

FREE JAZZ,
Harmolodics,
and Ornette Coleman



Stephen Rush

ROUTLEDGE


Free Jazz, Harmolodics, and Ornette Coleman

Free Jazz, Harmolodics, and Ornette Coleman discusses Ornette Coleman's musical philosophy of "Harmolodics," an improvisational system deeply inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. Falling under the guise of "free jazz," Harmolodics can be difficult to understand, even for seasoned musicians and musicologists. Yet this book offers a clear and thorough approach to these complex methods, outlining Coleman's position as the developer of a logical—and historically significant—system of jazz improvisation.

Included here are detailed musical analyses of improvisations, accompanied by full transcriptions. Intimate interviews between the author and Coleman explore the deeper issues at work in Harmolodics, issues of race, class, sex, and poverty. The principle of human equality quickly emerges as a central tenet of Coleman's life and music. Harmolodics is best understood when viewed in its essential form, both as a theory of improvisation and as an artistic expression of racial and human equality.

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Free Jazz, Harmolodics, and Ornette Coleman

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Foreword

Ornette Coleman was a seminal figure in American music in general, and Jazz in particular. While the debate about theories in music will always rage on—music theory, unlike scientific theory, has no chance of ever becoming law—it is hard to argue against the idea that the *sound* of it is what moves people. Sound is the basis of all music.

I remember when I was first introduced to Ornette’s music. Music critic and author Stanley Crouch introduced me to *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. I had often heard Ornette’s music described as “out,” which probably contributed to my confusion when hearing it. After three months of continuous listening, I realized that some of the forms of the songs were quite traditional, and that Mr. Coleman had figured out a way to expand the edges of traditional form, a complete contradiction to the modern definition of innovation. His ability to play traditional song forms while avoiding the trap of playing in four- and eight-bar phrases was much of the basis for my future development.

As opposed to other books or studies that choose the intellectual over the visceral (or vice versa), Dr. Rush’s thorough investigation of Ornette’s theories and performances maintains a fine balance between the theory of and the practice of performance. This book supports the idea that innovation is the logical extension of a tradition, not a radical departure from it. The parallels to the music of Mr. Coleman’s youth and the historical events surrounding black Americans’ fight for civil rights is also quite compelling.

I hope you enjoy, and learn from reading this book as I have.

Branford Marsalis
May 20, 2016



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Preface

I have been teaching Harmolodics at the University of Michigan for thirty years, and writing music often in a Harmolodic style for my bands Yuganaut and Naked Dance. In my first book with Reid Hamilton, *Better Get It in Your Soul* (2008), I wrote a chapter on Harmolodics, specific to the context of that book. My experience with the principles that govern Harmolodics is deeply personal and deeply musical. Spending considerable time with Ornette Coleman, however, taught me that the ideas that underlie his music go far beyond the realm of music itself. Simply put, Harmolodics is a fit and apt metaphor for social and mystical principles seminal to the black American experience. One principle in particular, Human Equality, seems to resonate with Ornette, as it does with many black Americans, and for obvious reasons.

Whenever the conversation flowed toward Harmolodics—as it inevitably did with him—we often turned from the issue of tonal transposition toward the issue of human equality. This gave me confidence that race and equality are fundamental to the understanding of Harmolodics. Harmolodics even simply as a theory about improvisation can be difficult to understand. Many who have played with Ornette, or who have studied or taught his music, throw their hands up in the air when the topic of Harmolodics is broached, and just admit, “I don’t get it!” James “Blood” Ulmer said to me in an interview, “Well, I played with Ornette for about six months. After which time he said, ‘Blood, you’re a Harmolodic player. That’s all I know!’” Sadly, listeners will often be perplexed by Ornette’s gentle, self-negating banter, and will simply turn to the music as evidence that the theory, though still unexplained, *works*.

Preface

My goal for this book is to shed clear light on Harmolodics. In doing so, I use Ornette Coleman's own words and offer my own technical commentary. These conversations are not in chronological order. Rather, I have arranged them in a way that can make Harmolodics understandable to the reader. I have not censored Mr. Coleman's words. Anyone who has spoken to him informally knows he uses strong language. As is often the practice in Jazz, Rock, and Blues, he uses sex, in particular, as a metaphor for power or empowerment. Such compositions as Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man" boast of sexual prowess ("making love in five seconds' time"). To interpret such lyrics only as sexual boasting is to misconstrue the tune. It is a Blues statement of manhood, substance, and citizenship—an assertion of human rights. So when Ornette says that "two things power the world, pussy and money," he could, in another context, be referencing either Freud or Jesus, since, after all, Freud was radically concerned with sex, and Jesus with economics. One could dismiss Ornette as graphic, crass, or contradictory. To those readers who are offended or confused, I would simply counsel patience and indulgence, because there is so much deep truth beneath the intense layering in Ornette's frank and honest speech.

I have presented this material as our conversation flowed—letting either Ornette or me "kick off the head," then listening to the riffing. When I felt it necessary, I have either clarified or briefly expounded on the dialogue. In every case I've tried to let Ornette speak for himself. Most of my commentary was approved by Ornette Coleman himself. When we had these conversations in January 2011, I found him extremely quick-witted and thoroughly engaging. His style of conversation was freewheeling and rambly, so my method in interviewing was to reflect his comments back to him in musical, theoretical, sociological, or spiritual terms as seemed appropriate. It was clear enough in our conversations when he agreed with me and when he disagreed, as the reader will plainly see.

It is important to note that this volume is in no way a biography of Ornette Coleman. More specifically, my goal is to use Ornette's words, interspersed with mine when needed, to *explain Harmolodics*. Readers interested in Ornette's biography should consult John Litweiler's *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life* (1992) or Howard Mandel's wonderful book *Miles, Ornette, Cecil* (2007).

I've never had a conversation partner who was so engaged, intense, philosophical, and cheerful. One had to be prepared for the unexpected, because he also used *non sequiturs* humorously to great effect. A conversation with Ornette Coleman is like a Harmolodic improvisation, a mental space that allows for anything to happen.

Any misinterpretations of Ornette contained in this book are my responsibility alone. I am sensitive to the controversial use of what some call "Ebonics," but I wanted to use Ornette's own language, not mine. I have tried to use such authors

as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou as models for how this might best be approached, so that I can convey Ornette clearly.

A note about the style of our discourse. Conversation II is a good example of how we spoke “together” in an improvised way. Different than a monologue, the truth is explored and discovered together, with participants overlapping each other with respect, deep listening, and care. And of course, joy. This style doesn’t work for every occasion, but it did seem to keep Ornette “in the game.” A number of times during the conversation his partner Michaela walked by and told me, “He’s having fun. Don’t worry.” Joy and truth are wonderful companions for discourse, but can lead to a lot of clumsy and hilarious overlapping, interrupting, and gesticulation.

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Acknowledgments

A project like this is immensely non-linear. It *did* start with me contacting Homer Neal, then Vice President of the University of Michigan, with the suggestion that there was no one more deserving of an honorary doctorate than Ornette Coleman. With the help of Geri Allen we were able to bring that dream to fruition. I had already befriended Ornette, and his long-time partner Michaela Deiss, during the writing of my first book. Michaela has been my constant beacon of light and hope through this project. In addition to moral support and advice, her gift of wonderful photographs for this book has doubled the value of the volume, and her encouragement during the entire writing of the book was the only real reason I felt there was any hope to continue.

The author who fails to thank his wife for her support is like a marsupial that fails to acknowledge his mother's pouch. Merilynne, thank you for listening to my raging and raving lunatic obsessions—and reminding me how confusing Ornette can be to the “real person,” a race to which I truly do not belong myself. Thank you for being my reality check, and my dream-girl.

My prose needs help, and what an author like me needs is a good friend who will slash you, burn you, and leave you in a pile of rubble. A friend who will immolate your hubris, and feed it to the dogs. And a friend who has an extremely strong command of language—yet can flex to your whims, or—in this case—the whims of your subject (Ornette Coleman's words are in their own special category). I have such a friend, and he is my editor, too: Reid Hamilton. Reid's delight in the process was and is still confounding. I hate editing—he loves it. We are a match made in both heaven and hell. He and I together spent hundreds of hours on this project, and every session made the book better and better, and taught me more about writing than I ever learned by reading, writing, or in school. I simply

Acknowledgments

cannot repay him enough for his endless, tireless, and oddly cheerful editing on this book.

An additional thank you to Susie Lorand—your watchful editorial eye has added another layer of clarity and exactness, helping repair what was a very clumsy initial document.

My transcribing team is, in a word, brilliant. Accuracy, promptness, patience, surely. But it takes raw talent and chops to hear with their level of acuity. Thank you Molly Radosevich and Andrew Hintzen—both generously funded by the University of Michigan Jazz Department, and encouraged by its chair and my dear friend, Ellen Rowe. Matthew Endahl, my former student, served as an arbiter of common, and uncommon, sense for the analysis section of the book. He vetted my theories, and in some cases eagerly jumped up to bonk his old teacher on the head with keen insights. Matthew also served as a transcriber, including the monumental transcription of “Shades of Jazz” by Keith Jarrett. And thank you to Keith Jarrett for looking over my analysis and the transcription, and allowing me to use both in this volume. Finally, a thank you to my dear daughter, Ruthemma, who helped me wrestle with the Chicago Manual of Style—and win.

Other colleagues have listened to my ramblings over the years and eagerly egged me on with this project, notably my bandmates from Naked Dance, Andrew Bishop and Jeremy Edwards. Their artistry and friendship have proved invaluable here. I also want to thank, for their generous support, some of my “real-world” friends in New York, including Barry Altschul, Aaron Siegel, Al MacDowell, and Steve Swell (the “other Steve”).

Part Two, the interview, went from a below-average audio recording of my interviews with Ornette to an almost-coherent document only through the painstaking transcribing efforts of one aptly named fellow, Michael Musick. He has been a mensch in so many ways. Finally, the preparation of all of the musical inserts fell to my wonderful graduate research assistant, Fidelia Lam. Without her careful and extraordinary work, funded generously by the Department of Performing Arts and Technology and chaired by Jason Corey, the analysis portion of this book would look and sound sloppy, many serious Jazz students would have been robbed of vital coherency, and Ornette’s theories could have gone “unproven.”

PART ONE

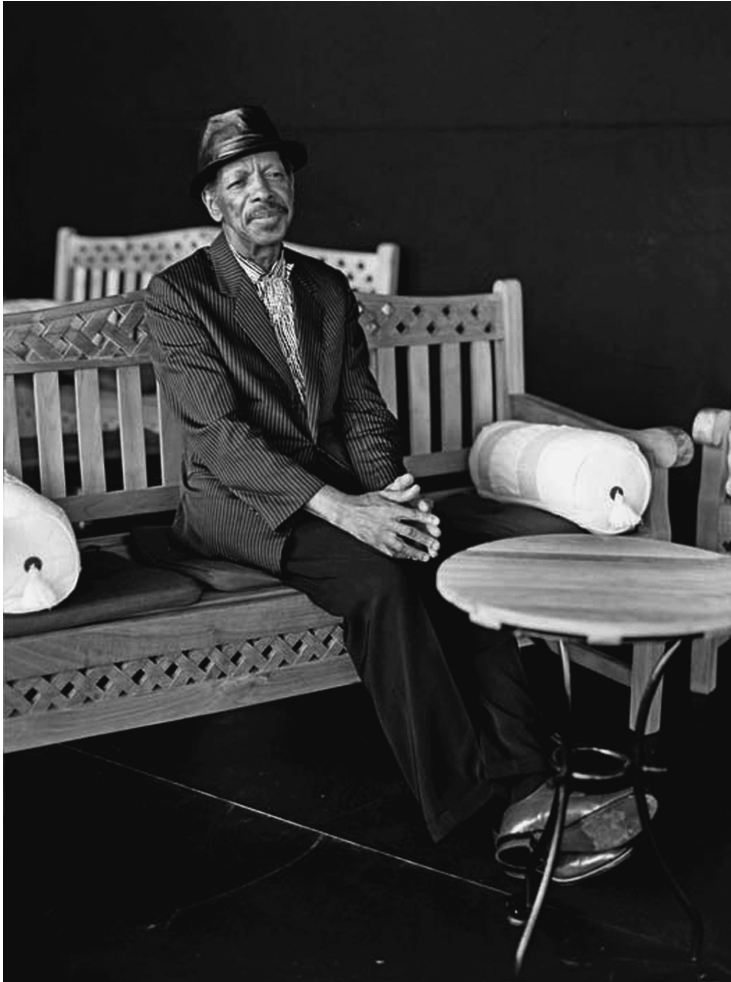


Figure 1.1: Ornette Coleman.
PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAELA DEISS.

Historical Context

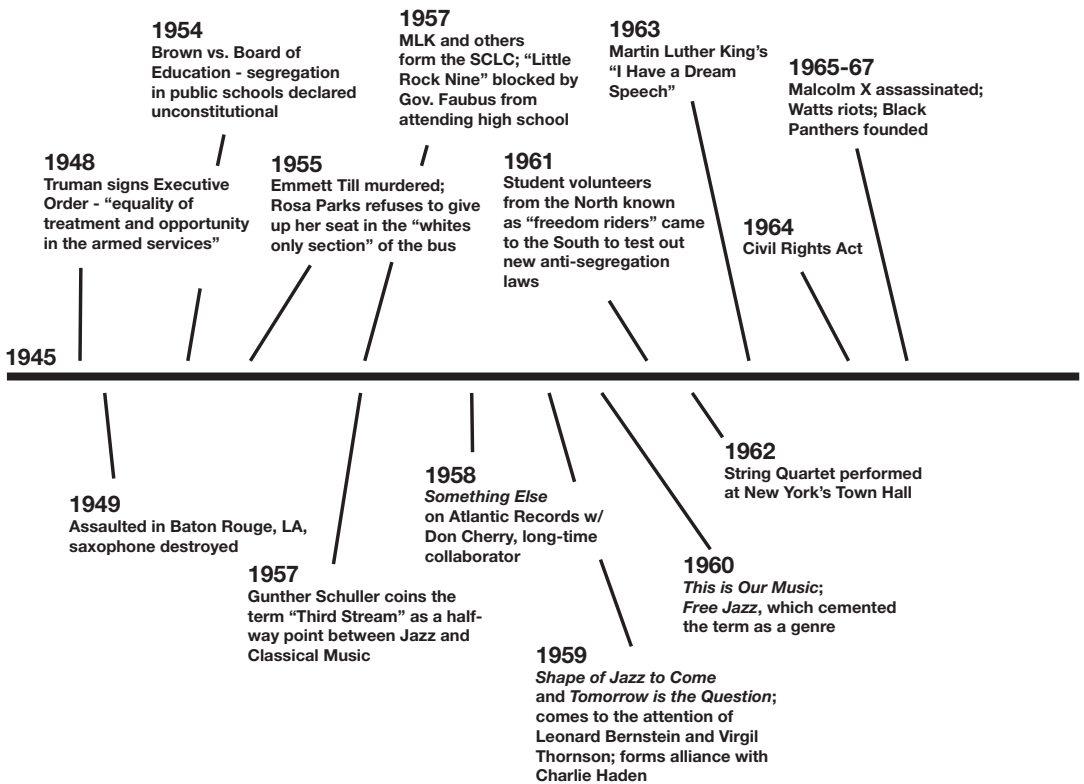
Harmolodics is about the relationship between style and process in improvisation. It is also about human rights and issues surrounding equality. Simply put, Harmolodics respects every single voice in an ensemble, without creating a preference or elevated function for any one instrument. This is consistent with the founding principles of Jazz, expressed in the music of Louis Armstrong and King Oliver. Of Armstrong and Oliver, Ornette says, “they had something to back them up, and that’s what we call Sound.” When Ornette said that to me, it brought to my mind the opening sentence from the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.” Sound is the fundamental principle of music, and Ornette is saying that the origins of Jazz contain that fundamental principle—Sound. Sound is a term that Ornette often uses idiosyncratically. In addition to the textbook definition of Sound, Ornette’s approach to the topic includes emotion, source, human connection—the metaphysical origins from which his music emerges.

Harmolodics is also the science, one might say, of exploring the basic premise for improvisation: the empowerment of each human voice within the ensemble, or, more broadly, within society. Consequently, it makes complete sense that this approach to music would emerge and develop *in parallel* with the Civil Rights Movement.

Ornette Coleman was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1930. When Ornette was nineteen years old, President Truman signed an executive order to insure “equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed services.” Sadly, Truman rescinded the order within one year, declaring that the order had accomplished its goals. Many of us alive today romantically imagine the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement as the moment in 1955 when Rosa Parks famously refused to “go to the back of

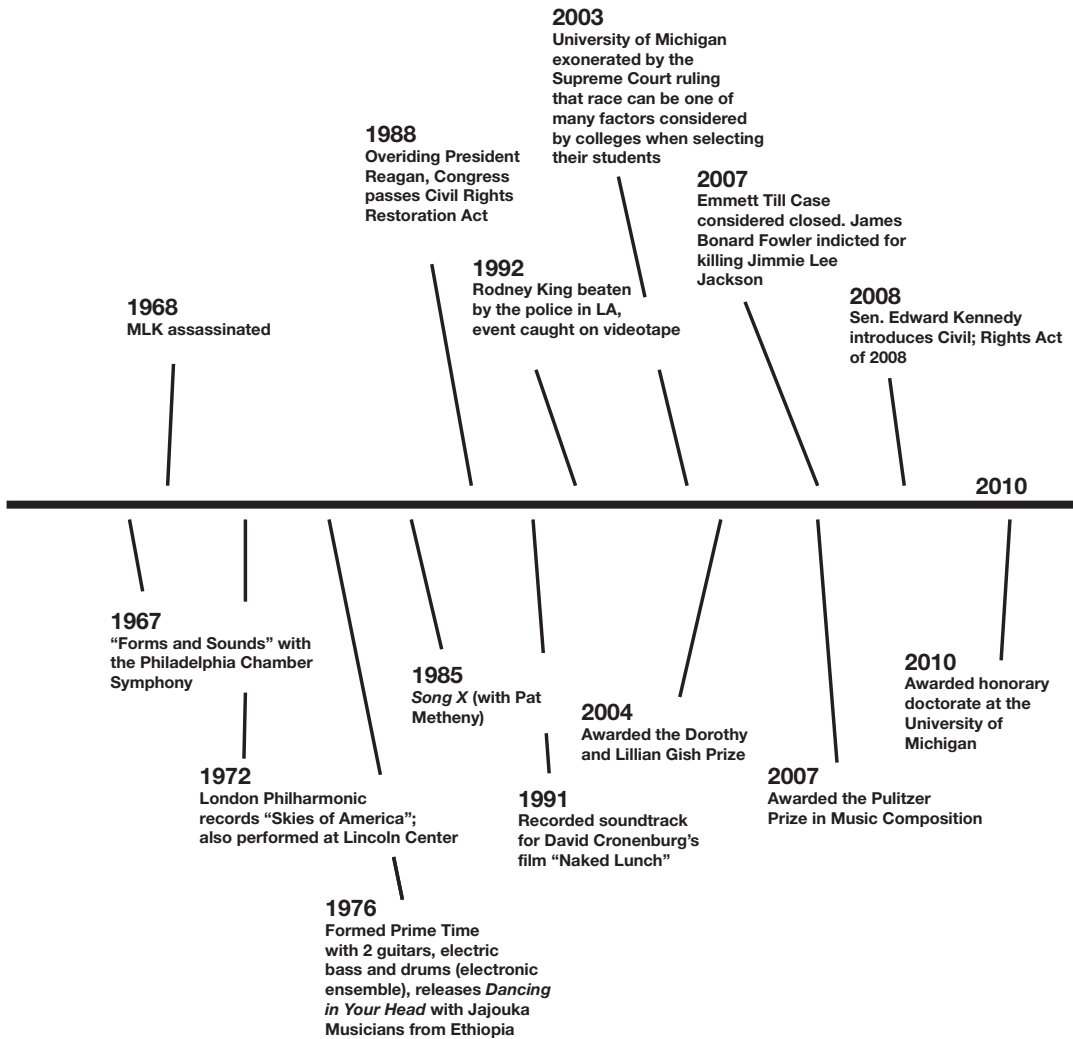
TIMELINE COMPARING ORNETTE COLEMAN'S

Civil Rights



Ornette Coleman

LIFETIME TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT



the bus.” But the roots of the Civil Rights Movement go back much further, pre-dating the Emancipation Proclamation of 1861. And Jazz has deep roots in field hollers and spirituals, born out of slave culture, especially in the Deep South. Certainly it is true that the struggle for freedom for black Americans gained new, increased urgency shortly after the Second World War, and continues to the present day.

In the timeline above one can see remarkable simultaneities between Ornette’s career and the progress of the march for civil rights. Around the same time that Ornette was being publicly recognized by musicians and critics such as the white composers Leonard Bernstein, Gunther Schuller, and Virgil Thompson, *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided and Rosa Parks became national news.

It is too much to say that the relationship between these events and Ornette’s music was one of cause and effect. It is clear, however, that Ornette’s music and thinking were closely tied to the transformational events of his day. Observe, for example, how the titles of his albums seem to underscore huge political upheaval,



Figure 1.2: Artist Frederick Brown, Ornette Coleman, and President Bill Clinton, next to Brown’s portrait of Ornette.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAELA DEISS.

as in *Change of the Century* (1960); and the power and significance of black American Music, *This is Our Music* (1959). It is particularly striking that in the same year that the genre-coining album *Free Jazz* was released—1960—freedom fighters from the North were going south to push for the enforcement of anti-segregation laws. Within mere months of the assassinations of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, Ornette released his album *Crisis*, with a dramatic picture of the Bill of Rights in flames on its cover.

Ornette's musical commentary on civil rights continued throughout the remainder of his life, into the twenty-first century. It was within a two-year time frame that Ornette won a Pulitzer Prize in Music, a Grammy Award, and the MacArthur Genius Award, and Senator Edward Kennedy introduced the Civil Rights Act of 2008. One cannot shrug these simultaneities off as coincidence, *because* Ornette Coleman himself frames his approach to music *in relation to* civil rights and racial justice. "I am not a member of the total human race," he says, "and I do not know how to become a member."

Ornette Coleman believed in the value of all Life. As he said to me: "*Life*. L-I-F-E! Now worms, ants, everything . . . live like that. So do people. We all change in some form or another. But it's for the purpose of becoming what we call age, knowledge, and ability. But that only represents two things: Humans and Value. That has something to do with what is called 'How Valuable You Are.'"

An Introduction to Harmolodics

Harmolodics is about collective improvisation. It posits that equal consideration should be given to each player. Early Jazz uses this very premise for improvisation. The concept of the “extended solo” later, as a feature of Bebop, commenced roughly in the 1940s. The music of King Oliver and Louis Armstrong shows a more collective sensibility—a group articulation of form and melody—than the more hierarchical approach found in later Jazz.

Harmolodics is also about breaking the stranglehold that harmony had on Jazz by the end of the 1950s. American song form and Bebop had confined Jazz to a “head–solos–head” structure, or “composed melody–improvise over the changes–melody.” Harmolodics uses that rubric also, as any of the transcriptions in this volume will show, but the “improvise over the changes” aspect is replaced with “improvise over the ethos of the composition.” This could mean changing the groove, that is, breaking away from the constraints of 4/4 time, or even slowing down or speeding up. It definitely implies moving beyond the changes into what has now become known as “Free Jazz,” allowing for virtually unlimited possibilities of transposition and fragmentation/extension.

Ornette and all of the players analysed in this book have some basic strategies for *solo* improvisation that could be codified as “Harmolodic approaches,” namely:

- purposeful use of range to organize the structure of an improvisation
- references to keys within and without the home key of the composition during the improvisation
- the artful manipulation of phrase length
- a balance between “inside” and “outside”



Figure 2.1: Ornette Coleman.
PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAELA DEISS.

- a playful use of folksong-like characteristics, to wit, longer note values, antecedent–consequent phrasing, strong references to the “home key” or “home keys”
- the extrapolation of key centers stated or implied by the head
- the strategic and balanced play between harmonic and rhythmic tension and simplicity
- detailed listening and flexibility by the bandmates to create large-scale structures
- the use of timbre as an expressive tool
- the use of Pop groove references within a Free Jazz composition
- clear reference to Blues modality and phrasing.

These comprise the building blocks of Harmolodics, pure and simple: but they must be intelligently executed.

Transposition and Harmolodics

Ornette Coleman had a very specific way of talking about transposition. In our interview ([Chapter 6](#)), he emphasized the equality of all tones: “We have seven notes to each *key*,” he said. “We only have twelve keys, but they are all coming from the same notes. That means you have C natural on the violin and C natural on the trumpet; you have *two different C’s*. . . . But the people that are trying to improvise something—they can’t use both of those C’s for the same purpose. They have to find which one is going to yield to the other C. But it won’t work that way.”

It is very important to understand exactly what Ornette Coleman meant here. He meant that a C on a violin sounds as “C concert pitch,” and a written C on a trumpet sounds as “B \flat concert pitch” due to transposition, and because the trumpet is a “B \flat instrument.”

Later in the interview, Ornette said: “All the keys have the same resolution of any recipe used for any idea. C to F \sharp is a flat fifth [enharmonically speaking]. But F \sharp to C \sharp is a perfect fifth. Well, that means that the C and C \sharp are dominating the F \sharp . And it’s true! I learned that about ten years ago or more. That is why I don’t worry about the keys or the changes.” In other words, C can become the dominant of F, C \sharp can become the dominant of F \sharp . Thus Ornette’s thinking does agree in part with Western European traditional harmony.

Notes can have the same names, but nevertheless sound as different tones. In concert pitch, a C on a trumpet is not going to sound like a C on a piano. As Ornette says, they “can’t be used for the same purpose.” However, this nomenclature allows a huge opening for Jazz and *all* music—the possibility that one no longer has to adhere rigorously to prescribed keys or changes. But, how does one proceed without such constraints? My analyses of the transcriptions in this volume will help



Figure 3.1: Ornette Coleman at the Jazz Living Legends Awards. Ornette is seated in the second row on the far right end with his hat in his lap.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAELA DEISS.

elucidate the systematic use of such principles. Harmolodics is not anarchy. It is not a matter of “play whatever you want, there are no wrong notes.” Rather, it is a logical progression from “playing over the changes” to another approach that suggests “playing within the ethos of a composition.”

A Definition of Harmolodics: The Shape of Jazz to Come¹

“Peace Warriors” (quartet version)

Harmolodics is about race. It is about human equality. Equality of tones is about race. Consider this exchange:

Stephen: This constraint on civilization and the constraint on music is going to cause an end to Jazz?

Ornette: I know you’re right . . . I know you’re right. And the reason why it is . . . sex, money, and race. In that order.

Harmolodics is an approach that attempts to value each element and each participant equally. Melody is the “source of the music,” as Ornette told me years ago in an interview that predates this material.² From melody all other elements are implied: groove, intervallic content, harmony. If one were to trace David Izenson or Charlie Haden’s bass notes accompanying Ornette Coleman over the years, it would prove difficult, even fruitless, to attempt to codify the harmony for any given composition. Each repetition of the form, if there *is* a repetition, uses a consistent harmony. The bass line, seeming to contain the harmony, is actually a result of the melody: in the same way, the bass line of a Bach two-part invention seems to contain the harmony, but is actually a result of the melodic material that generates both treble and bass lines. The melody is the source code for all the other musical events, harmonic or contrapuntal. It is simply bizarre that music schools still teach the bass line as being the generator of the melody (figured bass instruction is endemic to all classical Western European music education). Ornette’s approach is much more straightforward: “top down” instead of “bottom up.”



Figure 4.1: Ornette playing at Hill Auditorium in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAELA DEISS.

Notice in “Peace Warriors,” from *In All Languages* (Coleman 1987a), Charlie Haden’s ability to follow and sometimes subvert Ornette’s tonal and rhythmic phraseology. The composition itself is tonally ambiguous, and deliberately so. The first phrase is almost a throwaway tonally—ending in A—but generates the groove. It *does* end on a G \sharp , making the G \sharp seem like either I or V. The first portion of the head is certainly in C \sharp (major or minor), with phrases ending on C \sharp in m. 4, G \sharp in m. 6, C \sharp again in m. 8, and G \sharp in m. 10 (see below). However, the coda (mm. 11–14) ends the composition with a phrase in G, then in G \flat !

I could envision this scenario in a Jazz improvisation or theory class:

Teacher: In what key is “Peace Warriors” by Ornette Coleman?

Student: C \sharp and G \flat , I think! But maybe A, G, or G \sharp .

Teacher: That is precisely correct. But isn’t the key of the composition established by the opening phrase of the composition, and supported by the last phrase?

Part One

Fast Bop Groove (horns in unison) (6 times) (Don Cherry plays the C#)

(bass part is transposed up as is practice in symphonic score)

* (similar) * (similar) * (similar)

•(G is slightly sharp) •(F# is slightly sharp)

11 Horns in Unison again (Entire Head Repeats)

(drums)

2nd Time:
(Ornette Coleman Solo)

17

Student: Yes, but the opening phrase ends in A, and the last phrase ends in G#, and the body of the composition is clearly in C#. In other words, the composition is in at least three keys, before any improvisation occurs at all.

Teacher: Correct! You get an A. Or a Bb, or a . . . (class laughter ensues).

“Peace Warriors” is a *Harmolodic* composition. It is in many keys, and shows traditional sequences of I–V, surely, and transpositions (e.g., the coda) down by a step. These are not new compositional approaches, but they are newer consequences of traditional approaches.

mm. 17 - 27

(Ornette Coleman Solo)

The musical score for Ornette Coleman's solo in "Peace Warriors" (measures 17-27) is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one flat (Bb). The time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 17-19) shows a melodic line in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The second system (measures 20-23) continues the melodic and bass lines. The third system (measures 24-27) includes triplets in both staves and ends with a 3/4 time signature change.

A close look at the improvisation (above) shows that starting in m. 18, Ornette begins by transposing the shape and rhythm of the opening phrase—*eight* times. The ending notes of each of those phrases—ostensibly the tonal centers for those transpositions—are Bb, Ab, Fb, D, B, Bb, Ab, Db. To attempt to provide some rationale for those choices would be to miss the point—this phrase is about the shape and the rhythm of the motive rather than an attempt to reveal some larger architectonic scheme. But it is a key element of how motivic generation works in Harmolodics, with absolutely no respect for the traditional hierarchy of tonality.

Such rapid change of tonality, however, could soon turn into a difficult, didactic exercise in both listening and performance, so Ornette sinks deep into a key in order to balance stasis with non-stasis. Starting at m. 38, he begins with a clear phrase in G. Charlie Haden hears and supports this wonderfully. In order to *seat the improvisation* in the key of C, Ornette inserts the *Wizard of Oz* quote "If I were the King of the Forest" in m. 45. It is interesting to note that the time feel flexes away from 4/4. My notation is not meant to imply, by the way, that m. 44 is in 2/4 time, or m. 47 is in 5/4, but it *is* meant to show that the "6 feeling" of the quote is