout the black community, not classroom settings. It was on-the-job training within the contexts of club settings, ballrooms, the black musicians' union, people's living rooms, and numerous jam sessions, as well as practice sessions with fellow musicians. These apprenticeships also taught him the art of accompanying vocalists.

Road Apprenticeships

As a result of his Philadelphia apprenticeships, Coltrane's musicianship and reputation grew stronger and led to his being invited, in the late 1940s, to become a member of traveling bands including those led by Joe Webb, King Kolax, and Eddie Vinson. All these men were accomplished musicians leading black bands that played across the Midwest and South to predominantly black audiences in mostly segregated communities. The repertoire of each featured lots of rhythm and blues with some jazz, including bebop, thrown in at times. In his travels, Coltrane learned from fellow band members as well as from black musicians living in the various performance sites. He was exposed to musical styles, approaches, and sounds that were unique to specific geographic regions, for during this time there was a black Chicago sound, a black New York sound, a black New Orleans sound, a

black Baltimore sound, a black Detroit sound, and a black Kansas City sound. He was able to play in jam sessions that exposed him to these regional aesthetics and to even sit in with local masters.

Outside of the musical knowledge and exposure, Coltrane also apprenticed in the daily struggles of black musicians on the road. Segregation was a dominant factor in the majority of performance venues, as well as the surrounding geographical area. This determined where one could eat, use the bathroom, get gasoline, rent a hotel room, or even get a drink of water. And there was always the threat of racist police encounters. These cultural experiences were a part of his mentoring on the road and influenced the evolution of his conscious intent to use music as a force for goodness.

By 1950, Coltrane had developed his musicianship to such a level that he was invited to join the group of one of his heroes, the masterful Dizzy Gillespie. With Gillespie, he came under the tutelage of one of the "creators of bebop" and the father of Latin jazz. Coltrane's time with Gillespie can be considered the equivalent of a PhD in the beliefs, aesthetics, and performance practices of bebop and Afro-Cuban music, both of which were major influences on his later musical creations. After leaving Gillespie, over the next six years he was invited to perform by these leaders: Earl Bostic, who taught Coltrane how to gain greater saxophone command, including extending melodic and harmonic possibilities into the altissimo range; Johnny Hodges, whom he had idolized as an adolescent and who was one of the great saxophone expressionists with a unique sound; and the brilliant Miles Davis, who performed music of the highest level, requiring excellent musicianship consistently, and who garnered national and international visibility.

Along with the musical mentoring and nurturing Coltrane received from these various invitations, in 1948 he picked up the debilitating habit of drug abuse that eventually led to his dismissal by Gillespie, Hodges, and Davis. No doubt his addiction affected his musicianship, but his level of proficiency and expressiveness led to continued employment.

The Epiphany, Monk and Miles Again

Through his own desire to end his addiction and with important encouragement and support from his family and friends, Coltrane quit drug use in the spring of 1957. During this time, he had a spiritual awakening, exhibited remarkable resiliency, and found new energy and purpose in life through music. Coltrane said he wanted to use his music as "a force for good." In this same time period, he was invited by Thelonious Monk to play with him. His time with Monk provided an apprenticeship with one of the greatest musical

minds of the twentieth century. While with Monk, Coltrane's conceptual approaches broadened significantly, including melodic invention, rhythmic variations, and mastery of vertical approaches to improvisation and sophisticated harmonic variations. His confidence grew stronger, and through his incredible practice habits (sometimes his practices lasted for eight or more hours), he became a saxophone virtuoso, extending the range of the tenor to four octaves and developing a sound that was uniquely his own.

After his time with Monk, Coltrane was again invited by Davis to become a member of the new Miles Davis Sextet, a group that subsequently made some of the most influential creative music of the twentieth century. In 1960, Coltrane left Davis and formed his own group. Over the next seven years until his death, he was the leader in producing some of the most creative, powerful, and innovative music of all time. The knowledge and experience he gained from the various "invitations" over the years 1946 to 1959 served to give Coltrane a thorough understanding of black American aesthetics for music making and awakened his own brilliance.

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