

*The purpose of this essay is to express and engender appreciation for the ways in which towering American historical figures like John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, and others fits into Black America's long, storied journey toward the recognition and dignity that they are owed by this country. Having written this several years ago, my feelings have changed on some aspects. I now see blatant speech and visible action as virtues in ways that I did not before. I have also come to understand the socio-political work of these figures not just as historical, biographical information, but as a guiding light for those currently participating in this ongoing struggle. Most of all, I want to express the love and respect that I have for one of my greatest heroes.*

### **Essay: John Coltrane's Dialogue with the Black American Struggle**

John Coltrane is a figure that truly contains multitudes. Many musicians and jazz fans know him as the epitome of jazz in its most intellectual form- the genius behind "Giant Steps" and one of the most talented musicians of all time. Others celebrate him as a spiritual leader who explored the furthest extent of the intangible feelings that can be expressed through any artistic medium. Some, such as musician and scholar Leonard L. Brown, author of *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom*, place John Coltrane as an important participant in

the collective development of Black American Culture.<sup>1</sup> Investigation into Coltrane's life reveals an artist fully aware of his existence within a developing Black American vernacular, a desire to contribute to that culture through mastery of his idiom and a strong, spiritual devotion to his perceived duty. Study of Coltrane's time and place reveals the mutually influential relationship between Coltrane and Black America at large. Black America's struggles during the Civil Rights Era shaped Coltrane's artistic vision and his eager participation in the artistic practice of that culture shaped the direction of the Civil Rights movement in turn.

Coltrane's known interests, writings, and public statements indicate that he recognized the significance of his identity as a black artist. Known to be an ardent reader and endlessly curious student of music and culture, Coltrane demonstrated ownership of his black identity early in his career. As a musician, he was firmly rooted in the blues, no doubt partially because of his extensive work with "jump blues" bands in the late 40's and early 50's. "The blues provided the soundtrack for Coltrane's early career," suggests Lewis Porter, explaining that his stints with bandleaders Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson and Earl Bostic, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Brown, *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), vii.

Johnny Hodges and Dizzy Gillespie, who had uncharacteristically rhythm-and-blues-oriented bands at the time, could have contributed to the development of his appreciation for blues. He went on to play with Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis, whom Porter suggests “had a unique approach to the blues”.<sup>2</sup>

Brown asserts that the blues are an important component of the Black American musical palette. “...the blues developed as a vocal-dominant music that chronicled black life experiences, good, bad, happy, and sad”.<sup>3</sup> That musical aesthetic has developed over time to incorporate many more complex parts of the black experience since the time of slavery from which it came. Brown counts “...at least thirty (Coltrane compositions) that either use the term ‘blues’ in the title or are harmonically and melodically based on the blues form with some variations”<sup>4</sup>. Not only did Coltrane heavily favor the blues in his compositions and programming, but he applied the blues aesthetic to a variety of other compositions and playing situations.

Brown further notes that Coltrane studied and had a profound interest in spirituals, another classic component of the Black American musical idiom.

According to Brown, Coltrane’s first wife, Naima, gave author C.O. Simpkins a

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<sup>2</sup>Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life And Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, *John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 27.

copy of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, by James Weldon Johnson, from Coltrane's library for his research.<sup>5</sup> Coltrane's possession of this book implies a keen interest in spirituals and perhaps the expressive possibilities thereof. Black American spirituals arose from a dark time in American history, when songs of woe, cries for mercy, or fleeting moments of hope were musical representations of the experience of slaves. Their simple, yet powerful melodies, participatory nature and roots in tradition likely drove Coltrane to incorporate spirituals, or the aesthetic of spirituals, into his musical palette. One obvious example of this incorporation is the opening track, entitled "Spiritual" from Coltrane's 1961 album *Live at the Village Vanguard*, which was likely based on a little-known version of "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See" from *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*.<sup>6</sup> The melody and accompanying drone from the bass and bass clarinet, as well as the recitative-like approach to time, invoke the sounds of an old spiritual. The harmony of the tune is static, giving John Coltrane a chance to stretch out emotionally in his improvisation and shape the meditative atmosphere he was known for in this period.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, *John Coltrane*, 206.

Besides studying the music of his own American roots, Coltrane was known to be a student of music from other cultures- particularly Africa and India. Coltrane undoubtedly picked up on the themes that carried over into Black American music from African music, especially its vocal nature. From the aforementioned long, meditative pieces to the striking free jazz he played later in his career, Coltrane made frequent use of “shouts” and “screams” from his instrument. The master of harmony in 1959 was experimenting with foregoing harmony altogether for the sake of emotion and expression by 1961. Fellow experimentally-minded saxophonist Archie Shepp said of Coltrane “he turned a basically western instrument into a non-western instrument. He took the saxophone and he did fundamentally non-Western things with it...”<sup>7</sup>. According to Archie Shepp these sounds were not just an exploration to push the boundaries of music, but a visceral expression of Coltrane’s African roots.

Coltrane was not just interested in his black identity from a historical perspective. He also drew artistic direction from that identity. His culture provided him with a kind of imperative that drove him to seek more daring avenues of expression and not cave to pressure from critics or audiences. There is evidence that he thought of jazz musicians as conduits for the expression of Black

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<sup>7</sup> Archie Shepp, “Musicians Talk about John Coltrane,” *Downbeat*, July 12, 1979, 20.

American attitudes and experiences. Scholar Portia Maulsby asserts that black music functions within the greater black community as a mode of communication and that music evolves over time as new chapters in the Black American experience are written. She explains that “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”, but “these styles do not evolve independently of existing traditions, but rather, they evolve out of them”.<sup>8</sup> In this way, black music is both ever-changing and firmly rooted in tradition. Coltrane participated in the development of a new form, the repetition of old forms, and the expression of his experience.

C.O. Simpkins’s biography includes a letter that Coltrane wrote to critic Don DeMichael in response to an Aaron Copland book the critic had sent to him about finding validity and a sense of purpose in one’s music. In it, Coltrane describes the innate connection that he believes jazz musicians have to the convictions of Black America. “We have absolutely no reason to worry about a lack of positive and affirmative philosophy. It’s built in us...we are born with this feeling that just comes out no matter what conditions exist”.<sup>9</sup> Here, Coltrane insinuates that there

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<sup>8</sup> Brown., *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom*, viii.

<sup>9</sup> C.O. Simpkins, *Coltrane: A Biography* (Perth Amboy, N.J.: Herndon House, 1975).

is a natural sense of purpose that jazz musicians possess- likely drawing from his own experience and sense of duty to the advancement of Black American culture. He goes on to explain that it is music, which Mautlsby described as an all-important mode of communication, that pushes the black community through oppression, discrimination, and adversity. The letter suggests that, for Coltrane, “jazz” music (a term which Coltrane implies is only applied to the music by white critics) and black culture go hand in hand and the jazz musician feels a certain obligation to advance that culture, or at least express the worldview of that culture.

In the letter, Coltrane goes on to muse about the artist Van Gogh, who “found himself at odds with the world he lived in, and in spite of all the adversity, frustrations and so forth- beautiful and living art came forth abundantly”.<sup>10</sup>

Coltrane infers from his study of Van Gogh that “the innovator is more often than not met with some degree of condemnation...quite often they are the rejects, outcasts, sub-citizens, etc. of the very societies to which they bring so much sustenance”.<sup>11</sup> From this statement, one can come to understand Coltrane’s fearless devotion to artistic exploration, even in the face of critical and public

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

rejection, but Brown takes the implications a step further, applying the statement to the condition of Black America as a whole. “Coltrane understood the ways Black folks had been stereotyped, ridiculed, and demonized in the United States. He also acknowledged the incredible rich tradition of Black American music and the contribution its artists had made to their own country and to the world”.<sup>12</sup> Coltrane’s understanding of himself as part of a culture hungry for expression added to the already powerful yearning for knowledge and self-actualization that propelled him forward.

Coltrane’s understanding of his role within the culture led him to acknowledge Civil Rights as his struggle to participate in. While Coltrane was not as blatantly political as some of his contemporaries, such as Archie Shepp and Charles Mingus, there is significant evidence that Coltrane consumed the rhetoric of Civil Rights leaders and was supportive of the cause. In the DeMichael letter, Coltrane states “Any person who claims to believe that the exponents of our music or freedom are not guided by the same entity, is either prejudiced, musically sterile, or just plain stupid or scheming”.<sup>13</sup> Here, Coltrane uses the word “our” to identify himself as part of a Black American people that have a common

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Simpkins, *John Coltrane*.



desire for freedom and even ascribes that desire to the same muse that guides him in the creation of his art. This statement shows that Coltrane saw himself not just as an observer, but as a participant in the struggle for freedom- a word which he adds, “so many seem to fear today”.<sup>14</sup>

Such a statement adds weight to the fact, which Coltrane opts not to linger on in a 1966 interview with Frank Kofsky, that he was known to have attended speeches by Malcolm X. In the interview, Coltrane answers Kofsky’s suggestion that his music reflects the teachings of Malcolm X by suggesting that music reflects many aspects of the human experience, but proceeds to confirm Kofsky’s insinuation by explaining that “when we see something that we feel should be better, we must exert effort to try and make it better”.<sup>15</sup>

As historian Ashley Kahn explains, in the late 1950’s, “jazz had already begun to reflect the increasingly confrontational stance of black America”<sup>16</sup> and many of Coltrane’s colleagues contributed to that stance with incendiary works such as Mingus’ “Fables of Faubus” and Max Roach’s “Freedom Now Suite”. Kahn further explains that “though Coltrane’s spiritual sensibility set him on a more pacifistic course, he allowed himself to be more outspoken in the titles of his

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Pauline Rivelli and Robert Levin, *Giants of Black Music* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1980), 26.

<sup>16</sup> Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane’s Signature Album* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 76.

songs”.<sup>17</sup> Recorded in 1961, the album *Africa/Brass* included a tune called “Song of the Underground Railroad, an adaptation of an old song called “The Drinking Gourd”.<sup>18</sup> Reference to Harriet Tubman takes on more than just a historical significance when one considers the socio-political climate of the early 1960s. Kahn posits that Coltrane’s blues composition “Up ‘Gainst the Wall”, from the 1962 album *Coltrane*, “had a definite law-enforcement ring to Black listeners of the period”.<sup>19</sup> In the Kofsky interview, Coltrane explains his take on injecting his social, cultural, and spiritual perspectives into his music. “I think it’s going to have to be very subtle; you can’t ram philosophies down anybody’s throat, and the music is enough! That’s philosophy.”<sup>20</sup> In Coltrane’s song titles, he is able to guide his audience into the right line of thinking and still let the music do most of the talking. This was the usual form that Coltrane’s social commentary took.

There were some instances in which Coltrane sacrificed the aforementioned subtlety for the sake of deliberate sociocultural imagery. “Alabama”, which appears on the 1963 quartet recording *Live at Birdland*, is a response to the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church that killed four young black girls in September of that year. Coltrane revealed the intention behind the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>18</sup> Porter, *John Coltrane*, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Rivelli & Levin, *Giants of Black Music*, 37.

piece to Bob Thiele, stating "It represents, musically, something that I saw down there translated into music from inside me."<sup>21</sup> Pianist McCoy Tyner elaborated on Coltrane's statement. "John said there was a Martin Luther King speech about the four girls getting killed in Alabama. It was in the newspaper- a printed medium. And so John took the rhythmic patterns of his speech and came up with 'Alabama'".<sup>22</sup> While Coltrane was considerate of his audiences enough not to bludgeon them with his opinions, the commentary embedded in his music is anything but vague. The tune Alabama is brooding and full of heartache- an elegy for a terrible tragedy, an accusation of a society that can allow such atrocities, and a call to arms for the people who would continue to stand up to racism in America. Porter lists a variety of sources that corroborate Tyner's statement, though admitting that it is unclear which speech the sources might be referring to.<sup>23</sup> Coltrane employed the technique of recitation of a text through his saxophone in the similarly recitative-like fourth movement of *A Love Supreme* and dedicated another piece to the iconic Civil Rights leader entitled "Reverend King" on the album *Cosmic Music*, which was released after Coltrane's death.

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<sup>21</sup> Leroi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1970), 66-67

<sup>22</sup> Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Porter, *John Coltrane*, 331.

All of the aforementioned Coltrane works were recorded and released during a time in which jazz was taking on a symbolic function within American culture. The late 1950's saw a plethora of advances in technology- the invention of birth control, which gave women unprecedented control of their bodies, the invention of the microchip, which set mankind on a path to mastery of information and communication, the space race, which expanded the horizons of human exploration, and nuclear weaponry, which introduced the world to the very real possibility of total destruction and would define the international political atmosphere for decades to come. There was an air of excitement, especially in the United States, for what the future had in store combined with an existential dread brought on by the threat of nuclear annihilation.<sup>24</sup>

This dual aesthetic caused artists to test the limits of their fields by inventing new, abstract forms for literature, music, and visual art and reflecting the grotesque nature of the time. Society at large also came to question the state of their surroundings and challenge the socio-cultural status quo. Fifteen years prior, Black men returned from fighting alongside whites in World War II to find that they were still very much second-class citizens and segregation continued to be the law

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<sup>24</sup> Fred Kaplan, 1959: *The Year Everything Changed* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 4.

of the land. The restless energy of the period brought racial tensions to a head and the leaders of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements emerged.

As Black America fought for freedom, they adopted jazz as the soundtrack to the movement. The themes that permeated jazz since its inception, namely that “Black people had something to say”, made it the perfect symbol this new culturally conscious era. The idolization of Black jazz soloists like Louis Armstrong and Lester Young, the sophistication and brilliance of Duke Ellington, and the virtuosity of the Count Basie Orchestra made jazz an incubator for Black pride. Bebop was a rejection on the part of jazz musicians of the “Black entertainer” identity in favor of the “Black intellectual” in the 40’s and 50’s. By the 60’s, even white socialites and world shakers who sought to be “hip” idolized the likes of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie for the aesthetic of their movement.

Coinciding with the growth of Black pride was Black artists’ reclaiming of the bebop idiom from white appropriation. Hard bop, as it was labeled by jazz critics, was music in the vein of bebop that incorporated elements of spirituals, church music, the blues, and other indicators of jazz’s African and Black American roots. The term also refers to developments in the complexity of bebop such as original compositions, independence of rhythm section instruments, and a compositional approach to the development of improvised solos, which were all most prominent

on the East Coast. 1950s John Coltrane is often placed by jazz historians in the latter category of hard bop. His original compositions, of which there were many, were harmonically complex and, as previously explained, the blues was an essential aspect of his aesthetic. Coltrane came into prominence as a member of Miles Davis' First Great Quintet, one of the premier hard bop groups of the 1950s. Davis became a symbol of the Civil Rights movement when he was brutally beaten and arrested by a white police officer between sets at Birdland.<sup>25</sup> He would continue to be a major figure in black music by performing some of the most complex music in American history with his Second Great Quintet and inventing new styles that would become major trends in jazz, rising to fame and fortune all while being being unapologetically confident in his worth as a Black man.

Many jazz musicians who were politically outspoken in the 1960s, such as Max Roach, Charles Mingus and Oscar Brown Jr., were associated with hard bop.<sup>26</sup> Others, such as Cannonball Adderley and Sonny Rollins, were more in line with John Coltrane's approach of subtly implying solidarity with black political movements with their song titles and their music. As Ted Gioia explains, "*Freedom* stood out as a politically charged word in American public discourse during the late 1950s and

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<sup>25</sup> Kaplan, *1959*, 133-134.

<sup>26</sup> Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 76.

early 1960s- it would be hard, in fact, to find a term more explosive, more laden with depths of meaning, or proclaimed with more emotion during these tumultuous years.”<sup>27</sup>The 1960s saw the release of a slew of albums with this incendiary word in the title, such as Rollins’s *Freedom Suite* (1958), Roach’s *Freedom Now Suite* (1960), the Jazz Messengers’ *The Freedom Rider* (1961), the Jazz Crusaders’s *Freedom Sound*, Jackie McLean’s *Let Freedom Ring* (1963) and tunes with titles such as “I Wish I Knew (How It Would Feel to be Free)” by Billy Taylor and “Freedom Jazz Dance” by Eddie Harris.

This concept of “freedom” would be employed by record labels when seeking an audience for a new, radical form of jazz that rose to prominence at this time. Ornette Coleman, a young alto saxophonist who skyrocketed to relevance when his band started their residency at the Five Spot, played jazz very much in the vein of bebop, but without the restrictions of a chord progression. “Free jazz”, as it was later labeled, subverted virtuosity and adherence to harmonic rules, the primary values in bebop and placed greater importance on communication between the musicians in an ensemble, the expression of emotions and ideas by improvising musicians, and the freedom of the ensemble to create in a way that is not dictated by a preconceived harmonic structure. Besides the suggestive nature

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<sup>27</sup> Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 309.

of the name “free jazz”, Coleman’s music was appealing to proponents of Black power because it was a music with African roots that rejected the constraints of European classical forms<sup>28</sup> While Kaplan asserts that “Though Coleman was raised amid segregation and experienced much racial discrimination in his life, he never saw free jazz as political”<sup>29</sup>, he also recognizes the significance of free jazz to the black power movement. Gioia insists “it is impossible to comprehend the free jazz movement of these same years without understanding how it fed upon this powerful cultural shift in American society.”<sup>30</sup>

Coltrane was a known admirer of Ornette Coleman and the ideas presented by Coleman’s new form of music would inform Coltrane’s approach throughout the 1960s. The most obvious example of Coleman’s influence on Coltrane is Coltrane’s 1960 album *The Avant-Garde*, which featured Coleman’s compositions. Coltrane’s quartet with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, and Elvin Jones advanced the practices of Ornette Coleman, combining the principles of communication, expression, and freedom with each musicians’ brilliant technique and lush palette of influences. Thus, the quartet was popular with Black activists for many of the same reasons that free jazz was. Coltrane would continue to defy the “rules” of

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<sup>28</sup> Phillipe Carles and Jean Louis Comolli. *Free Jazz/Black Power* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 155.

<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, 1959, 300.

<sup>30</sup> Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 310.



jazz forms that came before him with sonically jarring works such as *Ascension* (1965) and *Interstellar Space* (1967).

The movements for social justice in the 1960s were spurred on by John Coltrane's music. Kahn places *A Love Supreme*, regarded by many as John Coltrane's seminal work, amongst the most memorable moments of the Civil Rights movement. "To Black America, the album's appeal to the Divine, riding on a strident, emotional wave of sound, fit the season only too well. Malcolm X had been assassinated on February 21; on March 28, following a series of mass arrests and violence, Martin Luther King Jr. led 25,000 on a fifty-mile 'March on Alabama' from Selma to the state capital...*A Love Supreme* yoked the spirit *and* fist-raising energy of the day."<sup>31</sup> Author and philosopher Cornell West speaks to the transcendent nature of Coltrane's message. "I don't think his music is a thermometer- it's a thermostat. A thermometer just reflects the climate- a thermostat shapes the climate. So when you hear 'Alabama', it's not just his deep love of the precious four girls who were killed...it's not just a reconfiguration musically of certain speech patterns of Martin Luther King Jr. He's looking at Black people all the way down the road."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 160.

<sup>32</sup> John Scheinfeld, Director, *Chasing Trane*, Documentary.

John Coltrane the virtuoso, the historian, the sociologist, and the spiritual leader was a man fully aware not only of his time, but of his function within the greater story of Black America. That awareness propelled him into new musical and spiritual explorations which, in turn, shaped the progress of Black America's struggle for freedom and justice. By listening to his music, we can come to understand his curiosity about himself and the world around him, his love for and faith in humanity, and his devotion to the "great and eternal constant- the creative urge"<sup>33</sup>, to which he attributes his and Black America's insatiable desire to create.

The literature on John Coltrane points to Black America's mutual recognition of his significance. Anthony Brown, a contributor to Leonard Brown's book, calls Coltrane "the personification of spirituality in Black Music".<sup>34</sup> Cornel West says about Coltrane, along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "they represent the best- not just for black people, not just for America- they represent the best of the human spirit".<sup>35</sup> Jazz deejay Joel Dorn, who played *A Love Supreme* on his Philadelphia radio station explains "to young black kids, he was *Trane*, he had another meaning. There was a response to *A Love Supreme* like you would have

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<sup>33</sup> Simpkins, *John Coltrane*.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom*, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Scheinfield, *Chasing Trane*.

to Malcolm [X], like you would have to the march on Washington, like you have with the emergence of a black consciousness".<sup>36</sup> The deep impression that Coltrane's music made on Black people in America during his time and for decades since indicates that he went a long way toward achieving his ultimate goal as described to Kofsky- "to be the force which is truly for good."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, 159-160.

<sup>37</sup> Rivelli and Levin, *Giants of Black Music*, 38.

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