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Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality

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## **Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality**

**Franya J. Berkman**

Even though many African American jazz musicians have acknowledged the role of spirituality in their creative process, jazz scholars have tended to neglect this important context. More commonly, they have situated jazz, particularly in the 1960s, within the Civil Rights Movement and have focused on issues of political oppression.<sup>1</sup> An examination of the artists John and Alice Coltrane, however, suggests the limitation of exploring 1960s jazz solely within this political framework. Their compositional titles and their extensive commentary in interviews and in liner notes from the mid-'60s onward stressed the personal and the spiritual, not the explicitly political. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the religious and political facets of culture stand at oppositional poles. Rather, they should be viewed "as bands in a single spectrum" (Ellwood 1994:9). This is particularly true in an examination of both African American musical and political culture, where the divide between the sacred and secular has been historically nebulous.

The role of the Black Protestant Church has figured prominently in scholarly discussions of African American music culture, and to some extent its importance has been explored with respect to jazz.<sup>2</sup> However, with the exception of the Nation of Islam, the influence of Eastern religious practices among black Americans has not been significantly researched nor have adequate connections been made between these spiritual pursuits and the musical innovations they inspired.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, since the mid-'60s, black American artists have explored Yoga, Hinduism, various sects of Buddhism, Ahmadiya Islam, and Bahá'í. The aesthetic impact of these pursuits has been multi-dimensional and far-reaching. In

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their study of Asian philosophy and religion, jazz musicians have been exposed to the sounds and musical processes they have discovered in the cultures from which these traditions have emerged. One can hear this influence in musical borrowings, such as the use of traditional instrumentation, the reworking of melodic material from folk and classical genres, and the incorporation of indigenous improvisational and compositional techniques.<sup>4</sup> Though less audible, Eastern spiritual traditions have also exerted a more abstract philosophical influence that has shaped jazz aesthetics, inspiring jazz musicians to dissolve formal and stylistic boundaries and produce works of great originality.<sup>5</sup> Contextualizing the spiritual explorations of John and Alice Coltrane within American religious culture and liberation movements of the 1960s, this essay explores the way that their eclectic appropriation of Eastern spiritual concepts and their commitment to spiritual universality not only inspired musical innovation, but also provided a counter-hegemonic, political, and cultural critique.

### Spiritual Jazz

John Coltrane (1926–1967) needs little introduction; he is widely regarded as one of the great innovators of modern jazz and the most influential saxophonist since Charlie Parker. There are a considerable number of John Coltrane biographies, each of which takes up, to some extent, his spiritual disposition and the importance of his religious pursuits during the sixties.<sup>6</sup> Most biographers stress the influence of his religious upbringing—his father was a Methodist minister—and his exploration of various non-Western religions.<sup>7</sup> Few scholars, however, have seriously considered Alice Coltrane's musical contributions, her role as his spiritual and musical partner, or how her subsequent career as a composer, multi-instrumentalist, and spiritual teacher can be seen as a continuation of his legacy.<sup>8</sup>

Née Alice McLeod (Detroit, 1937–2007), Ms. Coltrane began the study of classical piano and harmony at the age of seven; as a teen, she developed her skills playing hymns, anthems, and gospel music for black congregations in Detroit, as well as bebop in Detroit's thriving jazz clubs of the 1950s. In 1963, after playing professionally with such figures as Lucky Thompson, Johnny Griffin, and Terry Gibbs, she met and soon married John Coltrane. In 1965, she replaced McCoy Tyner as pianist in his quartet. After her husband's death in 1967, she remained fully committed to a form of musical expression that was simultaneously devotional and avant-garde. During her abbreviated but prolific tenure as a commercial recording artist for the Impulse and Warner Brothers labels, she continued the exploration of free rhythm, rapidly shifting modality, and flexible formal structures that she began with her husband. Alongside pieces for piano and small jazz combo reminiscent of her earlier work with John Coltrane, her LPs consisted of ethereal meditations for harp, hard-hitting improvisations on Wurlitzer organ, and compositions for orchestra and choir based on the Hindu devotional hymns known as *bhajans*.

In 1976, Alice Coltrane had a mystical experience in which she received divine instruction to renounce the world and don the orange robes of a swami, or spiritual teacher, in the Hindu tradition. Until her recent passing in January 2007, she had been the guru at Sai Anantam Ashram, a predominantly African American spiritual community in Southern California, where she and her students studied the philosophy of Vedanta, and regularly participated in services of devotional music that she presided over. This essay, then, highlights Alice Coltrane's career and continued exploration of innovations developed alongside her husband and can be seen as a counter-narrative to the typical historical narratives of modern jazz, which tend to define her career as a mere footnote to that of her husband.

Although his canonical status as jazz guru belies the fact, a reputation cemented by the platinum selling album *A Love Supreme* (1965), John Coltrane was not the first jazz musician to draw on spiritual subject matter for musical inspiration. Other famous jazz composers such as Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus had alluded to the black church much earlier in their respective works, "The Black and Tan Fantasy" and "Prayer Meeting." In the late 1950s, this trend became increasingly popular as hard-bop players drew consistently from the gospel genre in order to differentiate and reclaim their music from that of the white "cool school."<sup>9</sup> By the mid-to-late 1960s, however, jazz musicians drew not only from African American spiritual traditions, but also from non-Christian, non-Western, even idiosyncratic, spiritual concepts. In some respects, such musical and spiritual explorations of "the East," of Africa, and of various cosmic realms distanced jazz from the traditional Protestant church as the locus of black ethnicity. Yet many of the same "functional dimensions" of African American sacred music persisted to use Melonee Burnim's useful term. The new spiritual jazz continued to provide "a means of cultural affirmation, individual and collective expression, and spiritual sustenance" (Burnim 1988:112).

Nevertheless, within the jazz community, John Coltrane's spiritual impact was singular; he imbued modal and avant-garde jazz improvisation with spiritual significance, and, in many respects, succeeded in creating a new religion for jazz musicians based on what Ms. Coltrane described as, "the entire experience of the expressive self" (Coltrane 2001). Let me offer Alice Coltrane's recollection of playing with her husband:

Of course John Coltrane is the one who inspires everybody, if you were fortunate enough to be in his presence in those days. He would always encourage you to fully express what you had. Not half of it, because it's not made that way, or three quarters—the entire experience of the expressive self. Truth on your instrument. That just opens so many doors, so many avenues, so many vistas, so many plateaus. You could hear your sound, music, light, coming from the ethereal, heavenly realms. When you played in octaves that you would never go—your bass area, and your contra-bass area, or your tenor

area. You heard all kinds of things that would have just been left alone, never a part of your discovery or appreciation. (Coltrane, Personal Interview, 2001)

It is of great significance that John Coltrane's spiritual vision was inspired by a concept of a supreme being more universal and inclusive than the Biblical Judeo-Christian tradition of his childhood. By the early 1960s, Mr. Coltrane found strength and solace in a well-reasoned, non-sectarian view of God, which Lewis Porter calls "a kind of universal religion" (1998:211). Included in his spirituality was an array of world traditions: Zen, Zoroastrianism, the writings of Yogananda and Krishnamurti, and a commitment to daily meditation—all of which he explored with his second wife, Alice Coltrane, who became his partner in 1963 and his pianist in 1965.

In the short time that Alice and John Coltrane were together (July 1963–July 1967), John Coltrane's music changed dramatically. When the couple met backstage at New York City's Birdland in July of 1963—Alice was playing piano in the Terry Gibbs's band opening for John Coltrane's "classic quartet" featuring McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones, and Jimmy Garrison—John Coltrane's music straddled a middle ground between the metered, modal music of the jazz mainstream and the metrical, formal, and timbral explorations of the avant-garde. By 1965 he had assembled a new group for the album *Ascension* and was committed almost exclusively thereafter to playing in free meter with increasingly free harmonic structure.<sup>10</sup> When Alice Coltrane joined him on the bandstand after giving birth to his three children, he recorded six of the most unconventional and daring projects of his career: *Cosmic Music* (1966), *Live at The Village Vanguard Again!* (1966), *Live in Japan* (1966), *Stellar Regions* (1967), *Expression* (1967), and *The Olatunji Concert* (1967). During this period, the spiritual intent of his music, first revealed in the extensive liner notes of *A Love Supreme* in 1965 and in later "out" recordings such as *Meditation* (1965) and *Om* (1965), became increasingly explicit. In an interview in 1988, Alice Coltrane explained their pursuits as a couple during this period: "What we did was really to begin to reach out and look toward higher experiences in spiritual life and higher knowledge to be obtained in spiritual life. This is what we did. And our basic root was, of course, reading and hearing discourse, talk by spiritual leaders and teachers, as well as our own engagement in meditation" (Brandon 1988).

By the early 1960s, John Coltrane's "universal spirituality" became increasingly fused with his interest in world music, and he developed a multicultural theory of musical transcendence that would have a lasting impact on Alice Coltrane's later career.<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Nat Hentoff in 1961, Mr. Coltrane stated, "I've already been looking into those approaches to music—as in India in which particular scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings."<sup>12</sup> Coltrane was particularly fascinated with the music of the sitar player Ravi Shankar, after whom he named his second son. Shankar began concertizing in the West in the early 1950s and almost single-handedly popularized Asian

Indian classical music in America, inspiring a great many jazz musicians of the era.<sup>13</sup> He had also befriended Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji, one of the first proponents of West African traditional music in America, with whom he would speak at great length about the correspondences between African tonal languages and drumming patterns.<sup>14</sup> In summer 1963, the same time he met his future wife, he discussed his interest in the magical, healing properties of music in an interview with the French press (Clouzet and Delorme 1963:14).

The timing was perfect for his unique synthesis. The modal jazz forms that John Coltrane pioneered with the Miles Davis sextet during the late 1950s allowed for the superimposition of non-Western music. The static harmony and tonic pedals that defined modal jazz—found on such albums as *Milestones* (1958) and *Kind of Blue* (1959)—allowed for the incorporation of music that relied on a drone or an unchanging tonal center common in Asian and African music. By the late 1960s, John Coltrane's concept of musical transcendence became extraordinarily popular. His fans and fellow musicians came to associate his spiritual views with the compositional devices he used on the album *A Love Supreme* and in other recordings from this period. Mantra-like melodies, static harmony, pentatonic improvisation, dynamic ensemble interaction, and increasing freedom from metric constraints came to signify both a religious attitude and a new ecstatic spiritual practice in its own right. One should keep in mind, nevertheless, that John Coltrane never applied non-Western musical genres in an orthodox manner; he took aspects of these traditions and absorbed them in his own jazz-based modal structures. With their attendant transcendent or healing properties, these non-Western sources were filtered through a personal musical and spiritual philosophy of expressing “inner truth.”

### 1960s Spirituality

The personalized, eclectic, and global nature of John Coltrane's spirituality was consistent with the new religious culture of the 1960s. Religion scholars have observed a profound transformation in American spirituality during the era. Religious identities that had long been rooted in “social sources of denominationalism,” such as class, region, race, and ethnicity, began to deteriorate as a product of greater social mobility in the postwar period.<sup>15</sup> Prior to mid-century, communities worshiped together “in ethnic enclaves that gave religious practice a distinct geographic identity” (Wuthnow 1998:23). This earlier model was one in which “family, church, and neighborhood were closely integrated” (Ibid. 20). By the sixties this “spirituality of dwelling” gave way “to a new spirituality of seeking” in which individuals began to “increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred” (Ibid. 3).

Religious practice of the 1960s also became more “inwardly focused” (Roof 1999:66); “Search for the spiritual went beyond doctrine, creed, or religion” and was concerned instead with “an inner world of truth and meaning” and “individualized authentic identity.” Philosopher Charles Taylor sees this as

part of America's "culture of authenticity," tracing its roots to the rational and political individualism of Descartes and Rousseau, the heartfelt yearnings of the romantics, the "committed inwardness" of Protestant Christianity, and Herder's eighteenth-century notion that people had individual "essences." As Taylor puts it,

Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something that only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment or self-realization in which it is usually couched. (Taylor 1991:29)

According to Taylor, this Western notion of "being true to myself" was connected to a political and spiritual "horizon of significance" during the sixties so that individual expressive acts could "offer a picture of what a better or higher life would be" and "a standard of what we ought to desire" (Ibid.).

Scholars have also observed a renewed interest in Asian religions and their American cousins, "harmonial" or "metaphysical religions." Interest in Asian Indian spiritual traditions can be traced to the Transcendentalists, influential thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who mixed together elements from a variety of religious sources in their writing. In particular, Emerson, in "The Oversoul" (1841) and "Spiritual Laws" (1841), popularized the Indian metaphysical belief that the world, God, and human beings all participated in one substance and that beyond the illusion of matter lay the reality of the spirit. Several decades after these essays were published, Russian émigré Helena Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society whose mission, among other things, was the study of comparative religions. Blavatsky invited Swami Vivekananda, the first Hindu monk to lecture in the United States, at the World Parliament of Religions, an extension of the 1898 Chicago World's Fair. Also in attendance were Buddhist delegates from Sri Lanka and Japan.

Perhaps because of its channels in America's nineteenth-century elite, white society, scholars have underplayed the extent to which Asian traditions have influenced blacks in the United States. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that these concepts filtered into the spiritual philosophies of several black religious communities in Harlem during the 1930s. In *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*, Philip Jenkins proposes links between late-nineteenth-century "harmonial" movements of New Thought and Theosophy and black religious figures such as Father Divine and Sweet Daddy Grace. He also points to the highly eclectic and "metaphysical" orientation of such groups as the Church of the Living God and Negro Masonry (Jenkins 2000:101).

A more direct cultural encounter with India occurred when Reverend Howard Thurman and his wife, musician and social historian Sue Thurman, led a Christian



Negro Delegation to India in 1935. There they met with Mahatma Gandhi and conversed at length about religion, colonialism, and racial issues in the United States. Reverend Thurman's subsequent writings were greatly influenced by Gandhi's commitment to non-violence. His work, in turn, influenced Martin Luther King Jr., who was said to have carried a copy of Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) with him in his briefcase.<sup>16</sup> Sue Thurman went on to lecture "on the beauties of Indian Civilization" and raised funds in these lectures so that several African American women could study at Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's school in West Bengal. In later years, Thurman founded a racially integrated church, Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, in San Francisco.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1960s, Americans explored Eastern spiritual traditions with new vigor, facilitated, in part, by the Asian Immigration Act of 1965, which allowed for South and East Asians to bring their daily religion to U.S. soil.<sup>18</sup> Technological advances, post-war affluence, and media focus on foreign wars of liberation also produced a new global exchange in which "religious symbols, teachings, and practices" were easily "disembedded," and "reembedded" into one another, resulting in "religious pluralism within the individual," "bricolage," and a "mixing of codes" (Roof 1999:73).

These trends in mainstream America held true for black America as well. However, the role of religion and the presence of religious leaders in the struggle for civil rights brought a new urgency to the issue of black spirituality. To quote Gayraud Wilmore, the late 1960s was "an unprecedented era of black theological reflection" (1998:244). The question over the political efficacy of the mainstream Protestant Church was a topic of enormous debate. Proponents saw the church as the wellspring of all black institutions, and one of the richest elements in black culture and social organization (Frazier 1964; Fichter 1987). They viewed the 1960s as a renaissance in which the church could reassume its traditional functions of challenging the goals of white America. Critics, however, complained that the church no longer lived up to the expectations engendered in its past; and that its fragmentation and complacency had led it to abandon the black underclass which was facing ever-increasing economic and political hardship (Washington 1964; Clark 1964; Cleage 1972).

These debates were contemporaneous with the rise of new forms of Afrocentric spirituality associated with cultural nationalism. The new forms included Ron Karenga's *Kwanzaa*, an interest in Egyptology and other forms of black religion such as Santeria, and, of course, the rise of the Nation of Islam. However, the expansion and assertion of black spirituality was not solely limited to a return to African roots. For some black Americans, the new spirituality included a journey East, to Japan and India, and into the realms of meditation and yoga.

This assertion of spirituality, even eclectic and Asian spirituality, was in keeping with the politics of Black Power. Though Black Power is typically associated with the political concerns of African American economic development, education, and even armed self-defense, it was also concerned with defining and asserting blackness as a cultural ideal. This, in turn, required a new spiritual

foundation. Members of the Black Arts Movement—the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement—wrote ardently about the need for a black spiritual culture whose politics were consistent with the revolutionary agenda of Black Nationalism. In 1969, writing on the theme of spirituality emerging in the plays of Black Arts literary figures, Larry Neal asserted:

The Old Spirituality is generalized. It seeks to recognize Universal Humanity. The New Spirituality is specific. It begins by seeing the world from the concise point of view of the colonized. Where the Old Spirituality would live with Oppression while ascribing to the oppressors an innate goodness, the New Spirituality demands a radical shift in point of view. The colonized native, the oppressed must, of necessity, subscribe to a separate morality. One that will liberate him and his people. (1989:77)

In an essay from 1968 called “The Religion of Black Power,” Vincent Harding enthusiastically proclaimed, “Allah and other gods of Africa enter into competition with Yahweh, Jesus, and Buddha. . . . It is joyously difficult but part of the affirmation of Black Power that ‘we are a spiritual people.’” That this simple, unequivocal assertion of spirituality was not necessarily bound to Africa as a cultural or geographic homeland opened the possibility of a myriad of forms that religion and spirituality could take. “We are a spiritual people” was also frequently coupled with what Gayraud Wilmore describes as “a new pride in the strange and wonderful beauty of being black and letting it all hang out” (1998:225).

Cultural historian Melanie McAlister has written persuasively on the political dimensions of African Americans’ interest in non-Western religions.<sup>19</sup> McAlister sees such spiritual explorations among black Americans as a way of forming “an alternative sacred geography” that provides “alternatives to official policy, framing transnational affiliations and claims to racial or religious authority that challenged the cultural logic of American power.” She sees these spiritual pursuits as part of a larger project that encompasses “a re-visioning of history and geography in order to construct a moral and spiritual basis for contemporary affiliations and identities” (1999:638). As McAlister wrote:

The attempt to construct a new black culture was deeply intertwined with the search for religious alternatives to mainstream Christianity, a search that included not only Islam, but also a renewed interest in the signs and symbols of pre-Islamic and traditional African religions (such as the Yoruban religion) and the study of ancient Egypt. These influences were often mixed together, in Baraka’s thought, as elsewhere, in an eclectic, sometimes deliberately mystical, mix. (Ibid.)

### Alice Coltrane and “Self-Realization”

By the late 1960s, it appears that Alice Coltrane, like her husband, had come to question the Protestant teachings of her youth and to find the Hindu belief in reincarnation sustaining, particularly after the death of her husband. In 1971, she stated, “The Western Church has failed, especially with young people. It was set up to serve needs it’s not meeting. Ask a Swami Hindu monk or someone else from the East about life after death and you’ll get answers that are real about direct experience, about looking to God. It has helped me to go on” (quoted in Dews 1971:42). In 1970, Alice Coltrane began to attend lectures by Indian guru Swami Satchidananda on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. When Swami Satchidananda came to the United States in 1967 at age 53, he was already a well-known spiritual teacher in his own country. For nearly two decades, he had studied and served under Swami Sivananda, whose writings Alice Coltrane had read prior to meeting her guru. Swami Satchidananda had also traveled widely in India, establishing several branches of Sivananda’s Divine Life Society, an organization and network of retreat centers in operation since 1936 committed to “a world-wide revival of spirituality through publication of books, pamphlets and magazines dealing scientifically with all the aspects of Yoga and Vedanta, universal religion and philosophy, and ancient medicine” (The Divine Life Society Website). At the invitation of writer and filmmaker Conrad Rooks, whom he met in 1966 in Sri Lanka, he came to New York City and was the guest of artist Peter Max. Satchidananda developed a group of American supporters and devotees, many of them artists and intellectuals, and quickly became something of a celebrity. He began lecturing weekly at the Unitarian Universalist Church on the Upper West Side and, soon after, founded the first Integral Yoga Institute at 500 West End Avenue. Satchidananda’s renown grew such that, in 1968, he was interviewed by *Life Magazine* for their issue “The Year of the Guru” and his lecture at Carnegie Hall drew a full house. He also opened the Woodstock Music and Peace Festival on August 19, 1969.

Alice Coltrane found the Vedic concept of “Self-realization” that Swami Satchidananda expounded deeply liberating. “Self-realization” is an essential doctrine of *Advaita Vedanta* and one of the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism. *Advaita Vedanta* is a monistic system of belief, in which the Self (*Atman*) is believed to be identical with the Absolute (*Brahman*).<sup>20</sup> According to *Vedanta*, the Absolute is without any attributes or qualities that can be specified or delimited. However, the Absolute can manifest in partial and lesser forms in a multitude of gods and images to which one might offer devotion. Although *Advaita Vedanta* allows for allegiance to many deities, liberation (*moksha*) is to be ultimately attained through knowledge of the Self, which is knowledge of the Absolute (*Brahman*). In an interview conducted in the 1980s with Dolores Brandon for WBAI, Alice Coltrane explained the appeal of this religious doctrine and how it differed from the institutionalized Christianity of her youth:

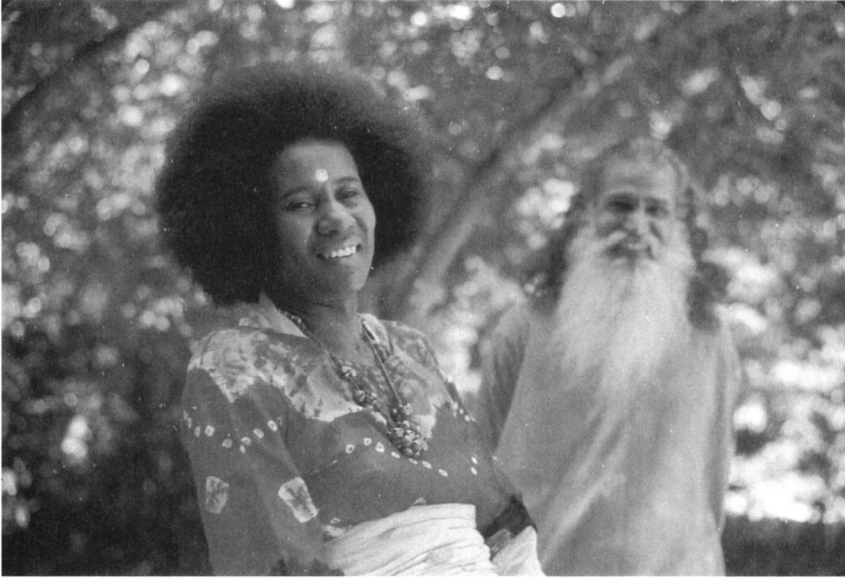
The Eastern philosophy gives the aspirant the chance or opportunity to develop himself. . . . Somehow, the experience that I had, and I'm not going to speak for everybody, I'm speaking for myself . . . you go there and you hear the service and you get the instructions: prayer, to be faithful, trust, ask God's blessings. Yet, it never tells you what you can become—More Christ-like, more Christ Conscious! There are certain wonderful statements made by Christ, "Greater works, shall ye also do" "I and my father are one." How is it that you can decide how this should be understood? If his word is the law then if he says "Greater works shall ye also do" let me believe that! . . . He told you about your potentiality, your higher spirituality, but the church says get under that. Be less than. I'm not stating we should be more than Christ, but you know really. He says you have a higher, a greater potentiality. "I've fed five thousand. I want you to feed five-million!"

To get self-realization. To get self-actualization, fulfillment. That's the point. And it isn't selfish—that term. It just means that you go to your fullest and highest potential, and not be limited by some tenets of some doctrine that says that we come here, here's the minister, and that we pay our tithes and go home and go back to your job or business or whatever and do everything you want. (Brandon 1988)

In its inclusiveness and emphasis on personal potential, the concept of Vedic self-realization that Alice Coltrane adhered to was similar to the spiritual and creative philosophy that John Coltrane developed. It can also be seen as deeply rooted in the "harmonial" traditions of the nineteenth century, and in America's "culture of authenticity." However, it was now connected to a traceable cultural and spiritual lineage and a set of yogic disciplines that Alice Coltrane subsequently took up.

### **Totality Concept**

In the introduction to the album *Universal Consciousness* (1971), the first LP that Alice Coltrane (now known by her new spiritual name Turiya) recorded after her first trip to India with Swami Satchidananda, she emphasized the importance of her pilgrimage: "Having made the journey to the East, a most important part of my Sadhana (spiritual struggle) has been completed." Her trip to India had a dramatic impact on her spiritual evolution and her related aesthetic sensibility. Upon returning, her new creative goal surpassed that of making music in a technical or artistic sense; she was now determined to express "extraordinary transonic and atmospherical power," which could send forth "illuminating worlds of sounds



**Figure 1:** Alice Coltrane and Swami Satchidananda, Los Angeles, California, 1972. Copyright © 2008 Philip Melnick.

into the ethers of this universe.”<sup>21</sup> As evidenced on the last group of albums she made for Impulse! and Warner Brothers, *Universal Consciousness* (1971); *World Galaxy* (1971); *Lord of Lords* (1972); *Eternity* (1975); *Transcendence* (1977); *Radha Krsna Nama Sankirtana* (1977); and *Transfiguration* (1978), the experience of her spiritual awakening could no longer be contained within the timbral palette of the jazz rhythm section, even at the latter’s most expressive and avant-garde extremes. She began to explore the combined potential of rhythm section, orchestral strings, *tambura*, harp, piano, percussion, and her newfound improvisational vehicle, the electric organ.

As Alice Coltrane committed herself fully to expressing her experience of the Absolute, her compositional sensibility became increasingly daring. I believe the artistic originality that emerges in these albums, demonstrated in the analysis that follows, was directly related to the ways in which her mystical experiences had been validated by her guru and by her experiences in India. In trying to express the Absolute, in the sense of Brahman as unbounded, all encompassing, and inclusive, she was moved to reach beyond the musical boundaries of the jazz genre and fully explore others traditions and styles.

After 1971, her commentary in her albums included elaborate descriptions of her belief in the stages that the soul passes through in its spiritual evolution, the nature of the outer galaxies of the universe, and conversations with the God and his various musical and spiritual emissaries. These exegeses provide a particularly vivid window into her deepening mysticism and, like her music from this period draw from an increasing array of disparate sources.

Starting with the album *Universal Consciousness* (1971), Alice Coltrane began to explore what she termed “a totality concept.” In the liner notes of the title track on the album, she explained:

Universal Consciousness literally means Cosmic Consciousness, Self-Realization, and illumination. This music tells of some of the various diverse avenues and channels through which the soul must pass before it finally reaches that exalted state of Absolute Consciousness. Once achieved, the soul becomes re-united with God and basks in the Sun of blissful union. At this point, The Creator bestows on the soul many of his Attributes, and names one a New Name. This experience and this music involve a Totality concept, which embraces cosmic thought as an emblem of Universal Sound.

On the album *Universal Consciousness* and, arguably, throughout the rest of her recording career, I see Alice Coltrane expressing this “Totality concept” by juxtaposing an array of musical identities that might not commonly appear together: contrasting instruments, a mix of composition and improvisation, and jazz, classical, and world music sonorities. *Universal Consciousness* displays both the breadth and array of compositional techniques that can be found on her recordings between 1971–1978. Two works on the album, “Battle of Armageddon” and “The Ankh of Amen Ra,” are duets for drum set and Wurlitzer organ. The music that depicts “Battle of Armageddon” is an avant-garde up-tempo free-meter duo. Resembling John Coltrane’s composition “Leo” and likewise featuring the mercurial drumming of Rashied Ali, the piece is a virtuosic romp for both players built on the repeated transposition and rhythmic variation of a single motif. “The Ankh of Amen Ra” includes a prayer to Amen-Ra, the Egyptian god of antiquity, “Amen-Ra bear us safe passage across the River Styx.” The organ theme reverts to a comparatively conventional metered pentatonic melody, which Alice Coltrane enhances with electronic effects and a driving, syncopated left hand figure.

Alice Coltrane also set the Wurlitzer in other more complex environments with a small string section, harp, and rhythm section. For these organ features, she composed innovative formal structures quite unlike typical jazz and blues forms. For the track “Universal Consciousness,” she fused the sound of harp and strings and contrasted that sonority with the organ, producing an overall ABA free-meter form with her up-tempo keyboard playing sandwiched in the middle. (In this case, ABA form refers to a compositional structure based on an opening musical idea followed by a contrasting section and a return to the opening material.) In an otherwise dissonant environment, several precomposed violin figures provide the organizational framework for the “A section.” The first is a tremulous figure that gradually becomes longer and more complex. The second figure is a sustained unison that has the effect of neutralizing the previous agita-



tion, and the third is a bold, angular motive. After the second figure is stated, the strings individuate, so that each of the four violin players (LeRoy Jenkins, Julius Brand, Joan Kalisch, and John Blair) explore different musical identities such as pizzicato, arco scrubbing effects in the middle and lower registers, harmonics, and free melodic improvisation. While the strings play, Alice Coltrane complements the activity with unifying arpeggios on the harp. According to her liner notes, these three tracks each display the arduousness of spiritual purification.

Countering the fierceness of these tracks are three others—"Oh Allah," "Hare Krishna" and "Sita Rama"—that portray more reflective, meditative states. In the liner notes Alice Coltrane states, "'Oh Allah' is a prayer for peace, unity and concord. The strings helped me to voice this plea: 'O Mustafa Lord Allah, bring forth us all together again. We can depend on You to envelop us in Your all-embracing arms of universal harmony, tranquility and love.'" The strings play twice an evocative metered introduction at the top of their register. Then Alice Coltrane establishes a pleasant E-Dorian environment with the sweet and tremulous organ melody that she plays upon entering and the two planing chords, Em7 and F#m7, which support the organ solo. A conversation between strings and Wurlitzer ensues, backed by the rhythm section. The organ theme is, as she indicates, plaintive.

"Hare Krishna" and "Sita Rama" are the most strikingly original compositions on the album. Both are based on traditional Indian chants. During her career as a bandleader, Alice Coltrane saw the potential of *bhajans* as a transcendent, avant-garde vehicle for rhythm section and orchestra. Thus, rather than simply arranging the traditional hymns, she created a new devotional genre modeled as much upon the participatory and functional aspects of the music as the original melodic material. To the best of my knowledge, no other jazz or classical composer has used Indian devotional music in this fashion. In her adaptation of "Hare Krishna," the entire ensemble plays an opening rubato theme in unison while Rashied Ali adds a patina of cymbals and bells. The opening melody appears to be an invocation and could very well match the text "Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama." The organ enters playing a theme in E major while the ensemble sustains a drone. The trills and ornamentation of her melodic line depart from both the language of jazz and classical music. They appear to be an approximation of *gamak*, the ornamental figures that characterize Indian raga. The organ theme beckons an antiphonal response from the orchestra and a second unison orchestral figure emerges. Gradually, Alice Coltrane's organ solo emerges, embracing dissonance. This entire rubato form is then repeated, like a song with various strains in which the verse comprises a free jazz environment for organ and rhythm section.

"Sita Rama," her second *bhajan* arrangement, is perhaps the most "Indian" of her tunes thus far considered. The strings are absent here, and the *tambura* and drums begin by establishing the drone. Another slowly-expanding organ improvisation emerges resembling *alap*, the unmetred melodic exposition of *raga* in Indian classical music. This is followed by a more clearly defined melody

that becomes the basis of improvisation. This structure is quite typical of Indian improvisational music. However, the entire conception is literally “jazzed up” with the sound of the rhythm section and overdubbed harp arpeggios. After this sonic environment has been established, Alice Coltrane closes with an entirely new ethereal musical moment using only harp and percussion.

One might argue, in a laudatory fashion, that Alice Coltrane’s musical eclecticism anticipated what is now a rather common post-modern trend of mixing and juxtaposing genres from vastly different historical periods and cultural traditions. However, as a devotional musician, her compositions lack the oppositional irony that one typically associates with post-modern aesthetics. Rather, I would suggest that it was her understanding of the Vedic concept of the Absolute, a notion that “the paths are many yet the destination one,” and her belief in the concept of musical self-realization that inspired her to draw from so many diverse sources in her musical composition.

### **The Political Valence of Spiritual Jazz**

The 1960s are often historicized as an era in which “all over the world chains and shackles of a classical imperialist kind were thrown off in a stirring wave of ‘wars of national liberation’” (Jameson 1984:181). While such a “mythical simplification” masks the complexities of these watershed years, decolonization and third world revolution are crucial to understanding the musical and spiritual pursuits of the black jazz community during the period in question. As Frederic Jameson writes, “the sixties were a period in which all these ‘natives’ became human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonized of the first world—‘minorities,’ marginals, and women, fully as much as its external subjects and official ‘natives.’” This cultural shift has been explained by numerous scholars in a variety of ways: “the coming to self-consciousness of subject peoples,” “the emergence of new subjects of history,” “the conquest of the right to speak in a new collective voice, never before heard on the world stage—and of the concomitant dismissal of the intermediaries (liberals, first-world intellectuals) who had hitherto claimed to talk in your name” (Ibid.). Global contestation of hegemony and the political emergence of subaltern voices produced an exchange of ideas across borders that influenced “First World” society in profound and lasting ways. The “continuous exchange and mutual influences between the American black movements and the various African and Caribbean ones” and cultural and intellectual exchange across other decolonized nation-states permitted a new traffic in arts, politics, and spiritual practices and offered new narratives of the past and new visions of the future (Ibid.).

Drawing from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, McAlister argues that cultural productions make meaning by their “historical association with other types of meaning-making activity” (2001:8). She states, “we need to ‘explain the coincidence’ that brings specific cultural products into conversation with specific political discourses” (2001:7). While Alice Coltrane and John Coltrane were not



explicit about the transnational politics of their music or spirituality, when framed within this “global contestation of hegemony” of which Jameson writes, and this “alternative sacred geography” of the Black Arts Movement that McAlister describes, their explorations are rendered politically meaningful.

One might contrarily argue that the Coltranes’ appropriation of non-Western spirituality constitutes what Edward Said has called, “the phenomenon of Orientalism,” whereby the East comes to represent “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” in the Western imagination (1979:1). Like many Asian apologists, religion scholars, and spiritual enthusiasts from the West, they have “focused on philosophical doctrines (often in the guise of an ancient wisdom) . . . with little attention directed to more difficult questions of the contexts of textual production and circulation” (Lopez 1995:7). However, while Alice and John Coltrane may represent Asian spiritual doctrine in a reductive manner, the political agenda that defines Orientalism and the critical East–West distancing implicit in this relationship does not typify their involvement with Eastern spirituality. Said argues that stereotypes of Oriental cultures were used by European powers to colonize the Orient and, further, that orientalism is “shot through” with doctrines of “European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism and the like” (1979:8). By contrast, their musical and spiritual engagement with non-Western cultures and that of other African American artists during the 1960s were often part of a lasting engagement with the cultures themselves, and can be seen as part of a larger oppositional discourse, one that has offered a compelling critique of imperialism. The emergence and valuation of “Third World” forms of expression, whether they are political, artistic, or spiritual, provided an important backdrop to the music of the jazz avant-garde as it expanded the sources that musicians could draw from and what the music could mean in the bigger picture.

The political ramifications of self-realization should also be included in this discussion. The notion of expressing an “authentic self” is intrinsic to the musical philosophy of John Coltrane, the jazz avant-garde, and, one might argue, jazz in general. John Coltrane, and later Alice, encouraged their band members to make extraordinarily personal statements. While the authenticity they sought—“the entire experience of the expressive self” and “truth on your instrument”—was intrinsic to their notion of musical and spiritual universality it also had extensive political ramifications during the 1960s as a display of personal liberation and black cultural expression. In the comprehensive reorganization of religious and political authority during the ’60s, individual, authentic, and spiritually inspired jazz music could constitute, symbolically, a form of revolutionary praxis.

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. and others have argued, long after the Enlightenment era during which political notions of universality such as “abstract individual” and “citizen” emerged, people of African decent were not granted such status (Gates 1991:4). It was only in the mid-nineteenth century with the Abolitionist Movement that the concept of a black self or a black spiritual birthright began to circulate in mainstream America. To be sure, this “perilous journey

from object to subject” first documented in eighteenth and nineteenth century black spiritual autobiographies and slave narratives has been laden with obstacles that have stood between the black soul/self and its place in the “absolutes” and “inalienables” of Enlightenment universality (Ibid.). In many respects, both John and Alice Coltrane’s spiritual testimonials, which are evident in their extensive liner notes and their devotional music, find strong historical antecedents in these fraught proclamations of transcendent selfhood that characterize black religious and autobiographical writings.<sup>22</sup>

As many have argued, it has been the overwhelming burden of subalterns to write themselves into the Western narrative in order to gain entrance into “the universal.” In the study of minority discourse, scholars have gone so far as to argue that the subaltern cannot speak and that “the minority subject steps into a pre-inscribed symbolic” (Palumbo-Liu 1995:193). However, as David Palumbo-Liu suggests, “In the face of this Eurocentric universal and the various imperialist projects it underwrites, the minor has attempted to assert its specific relation to the universal—it has ‘written back’ its particular version of the universal against the empire” (1995:190). I find it extremely interesting and valuable to explore how the Coltranes have appropriated the concept of universality. In so doing, they have redefined the concept to include a broad, pluralistic notion of both religion and music representative of minority discourses and minority cultural expression.

To understand how the Coltranes have “written back,” it is important to distinguish their concept of spiritual and musical universality from the notion of political universality associated with Enlightenment philosophy. The two are quite different and should not be confused as each produces a different set of theoretical and actual possibilities. The appeal to universality that emerged as part of Enlightenment philosophy eradicates difference for the sake of formal equality. It also masks hierarchical relations between dominant and subordinate cultures, languages, and histories. By contrast, as a spiritual concept, the Coltrane’s notion of universality welcomes, accepts, and even produces plurality, epitomized by the statement that “the paths are many but the destination one.” Their commitment to spiritual universality can be seen as a counter-narrative to both notions of universality associated with Enlightenment thought and the exclusivity of monotheistic religious traditions. It has also allowed for new hybrid and global aesthetics, beautiful music, and a transnational ethical message that transcends the ethnic essentialism and identity politics that have influenced public culture, politics, and scholarship since the late 1960s.

Viewing John and Alice Coltrane’s exploration of Eastern spirituality and their commitment to avant-garde jazz as a vehicle of self-realization directs attention from the political rebellion of the period to its equally important counterpart, spiritual revolution. Exploring the Coltranes’ musical development in this light allows us to consider how countercultural spiritual explorations among black musicians influenced the aesthetics of avant-garde musical expression, and, in turn, reveals the exceptional fluidity of ritual practices in twentieth-century

American society. While the study of ritual practices has figured prominently in both ethnomusicological studies of non-Western music and in musicological works devoted to Western art music from past centuries, it has been noticeably absent in studies of post-'60s jazz and contemporary experimental music. This essay calls attention to this largely untapped area of research. There is great room for further exploration, particularly in the study of avant-garde jazz musicians whose compositions and commentary frequently refer to spiritual themes.<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

1. Two dominant and opposed methodologies have generally emerged. The first method of scholarship separates the aesthetic from the political. This customarily begins with an initial nod to the Civil Rights Movement followed by a retreat into the musician's work. The advantage of this method is that the black jazz musician, who has been over-determined as a racial and political figure through decades of criticism, acquires the status of "individual" and "genius." The disadvantage of course, is the disavowal of revolutionary cultural shifts that were then shaping artistic production. See for example the work of Ekkehard Jost 1974, Roger Dean 1992, and John Litweiler 1993. A second scholarly tendency encodes the music with radical meaning. Here writers tend to ally musical characteristics such as free rhythm, collective improvisation, and timbral intensity with cultural nationalism and black militancy. See for instance the work of Amiri Baraka 1970, Ben Sidran 1971, and John Kofsky 1998.

2. See for instance Murray 1973, Boyer 1977, Levine 1977, and Maultsby 1992.

3. When scholars have ventured to discuss the complex relationship between sixties jazz, spirituality, and politics, the cultural legacy of the Black Church (Hersh 1996) and the involvement of jazz musicians in the Nation of Islam have figured most prominently (Weinstein 1992, Turner 1997). Scholars have also called attention to utopian and Zionist visions of life in outer space that individual artists have fashioned for their inspiration (Szwed 1997, Kelley 2002, Gilroy 2000).

4. Well-known jazz artists whose study of Indian spiritual paths have influenced or fused with their musical practice include Don Ellis, Paul Horn, and John McLaughlin. For a comprehensive overview, see Gerry Farrell's "Indian Elements in Popular Music and Jazz" in *Indian Music and the West* (1997). Other jazz artists who have explored various sects of Japanese Buddhism and have acknowledged the aesthetic influence of their spiritual practice in interviews and liner notes include Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. Yusef Lateef's involvement with Ahmadiyya Islam and Dizzie Gillespie's practice of Bahá'í have surfaced in interviews and in biographical sketches.

5. With the exception of Joachim-Ernst Berendt's *The World Is Sound. Nada Brahma* (1991) there are no major writings that specifically address the influence of non-Western spirituality on jazz of the 1960s and 1970s, although a small selection of articles have broached the subject (Monson 1998), and brief references can be found in topical studies (Budds 1990, Feather 1986).

6. The major biographies of John Coltrane each discuss his spiritual transformation of the sixties (Thomas 1975, Cole 1976, Priestly 1987, Nisenson 1993, Fraim 1996, Porter 1998). For the most comprehensive documentation of interviews and actual comments made by John Coltrane on the topic, see Lewis Porter's *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (1998). For an interdisciplinary exploration of John Coltrane's spirituality that engages with the political ramifications of his "love ethic" and his eclectic spirituality, see James C. Hall's "Meditations: John Coltrane and Freedom" in *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties* (2001).

7. His first marriage to Naima Coltrane, a black American Muslim, should also be mentioned here, however, John Coltrane never embraced Islam himself.

8. With the exception of my doctoral dissertation, "Divine Songs: The Music of Alice Coltrane" (2003) there are no full length works devoted to her life and music. Lewis Porter (1998) has written briefly about Alice Coltrane's maternal and nurturing influence on her husband, as well as their musical compatibility. For a brief, yet thorough article about Alice Coltrane's life and musical career, see David Toop's "Alice Coltrane: Universal Consciousness" (2002).

9. "Cool" jazz is a highly amorphous musical category. As a racialized term, it typically refers to the soft aesthetics of such white, "West Coast" players as trumpeter Chet Baker and saxophonists Stan Getz and Paul Desmond. However, the concept of "cool" is also associated with Miles Davis and his late modal approach typified on the album *Kind of Blue* (1958) as well as Davis's orchestral projects in collaboration with composer-arrangers Claude Thornhill and Gill Evans. Here, I differentiate works that purposefully make use of the gospel idiom, a sub genre of hard-bop often called "soul jazz."

10. Despite the diverse styles of post-1950s jazz, avant-garde musicians have been generally distinguished from the mainstream-jazz community by their explorations of free meter, free-form, and

group improvisation. However, within the first and second generation of avant-garde players, such as Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Charles Mingus, and in the music of their disciples, variable “formative principles” have distinguished their styles (Jost 1974:9). The aesthetics of “free” music have therefore been extremely difficult to categorize as a whole. David Such explains “free” jazz as a general need to lessen restrictions on various constituent formal elements of jazz. He equates the jazz avant-garde with contemporary movements in modernist painting that have explored texture, structure, and new media (1994:28). The free-jazz community has also been associated with a post-modern creative philosophy, summarized in statements such as: “free jazz is a music without boundaries; or is genre-less, so to speak. Any process of creating, transmitting or learning music, and the assimilation of any external influence, from any geographical location, past, present, or future, is possible” (Kiroff 1997:18).

11. Sun Ra was perhaps the only other jazz musician to attempt this kind of project at the time. However, Ra’s personal eccentricities in dress and demeanor, his unconventional intergalactic orchestra, and his lack of backing in the recording industry resulted in his comparative obscurity. Coltrane visited Sun Ra several times in Chicago in the late fifties. Sun Ra claims that he was the first to inspire John Coltrane to follow this path of musical and spiritual transcendence. See, for instance, Ra’s commentary in Steve Rowland’s documentary “Tell Me How Long Trane’s Been Gone” (2001). For a comprehensive study of Sun Ra’s music and his own brand of mysticism see John Szwed’s *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (1997).

12. This quote is taken from Nat Hentoff’s liner notes to the album *Live at the Village Vanguard* by John Coltrane.

13. See Josh Tynan’s “India’s Master Musician” in *Downbeat* May 6, 1965: 14-16.

14. See Olatunji’s remarks in Steve Rowland’s radio documentary “Tell Me How Long Trane’s Been Gone” (2001).

15. H. Richard Niebuhr first articulated this manner of social organization in his classic study, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929).

16. See Howard Thurman’s autobiography *With Head and Heart* (1979).

17. In addition to these spiritual affiliations with India, black radicals who sympathized with India’s struggle for independence from British rule also forged more immediate political allegiances in the early part of twentieth century. In *The Karma of Brown Folks* (2000) Vijay Prashad notes that “the stamp of radical India was made popular in the black press” by such figures as W. E. B. Du Bois who, in 1929 wrote, “the people of India, like American Negroes, are demanding today things, not in the least revolutionary, but things which every civilized white man has so long taken for granted, that he wishes to refuse to believe that there are people who are denied these rights” (*People*, January 10, 1929).

18. Though dealing almost exclusively with Euro-American culture, several authors have taken up the issue of American interest in eastern spirituality during the sixties. See Cox 1977, Wuthnow 1978, 1998, Ellwood 1979, 1987, 1994, Tipton 1982, and Prashad 2000.

19. While McAlister’s focus is that of the Nation of Islam, her insights and observations, can be extended to other forms of non-Western spirituality.

20. Sri Shankara (788–820 CE), Hindu philosopher and writer, is responsible for establishing *Advaita Vedanta* as the dominant Hindu philosophical tradition.

21. This quote was taken from the liner notes of *Universal Consciousness* (1971).

22. For instance, in his preface to *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century* (1991), Henry Louis Gates Jr. asserts, “Without the black spiritual autobiography’s reclamation of the Afro-American’s spiritual birthright, the fugitive slave narrative could not have made such a cogent case for black civil rights in the crises years between 1830 and 1865.” He further explains that even when converted to Christianity “primitives” were “still denied formal recognition of their subjectivity in Western arts and letters, in jurisprudence, and in all that signals full citizenship” (1991:4).

23. Interestingly, one sees a similar language of “Self-realization” in comments made by other experimental jazz musicians of the late sixties and early seventies as well. In his study of the Chicago-based black artists collective the AACM (The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians), George Lewis calls attention to the centrality of this concept among members. Lewis cites saxophonist Joseph Jarman in particular, who explained, “up until the late ‘sixties, we were always categorized, and it was only possible for you to self-realize certain situations. But then we began to realize that if you began to self-realize, you became a universal property, and then you must use the whole spectrum of conscious reality” (2003:110). Such commentary leads one to believe that this spiritual doctrine was pervasive in the post-Coltrane avant-garde jazz subculture and not limited to Alice Coltrane and the New York jazz scene.

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