

Book Review

Franya Berkman
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It's not far, yes close by
Through an open door
Work all done, care laid by
Going to fear no more

Mother's there expecting me
Father's waiting, too
Lots of folk gathered there
All the friends I knew

I'm going home¹

Alice Coltrane's music and spiritual life were intertwined. This connection between music and spirituality is the focus of Franya Berkman's ethnomusicological biography of Coltrane, *Monument Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane*. The book focuses on Coltrane in a holistic manner—one that has long been overdue for a musician who was so often in the shadow of her famous husband. While fans of Alice Coltrane's music have followed her career throughout the years, many listeners know little about her life, musical endeavors, or spiritual leadership. Berkman admits to her own initial lack of knowledge of Coltrane and her music in the introduction to the book, noting that she was first exposed to Coltrane not via John Coltrane's later albums (on which Alice was a sidewoman) but instead through a tape of Coltrane's religious music played during a yoga session. Although this introduction to a musician as accomplished as Alice Coltrane may seem strange, Berkman's careful analysis of her life and work illuminates why Coltrane has, at times, gone overlooked in the music world. Yet, at the heart of this study is not an attempt to "rescue" Coltrane from the past; rather, it is a contemporary investigation into an influential and enduringly relevant musician.

I first saw Berkman deliver a paper on Alice Coltrane in the fall of 2001 at the Society of Ethnomusicology's national meeting, held that year in Detroit. This was a long-awaited occurrence for me as I had become interested in women jazz musicians during my time as a master's student at Tufts University. I was particularly excited to finally hear about Coltrane's life and an analysis of her work, even in the shortened span of a conference paper. Up until Berkman, little critical work had been written on Coltrane's musical output or her life. She had always been in the shadow of John. Berkman was one of the first scholars to bring her out of that shadow and certainly the first to write a book-length work on Alice Coltrane. Many knew of Alice's work but few had chosen to write about her in any substantive way. *Monument Eternal* is a testament to Berkman's persistence. It was fitting too that the Detroit meeting was where Berkman decided to debut her studies, as Detroit was Alice's hometown and the center of her first musical endeavors.

Berkman's book is not a conventional biography since it is framed by an ethnomusicological focus. This focus provides a different approach to biography than might be expected. Berkman centers her exploration of Coltrane's life on "the role of spirituality in [Coltrane's] musical aesthetics and in the cultural spaces she inhabited" (3). Berkman's main overarching theme is the importance of spirituality and spiritual belief in Alice Coltrane's life and music. This is in contrast, as Berkman says, to how most avant-garde African American jazz musicians' careers and lives have been analyzed by scholars. In particular, Berkman points out that black nationalism and politics have been the primary focus of many studies of such musicians.² Rather than discounting politics, however, Berkman suggests that "[Coltrane's] spiritual explorations should be seen as a creative, energizing, and productive alternative to more explicit forms of political protest—an alternative that may, indeed, have deeply radical implications" (15).

In Chapter 1, Berkman begins her exploration of Coltrane's life in Detroit, where Alice took formal piano lessons as well as learning to play improvised piano and organ music in church as a young girl. These early experiences solidified Coltrane's lifetime relationship to music and spirituality. Berkman shows how Coltrane would use these formative years as a basis for her later years of performing and her eventual emergence as a spiritual leader. Coltrane's foray into jazz was heavily influenced by Detroit's rich jazz scene, as well as by her older half-brother Ernest Farrow. A well-respected bassist in the Detroit scene, Farrow would take Alice to jam sessions where she would play regularly. During these sessions, she gained valuable experience playing bebop. Coltrane moved to New York for a time to try out the music scene there. She returned to Detroit in the early 1960s and joined vibraphonist and bandleader Terry Gibbs' band. Unfortunately, there are few recordings of Coltrane's output during the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, Berkman provides useful transcriptions and analysis of Coltrane's recordings with Gibbs' bands. Berkman demonstrates Coltrane's adroit bebop playing style that was clearly informed by her Detroit roots.

In 1963, Alice met John Coltrane. This meeting and their subsequent marriage and musical collaboration is usually where most jazz listeners and fans become familiar with the life and work of Alice Coltrane. In Chapter 2 Berkman stresses the importance of Alice to John's life *and* music. Berkman explains, "I believe that John Coltrane's biographers have significantly underestimated Alice's deep influence on him as a partner. In the short time they were together (July 1963 to July 1967), John Coltrane's music changed dramatically" (49). It is clear from this statement that Berkman views Alice as a strong influence on John's music, on equal par with figures of the avant-garde like Albert Ayler who are also credited with inspiring Coltrane's shift to a "freer" context. Berkman makes it clear that Alice also played a significant role in John's spiritual journey. However, in the same way that previous criticism downplayed Alice's musical influences, her spiritual impact on his life has also been somewhat dismissed. Berkman emphasizes that Alice was deeply influenced by John on both a musical and spiritual level, but it is the *partnership* they shared that Berkman more fully reveals—a relationship that some scholars of John Coltrane have perhaps too often pushed aside.

After John Coltrane's death in 1967, Alice devoted the following years to composing works in John's honor. In Chapter 3, Berkman focuses on this post-John era as Alice coped with the death of her husband and the life of a single mother. Berkman divides this phase of Coltrane's life into three musical periods (1968 to early 1970; late 1970-1; and late 1971-8) but also stresses that this time was an equally important part of Coltrane's spiritual journey. This chapter traces what she calls Coltrane's "spiritual transfiguration." Berkman explores the music on Coltrane's albums between 1968 and 1978, highlighting various stylistic, improvisational, and spiritual changes and growth. These were productive years for Coltrane, and Berkman provides solid musical analysis. For instance, she provides a comparative analysis of Dvorak's "Largo" from the *New World* Symphony and Coltrane's own interpretation of the tune "Going Home." Berkman also closely examines several pieces on Coltrane's 1971 album, *Universal Consciousness*. Berkman also explores the emergence of what Alice called "a totality concept": a universal understanding of the connection between sound and spirituality. Contained within this totality concept was the use of non-typical jazz instrumentation including the harp and the Wurlitzer organ; as well as the incorporation of instruments and musical genres, especially *bhajans* (Hindu devotional hymns), associated with Indian classical and religious music.

Chapter 4 explores Coltrane's conversion to a *swami*, or spiritual teacher, in the Hindu religious tradition. It is during this period, in 1976, that Coltrane began to refer to herself as Swamini Turiyasangitananda (*swamini* is the female form of swami).³ Coltrane's conversion was preceded by several trips to India in the 1960s and 1970s, including a journey accompanying her spiritual guru Swami Satchidananda. Berkman includes interviews with devotees who belonged to Coltrane's Sai Anantam Ashram, the spiritual center she founded in Agoura, California in 1983. Importantly, this chapter also explores the music that Coltrane composed for her devotees, sung during services at the ashram. Until her death in 2007, these devotional hymns or *bhajans* were led by Coltrane herself. Berkman discusses Coltrane's *bhajans* as a combination of South Asian and African American church music practices. Coltrane's interpretation and arrangement of *bhajans* diverged quite starkly from other American interpretations. Berkman provides a clear description of the elements included in Coltrane's *bhajans*; however, unlike elsewhere in the book, she does not transcribe any of the music. This seems particularly perplexing given that Berkman says, "[Coltrane's] adaptations, then, predated the current *bhajan* craze by at least thirty years, and even though they provide some of the most interesting stylistic fusions and deeply rapturous versions of the American *bhajan* genre available, they are little known" (106). While this is a minor critique, some analysis of Coltrane's devotional music output would have enhanced Berkman's discussion of the uniqueness of Coltrane's devotional style.

Indeed, Berkman had a difficult task writing an ethnomusicological biographical text about a notoriously private jazz musician and spiritual leader. Granted only one interview, in 2001, Berkman provides a thick description of a woman many had only scant information about. Yet out of that fruitful interview and her other research, Berkman provides in *Monument Eternal* a critical, thoughtful, and eloquent discussion of Coltrane as a musician, mother, wife, and spiritual leader. Berkman does all of this while subtly providing a feminist exploration of Coltrane's life, even if she never states it in an overt a fashion. Instead, I see the subtlety presented in this text as part of the power that Berkman's work holds. By addressing Coltrane's life and work as surrounded by and engaging with the spiritual, Berkman provides a holistic look at a musician—not “merely” a female musician, but a *musician*. Furthermore, the importance placed on Coltrane as a musician whose work was impacted by spiritual practice and devotion lies at the heart of this study. This fact also makes the book a crucial addition to jazz studies. Few scholars have explored the spiritual lives of jazz musicians, living or dead, despite the fact that many artists such as Yusef Lateef, Mary Lou Williams, Anthony Braxton, and Herbie Hancock have openly discussed, performed, and relied upon a spiritual life connected to their music.⁴ Indeed, Berkman could have strengthened her argument concerning Coltrane's intertwined musical and spiritual lives by focusing on some of these other African American musicians who followed similar paths. For instance, Berkman mentions the life and work of Sun Ra, but only very briefly. His own philosophy on music and spirituality alone could have constituted a whole chapter.

In discussing Coltrane's spiritual background, I think Berkman could have also provided a larger discussion on the influence and philosophy of both Swami Satchidananda and Sai Baba. A deeper look into Sai Baba's teachings in particular would have helped to provide a better context for Alice's own spiritual journey. For instance, Sai Baba once said in regard to other religious practices, “Let the different faiths exist, let them flourish, and let the glory of God be sung in all the languages and a variety of tunes. That should be the ideal. Respect the differences between the faiths and recognize them as valid as long as they do not extinguish the flame of unity” (Sai Baba).⁵ This philosophy is akin to Coltrane's own inclusion of different perspectives from her lived experience. A more in-depth focus on the specific teachings of Coltrane's main gurus would have made the exploration of her spirituality all the more powerful. Nevertheless, through her close look at Coltrane's spiritual life, Berkman has further expanded the field of jazz studies to include crucial conversations and explorations of music and spirituality.

I had hoped to encourage Franya Berkman to write a second volume to serve as a follow-up to this very important work. There is much more to say about Alice Coltrane and I so wanted Franya to be able to continue exploring those issues left unsaid in *Monument Eternal*. For instance, Alice Coltrane did not particularly listen to or engage in popular music. However, she played harp and organ on several pop albums during the 1970s. The connection to these albums was a musical one but also, more importantly, a spiritual one. Coltrane played harp on singer Laura Nyro's⁶ album *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat*. She also played on The Rascals' album *Peaceful World*. Why would these three seemingly divergent acts be connected? The answer lies in the fact that Coltrane, Nyro, and Rascals band member Felix Cavaliere were all disciples of Swami Satchidananda. In fact, all three performed a benefit concert at Carnegie Hall for the Internal Yoga Institute (Swami Satchidananda's institute) in 1971. These aspects reveal there is much to explore in the life and music of Alice Coltrane. However, with Franya's passing, it is now up to others to take her monument to Alice and build upon it—or rather, to build new monuments that will give us further insight into formerly ignored areas of jazz history. *Monument Eternal* sets the stage for further work on a musician who has gone without proper critical attention for far too long, and we are indebted to Franya Berkman for doing so. While we mourn the death of Franya, she has left us with an invaluable text about an eternal musician.

Notes

¹ While I was writing this review, Franya Berkman passed away on August 26, 2012 of breast cancer. She is survived by her husband and three young children. Alice Coltrane performed “Going Home” (a melody from the “Largo” of Dvorak's *New World* Symphony and a piece that would later become somewhat of a jazz standard) as an expansive organ feature on her 1972 album *Lord of Lords*. I include the lyrics written by one of Dvorak's students, William Arms Fisher, in 1922 as a tribute to both Franya and Alice. They live on through their families, friends, and works. They are now both home.

² As Berkman notes, it is not that politics are unimportant to understanding avant-garde and free jazz, it is that politics often become the primary focus above all other considerations.

³ Coltrane translated her name as “the Transcendental Lord’s highest song of bliss” (94).

⁴ Eric Nisenson’s book on John Coltrane, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, is one example of the rare spiritual jazz biography.

⁵ <http://www.sathyasai.org/intro/message.htm>

⁶ Nyro was another woman lost too young to cancer.