

# The Aesthetic of Ornette Coleman

JD Pirtle | 2004



**“You could tell whenever the band was playing, because the audience would be outside on the sidewalk, and then the intermission came, they’d go into the club for a drink.”**

Paul Bley, describing the debut of Ornette Coleman at the Hillcrest Club, Los Angeles, 1958. (A New History of Jazz, 773)

**“Coleman is doing the only really new thing in jazz since the innovations of Parker, Gillespie and Monk.”**

Spellman, *Black Music: Four Lives*

**“Hell, just listen to what he (Coleman) writes and how he plays. If you’re talking psychologically, the man is all screwed-up inside.”**

-Miles Davis (*Jazz: America’s Classical Music*, 188)

Ornette Coleman was born on March 9, 1930 in Fort Worth, Texas. He began playing the alto saxophone at 14, and like his hero, Charlie Parker, became a jazz legend.

Often referred to as the father of the free jazz movement, he has also been called “The most significant jazz innovator of the last forty years of the twentieth century.” (Shipton, 773).

Coleman, however, has not always been so praised.

Coleman inadvertently learned the saxophone as if it were set up like a piano, with all of the keys occurring in order as one plods through diatonically. In other words, he learned it “wrong”. However, it could be argued that this mistake contributed directly to some of Coleman’s unusual ideas about what exactly music and jazz were. Previous to 1972, he attempted to fit into his role as a traditional alto saxophonist. During this time journalists were rabidly searching for a new messianic replacement for Charlie Parker. Many thought that a young Ornette Coleman would be that prophet, but others were not so convinced.

Coleman wandered between Fort Worth and Los Angeles, New York and Morocco. He drifted from band to band, making his bones with such groups as Pee Wee Crayton, American Jazz Quintet, Jazz Messiahs, The Paul Bley Group, and many others. His works, such as his album *Free Jazz*, an Atlantic recording for a double jazz quartet, “led to numerous denunciations of his work by a number of influential American jazz musicians, including Miles Davis and Charles Mingus” (New Grove Dictionary of Jazz, 479).

In the period between 1965 and 1972, Coleman took several sabbaticals from the public eye, always returning to collaborate with artists such as drummer Ed Blackwell and to introduce new tonal and instrumental concepts. During this period Coleman also struggled with financial insolvency and artistic uncertainty.

In 1972, Coleman made an influential visit to Morocco, and was forever changed by the Eastern tonal concepts and intoxicating rhythms that he encountered there. Coleman was profoundly stirred by these new ideas, just as North African music had influenced John Coltrane, Jimmy Page, Donovan and many others.

In tunes such as "Congeniality" (Atlantic, 1959), Coleman seems to depart completely from traditional ideas about soloing. At certain points, he seems to even bark at himself. His harried notes are some of the most non-musical yet expressive music I have ever heard.

In his 1971 work, entitled "Civilization Day" (Sony, 1971), Coleman brays like an elephant playing in "unison" with Don Cherry. This tune builds an incremental tension that is not exactly released from a traditional point of view. The drum solo provides a brief rest from the energetic horn spasm that follows.

His album *Change of the Century* (Atlantic, 1959)--which features tunes such as "Free" and "Ramblin'"--more typical of this genre, fits with my preconceived ideas about free jazz, but with an edge I had not thought I would find.

Part of Ornette Coleman's strange aesthetic can be appreciated by taking a look at some of the people with whom he associated. At historic dives such as the Five Spot, he found company in painters De Kooning and Leslie, writers like Jack Kerouac, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch. Though he did not always share all of their artistic ideals, one can see how the influence of so many varied artists affected Ornette Coleman. Because the late 1950's and early 1960's were a time of great political and social pressure, many artists who had been marginalized and criticized were beginning to be more open about their beliefs and were ready to begin expressing these ideals. Coleman was no different.

In 1975, Coleman formed his most well-known group, *Prime Time*, a quintet which included two electric guitars, an electric bass and a drummer. *Prime Time* was the capitulation of all that had influenced Coleman---rock fused with atonal, Eastern music.

In the years that followed *Prime Time*, Coleman has formed various duets and bands. He has collaborated with Pat Metheny many times. Their duet "Song X," was popular enough to give

Coleman the public attention that he had craved for so long. He has also performed many times with his son, drummer Denardo Coleman.

Another important aspect of Ornette Coleman's aesthetic is his desire to master other instruments. At one point he took a hiatus to learn the trumpet and violin. Another phase found Coleman writing exclusively for solo mandolin. Though none of these instruments were as purely matched with Coleman as was the saxophone, he must be celebrated as an innovator, if nothing else.

Coleman has also composed many classical works, or pieces of "absolute" music, which were featured in 1987 in the Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. "The Sacred Mind of Johnny Dolphin" for chamber ensemble and "Trinity," for solo violin, are perfect examples of an artist stretching out to embrace an as of yet undiscovered territory in his respective art form.

Coleman is, in his own way, a deconstructionist. Like Miles Davis, his ability to reinvent himself has enabled him to profit from an art form that could have remained on the fringe. Roy Eldridge once commented, "I listened to Coleman high, and I listened to him sober. I even played with him. I think he's jiving, baby. He's putting everybody on. They start out with a nice lead-off figure, but then they go into outer space. They disregard chords and they play odd numbers of bars. I can't follow them. I even listened to them with Paul Chambers, Miles Davis' bass player, 'you—you're younger than me—can you follow Ornette?' Paul said he couldn't either." (Jazz: America's Classical Music, 188)

The criticism of Ornette Coleman's music is largely academic. Many classically trained musicians and road-tested players have said that Ornette Coleman was simply playing random notes, rarely having a scale or tonal center on which to rest. Others hail him as an innovative genius of unlimited potential. I found many of his compositions stunning, some painful and all intriguing. I do not associate him with Charlie Parker, as many have and many more have not. I think of his material as a departure from traditional form and context. Ornette Coleman stands out as a true bridge between jazz and psychedelic rock. At the same time, however, he has produced classical works that inspire the admiration of many established academics. He played a plastic saxophone—what more can you say?

Though his detractors criticize him for his lack of technical music savvy, his apparent misunderstanding of twelve-tone rows and soloing, and his disregard of musical institutions, Ornette Coleman is held in high regard by many because of his unorthodox free jazz. He finds

his way into textbooks, radio stations and records stores all over the world, and in the end, perhaps that is evidence enough of his greatness and testament to his unusual aesthetic.

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