



Alice Coltrane: The Swamini and the Harp

by Ashley Kahn

Editor's note: Alice Coltrane would have been 80 years old on August 27th, 2017. In commemoration of this event, and the tenth anniversary of her death on January 12th, 2007, we present the following two articles about her life, harp and legacy. (All photos used with permission.)

Interviewer: John [Coltrane] was long in love with the harp, before he met you.

Alice Coltrane: Yes, that's what got me interested; he ordered that harp—a beautiful concert grand golden crown. It took us a year to get it because they are practically hand made. [He died before it arrived so] his physical eyes never saw it. He was really responsible for that being a part of my life. I still have that harp today.

— WBAI-FM, New York City radio interview, 1987

ALICE Coltrane was always one to follow her own path. She was a classically trained pianist who later fell head over heels in love with modern jazz. As a child, she was a church-raised Methodist who sang and played gospel music. In a day when respectable single ladies did not travel overseas alone, she married a musician so that she could get to Paris to study bebop piano. In her adult years, she learned to meditate, explored Eastern spiritual paths, followed various gurus to India, and eventually became a swamini herself, establishing an ashram for Vedic study in southern California.

That Alice Coltrane—née McLeod in Detroit Michigan in 1937—is also credited with bringing the harp to a level of respect in the world of improvised music holds little surprise. To understand why and how she came to accomplish all these things requires a deeper understanding of how her choice of instru-

ments and styles, her family and career, and her various roles as musician and spiritual leader eventually all became intertwined. For Alice, spirituality was her path *and* her destination, and that realization helps explain her story—and how she and the harp were destined to meet.

Becoming Alice Coltrane

“I was married to John Coltrane, and he...liked to meditate and we used to meditate together. I think it started with him, because I was born into a Christian family; I spent many years in the church. I was a pianist in the church in Detroit, where I am from. And it wasn't so much a turning away from that, as it was a direction that I was given to follow.”

— Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda, 2007

Before she was Alice Coltrane, she was Alice Lucille McLeod, the fifth of six siblings in a musical family, raised on church music and schooled in classical music from the age of seven. Her musical enthusiasm and facility on the piano led her to modern jazz. She sat in with groups led by saxophonist Yusef Lateef and guitarist Kenny Burrell, and sometime in 1959 or '60, began to entertain the idea of traveling to Paris to study with bebop piano pioneer Bud Powell. According to Alice's daughter and eldest child, the vocalist Michelle Coltrane, the attraction was both to Kenneth “Pancho” Hagood, a singer bound for Paris whom she had become involved with, and to the city itself: “She told me about Paris, how it was so hip in that era...for her, the music definitely was first, not to discount her relationship, but knowing her as I did I'm sure that it was the drive to be involved in music. She was young.”



Alice Coltrane.
Photo: used with permission from the Coltrane family.

Inspired, busy, and soon pregnant, Alice made the most of her time in Paris; but in short order, her marriage fell apart and she returned to Detroit with her infant daughter, eventually joining a group led by vibraphonist Terry Gibbs. In 1962, Gibbs shared a run at New York City's Birdland club with a group led by the well-known and hugely influential saxophonist John Coltrane, which brought the 25-year-old Alice together with her future husband. "Before I even met him and became part of the group and part of his life," she later recounted, "there was something in me that knew that there is a spiritual, musical connection—a divine connection—with this person. Because there were things that he said to me, they weren't spoken with the human voice."

Their initial spark was fanned by a number of mutual experiences and passions. Both were steeped in the blues and were beboppers at heart, exploring and expanding the musical language that Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie (and Bud Powell) had introduced. Both came from church backgrounds and were intensely focused on healthy living: Alice a teetotaler and Coltrane having sworn off drugs and alcohol in '57. Though his father had been a preacher and his grandfather a minister and community leader, Coltrane's questioning nature had led him to unravel the singularity of his own Christian faith. He read the Bhagavad Gita, the Qur'an and other religious books from diverse cultures. He de-

veloped a personal, spiritual path and a decidedly universalist philosophy that inspired his famous 1964 recording *A Love Supreme*. "All paths lead to God," Coltrane wrote in the poem that graced the album's cover. "No road is an easy one, but they all go back to God."

Musically and spiritually, John Coltrane would prove to be one of the most influential forces in the jazz world of the 1960s and for generations after, swaying the direction of an entire musical community through his recorded music. Imagine the impact he must have had on the woman who was at his side day by day, who married him and bore his children, who played alongside him when in 1965 his music pivoted towards a charged, avant-garde sound that challenged even the most stalwart fans.

By 1966, Alice's piano approach developed a startling new side, filled with sweeping, tide-like cadences, much like the approach she later transferred to the harp; at the same time, she began to follow a spiritual curiosity veering towards Eastern paths, all influenced and encouraged by her husband's example. Then, in July 1967, John suddenly succumbed to liver cancer and was gone.

In a five-year flash, McLeod had become John Coltrane's wife, sideman and, in July of '67, his 30-year-old widow with four children (her daughter and three sons by Coltrane.) She not only persevered, but stepped up her schedule and became more public than ever. Through the rest of '67, she focused on her family. Before 1968 ended, she had produced an album on the Coltrane Music label her husband founded. She finished building, and began recording in a home studio in their family house in Long Island, and signed to Impulse Records, the company her husband had helped make famous.

The Harp

I remember there were instruments all over the place, always...like these instruments from Japan, a koto, and a sitar from India, a tamboura, and there was [a] piccolo, and that little baby Guild guitar, a small, acoustic one...and a harp.

—Michelle Coltrane recalling the Coltrane family home, 2001

Sometime in early 1968, a double-action, hand-gilded pedal harp—a Lyon & Healy Style 11, gold—arrived at the Coltrane family home in Dix Hills, Long Island. Alice had ordered this particular, top-end harp after visiting the company’s Manhattan showroom on 57th Street with her husband in presumably late ’66 or early ’67; it had taken over a year to manufacture and deliver. The motivation, as she would freely tell in the years that followed, was her husband’s interest in the instrument. In his record collection at home were albums by harpist Carlos Salzedo, one of the premier players and composers for harp of his generation. As well, Coltrane, an obsessive when it came to exploring the harmonic, inner workings of jazz, often practiced the saxophone using Nicolas Slonimsky’s *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, and did the same with harp methods and études.

But the decision to obtain the harp was Alice’s—as well as the choice of model and style—and reveals she had a solid idea of which harp would work best with her music. “Of course she would need a harp of this sort to play in all twelve keys,” says Brandee Younger, a current member of the close-knit New York City jazz community and a longtime student of Alice Coltrane’s music. “Alice wasn’t shopping for a lever harp obviously.”

In taking delivery of the harp, Alice knew she was taking on a serious challenge. Learning to perform on the harp was not like shifting from a piano keyboard to a Wurlitzer electric piano (another instrument she would learn to play and record on.) The harp would require time and dedication to develop new motor skills, sonic familiarity—even the ergonomics of the instrument—unlike anything else she had played before.

Did she or didn’t she take lessons? Did she have any interaction with the harp prior to purchasing one? Did she practice on a rented or borrowed one before the Lyon & Healy arrived?

Today, the questions of Alice’s harp training do not yield any clear, definitive answers. She died in 2007, and few who were near to her in ’68 are still alive. Ravi Coltrane, Alice and John’s second oldest son (and an active jazz musician in his own right) says that his mother “may have studied with Dorothy



Alice Coltrane, Swamini, c. 1995.

Photo: used with permission from the Coltrane family.

Ashby but I’m not sure about that...” Younger is sure the two never crossed paths though they would have known of each other: “I have a recording of Dorothy from the ’80s in Detroit and she mentions they never met, and she died not long after...”

Ashby, a fellow Detroit and harp player who was seven years older than Alice, had, since the late ’50s, sought to establish the instrument in the jazz realm, recording and touring with her drummer husband. Ashby was a graduate of Detroit’s Cass Technical High School, known for its music studies program which included a distinguished focus on harp and voice. She later went on to record eleven albums which collectively serve as a compelling argument for how effective she was in pushing the harp as a lead instrument into the African American musical lexicon.

Alice Coltrane biographer Franya Berkman credits Ashby for buttressing Alice’s “unusual confidence in the harp’s potential,” yet maintains that Alice was “self-taught on the instrument.” Younger notes that she was never a “traditionally technical player,” unlike one who received classical training on the instrument. Younger also recalls being told by drummer Rashied Ali—John Coltrane’s drummer in his last year and a half who recorded with Alice between 1969 and ’72—that in ’68 he witnessed Alice “sometimes getting frustrated trying to learn it.”

Whatever the process, by June of ’68 Alice was sufficiently confident to enter her home studio with

the harp and two respected veterans of the jazz scene—bassist Jimmy Garrison (another former John Coltrane sideman) and drummer Ben Riley—to record three tracks playing harp that comprised her public debut on the instrument. The trio of performances constituted half of her debut album *A Monastic Trio* for Impulse Records.

“The entire B side of the original LP features new compositions and improvisations for the harp (‘Lovely Skyboat,’ ‘Oceanic Beloved,’ and ‘Atomic Peace.’)” Berkman wrote, citing titles that betrayed Alice’s deepening interest in spirituality and a more cosmic view of things. She added that, “*A Monastic Trio* was not merely Alice’s debut as a composer; it was her debut as a multi-instrumentalist.”

It’s also significant to note that on the cover of her very first album, Alice presented herself playing not the piano but the harp—her new Lyon & Healy—and wearing a sleeveless dress and hoop earrings. Her more spiritual wardrobe—punjabi dresses and sweeping robes—would come later.

To the jazz world of the time, the harp music on *A Monastic Trio* sounded strange and hypnotic, blues-flavored with Eastern sonorities—not jazz and certainly not typical harp music. In another era, it might have been categorized as “New Age,” and shelved alongside recordings by Swiss harpist Andreas Voltenweider. The jazz writer John Litweiler likened it to “waves of sound, a wispy impressionist feeling without urgent substance.” Other critics were less enthusiastic.

What these generalizations do not take into account was that in an incredibly brief period of time—no more than a few months—Alice had mastered the harp, enough to warrant at least a lukewarm response from a hard-bitten critic, and to open a door for further self-instruction and creative evolution—of which there was much to come.

Alice had already learned to get what she wanted from “standard tuning, though she also positioned the pedals to achieve pentatonic glissandi,” says Younger. Berkman similarly noted that she had “developed a unique style, relying extensively on pentatonic modality, glissandi, accented arpeggios, and pedal points [sustained notes often played by the bassist in modal jazz to help root the harmony,



Alice Coltrane at *The Monastic Trio* recording and photo shoot, c. 1968.

Photo: © Chuck Stewart Photography, LLC.

and often found in other styles like Indian and Vedic music.]” As important was that the harp was a fresh, effective addition to her already expansive musical vocabulary. “The harp offered Alice fresh sonorities and textures, and a new vehicle of expression,” Berkman wrote, and heard the growing potential in her first recordings. “These early timbral and gestural explorations on the harp were the precursors of her later sound experimentations on a much larger scale.”

“The piano is the sunrise and the harp is the sunset,” Alice described her metaphoric take on the instrument to *Keyboard* magazine in 1982. “All that energy, light, brilliance, and clarity that’s in the rising sun—or what we call ‘rising’. It’s actually us moving over toward the light—you can hear the piano. Then listen to the sonorities of the harp, the subtleties, the quietness, the peacefulness. That’s like our sunsets. But the sun is always the sun and a person is always who he or she will be.”

Alice’s decision to record with an instrument largely unknown to the world of jazz made sense in the land of wonderment and Woodstock that was the late ‘60s. As the final years of that decade respun the social fabric of the age, so Alice continued to transform herself. She simultaneously pursued her own inner spiritual growth, the path of motherhood, and

that of a top-billed jazz star who pushed at the limits of her genre, all while under a public, often critical eye drawn first to her last name.

In the years immediately after John Coltrane's demise, his mystique was just beginning to build inside and outside the jazz circle, and his widow could not help being high-profile. All Alice did was noticed and wondered at. Over the next ten years, through '78, she recorded thirteen albums while signed to two successive record companies—Impulse and Warner Music. She did this while recording, touring, taking care of four children, and eventually becoming a spiritual leader to more than a hundred followers. These recordings trace her evolving musical journey—expanding into Indian raga music, Hare Krishna songs of praise, and Vedic devotional chants, and never losing touch with her jazz and gospel roots. Each step of the way, she figured out a way to incorporate the harp into her music; of those thirteen albums, she played harp on eleven.

The harp also became a part of Alice's onstage identity. She invested in a smaller, Lyon & Healy Troubadour harp which could travel easier. But most often she played rented harps and trusted the technical support in each city to find a way to adequately mic and amplify the acoustic instrument, avoiding feedback and working out the right mix with the rest of the group.

"Her harp was under-amplified," noted a *New York Times* critic of a gig at the Beacon Theater in 1977, a common complaint at that time, "but she was marvelous on organ." By 1984 things were improving with sound technology and the same paper reported on another performance by Alice that, "much of the evening's music strongly reflected the Eastern mysticism that has long colored Mrs. Coltrane's music. These concerns were expressed most directly in a harp solo that wove diaphanous inventions around a simple blues motif."

The Harp at Home

Ravi Coltrane: Being the son of both of these iconic figures, there's a good amount of time that people are asking me about John Coltrane's music. But almost equally, people ask me about my mother –

'When is she gonna record again? What's she doing?'

Alice Coltrane: My son's been trying to tell me that for a while. I never considered myself to be so remembered like John Coltrane. But for myself, I'm sure there must be a few people.

RC: She's being modest.

—2004 interview of mother and son, relating to Alice Coltrane's last album, *Translinear Light*

By the end of the '70s Alice left her music career behind to refocus her energies on creating an ashram for her followers, and in the early '80s she bought land and established a spiritual community in Agoura Hills, California. She became known as Swamini Turiyasangitananda—her Sanskrit name meaning "the highest song of God." She recorded prayer-like music, and produced a local TV show to serve a growing flock. She established the John Coltrane Foundation, assisting young jazz performers, and ran Jowcol Music, the company that still oversees the use of John's music and legacy.

The Sai Anantam Ashram grew and Alice's harp playing was sometimes heard by her students and acolytes. Primarily her harp playing became an activity she did privately at home, for herself. Once in a while one of her children, teenagers by this time running their teenage lives, would witness this. "I've woken up in [our] house we grew up in, hearing this beautiful harp music playing at dawn, when your eyes are still closed and ears open first," her daughter Michelle still remembers. "This beautiful, tranquil, heavenly music."

There was a rare jazz booking that Alice agreed to, appearing in Warsaw in 1987 as part of the Jazz Jamboree festival and giving a masterclass attended by a number of Polish harpists. The group included the classically trained Małgorzata Zalewska, whose email description offers a revealing look at how many in the harp world were as fascinated by Alice Coltrane the musician as the person.

"I remember this workshop very well. There [were] about ten harpists, all great musicians, all working now as principal harpists in major Polish orchestras and operas. And all classically trained.

At this time Poland was newly liberated from communism and starting to be open to different styles in the arts so playing jazz on the harp was refreshing and new. Alice [Coltrane] was a Grand Lady of Jazz—tall, BIG hair, colorful clothes, and a very nice personality. Always smiling at people. The next year I had another workshop with Deborah Henson-Conant, then with other great jazz harpists. But I always remember this very first one with her!”

In 2004, Alice’s children convinced their mother to record one more commercial album; she called it *Translinear Light*. It featured some old friends—bassist Charlie Haden and drummer Jack DeJohnette, plus her sons Ravi and Oran—but no harp. It was her last recording.

Among jazz musicians, a colleague’s death is often referred to as “leaving town”; in the Vedic world, it is called an “ascension.” Alice Coltrane’s departure in 2007 deeply touched music and spiritual circles, with a shared feeling of unfinished business, that there had been more music, and more harp explorations, to come. A portrait of her today is incomplete without her substantial contributions on the instrument—check out her catalogue, and hear what it has to say. To embrace an instrument usually relegated to a certain sector of society took curiosity and drive and a certain degree of courage. The resolve needed to accomplish this by an African American woman in a more conservative era is another necessary facet of Alice’s portrait.

Another story from Zaleska of Alice’s 1987 visit to Poland: “One of the harpist girls asked her how she came to realize she wanted to play jazz on the harp. She smiled beautifully and said, “I was gifted [it] from God. My husband and I went into this musical shop, I saw this harp and I immediately knew I wanted to play on this instrument. My beloved husband purchased this harp for me so I can go and find my way with my new inspiration.”


Alice Coltrane found her way: she created a musical language all her own, unique and disparate from that of her famous husband, and even more divergent from the jazz tradition. She found connections between the familiar and the foreign, and a way of speaking jazz vocabulary through an unusually wide arsenal of instruments—including and especially the harp.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Kahn is a Grammy-winning American music historian, journalist, producer, and educator. He teaches at New York University’s Clive Davis Institute for Recorded Music; among his books are two titles on two legendary recordings: *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane and *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis.



ALICE COLTRANE DISCOGRAPHY (AS A LEADER)

- A Monastic Trio (Impulse!, 1968)
- Cosmic Music (Impulse!, 1966–68) with John Coltrane
- Huntington Ashram Monastery (Impulse!, 1969)
- Ptah, the El Daoud (Impulse!, 1970)
- Journey in Satchidananda (Impulse!, 1970)
- Universal Consciousness (Impulse!, 1971)
- World Galaxy (Impulse!, 1972)
- Lord of Lords (Impulse!, 1973)
- Reflection on Creation and Space (a Five Year View) (Impulse!, 1973; compilation)
- Illuminations (Columbia, 1974) with Carlos Santana
- Eternity (Warner Bros, 1975)
- Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana (Warner Bros., 1976)
- Transcendence (Warner Bros., 1977)
- Transfiguration (Warner Bros., 1978)
- Turiya Sings (Avatar Book Institute, 1982)
- Divine Songs (Avatar, 1987)
- Infinite Chants (Avatar, 1990)
- Glorious Chants (Avatar, 1995)
- Priceless Jazz Collection (GRP, 1998; compilation)
- Astral Meditations (Impulse!, 1999; compilation)
- Translinear Light (Impulse!, 2004)
- The Impulse Story (Impulse!, 2006; compilation)
- World Spiritual Classics: Volume I: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda (Luaka Bop, 2017; compilation) 



Alice Coltrane: The Harpist and Her Legacy

by Brandee Younger

First Hearing, c. 1997

MY introduction to Alice Coltrane's music came from my parents. One afternoon, while playing outside like any carefree child, they called me into the house. After arriving inside, they handed me a CD, *Alice Coltrane—Priceless Jazz Collection*, which was a compilation of some of her greatest works. This happened sometime around 1997, when I was in junior high school, just discovering dial-up internet and using my minimum-wage income to buy vinyl on eBay. Hearing the first two tracks on this disc, "Blue Nile" and "Turiya and Ramakrishna," changed my musical life.

On "Blue Nile," I had never before heard such soulful glissandi, or glissandi that played a functional, chordal role within a rhythm section. Her glissandi helped to keep time and change chords, articulate rhythmic patterns within the piece, and were the perfect complement to Pharoah Sanders'¹ and Joe Henderson's² flute playing. After hearing Alice play piano on the second track, "Turiya and Ramakrishna," which is scored for piano trio, I knew that I wanted to play it on the harp. This recording planted musical seeds that would grow through my harp studies in college and graduate school. And the seeds continue to grow.

1 Pharoah Sanders (b. 1940) is an American tenor saxophonist who came to greater prominence in 1965 when he joined John Coltrane's band. He is known for his overblowing, harmonic and multiphonic techniques on the saxophone, as well as his use of "sheets of sound." Coltrane's later style was influenced by Sanders.

2 Joe Henderson (1937-2001) was an American tenor saxophonist who came to prominence in the 1960s as a member of the Kenny Dorham band and Horace Silver group.

Alice Coltrane's Harp Music & Influences

In 1958, jazz critic Ira Gitler coined the term "Sheets of Sound" to describe (tenor saxophone icon) John Coltrane's melismatic, glissando-like improvisations that involved playing rapid lines and arpeggios throughout the full range of his instrument. Elements of "sheets of sound" can also be heard in Alice's sweeping, glissando-rich harp playing which, much like John's playing, favored pentatonic and quartal harmonies.

Married in 1965, both John and Alice Coltrane took a keen interest in Eastern and African music and these influences can be heard not only in their harmonies, but also in their sounds and textures. This was especially true with Alice's unique treatment of glissandi, which would ultimately become her signature sound. The effect they created can be described as 'transportive' or 'mind-altering,' and this effect also came across in her piano playing, which was very harpistic in nature.

In addition to Eastern, African and gospel influences, one can hear Alice's classical and jazz training in her music, as well as the heavy influence of the blues, especially in her harp solos on "Blue Nile" and "Journey in Satchidananda." A lover of all styles of music, Alice opted to play mainly spiritual music.

When first studying Alice's large body of work, it did not take me very long to discover that she approached music as a way of expressing her deep faith and desire to communicate with the divine. In listening to her devotional music, her Baptist roots and jazz training are strongly present within the Hindu songs and chants.

Even though piano and organ were her main instruments, Alice would become a cultural icon as

a harpist. In a time when the harp was almost exclusively played in classical settings, she and harpist Dorothy Ashby—whom she did not know, yet deeply admired—became the “faces of the harp,” showcasing it to a much broader audience, and as a result, making it accessible for people of all walks of life to see and hear.³

First-Hand Experiences, 2007-2017

It would have been impossible for me to have predicted the events of the past ten years. What began as sincere admiration and appreciation for Alice Coltrane and her music blossomed into an unimaginable decade of powerful, deeply meaningful music and relationships.

Alice’s sudden passing in 2007 brought great sadness to those closest to her: her family, students, fans and musical community. Having never met her, I deeply regretted never mailing the many letters that I had written to her over the years. It was certainly a sad and introspective time for me as a young musician. A few months after her passing, her son Ravi Coltrane called me to be a part of her New York City memorial at St. John the Divine Cathedral and my spirits were instantly lifted. This would finally allow me to express my love and appreciation for her music through her own body of work.

At the memorial, in front of hundreds of Alice’s friends, family and devotees, I was given the honor of performing some of her most well-known works with her beloved musical colleagues. Up until this point, I had only known these musicians from the classic recordings by John Coltrane, Alice Coltrane and Miles Davis.⁴ One of the standout pieces of the evening was composed by Alice’s longtime friend, collabora-

tor and lover of the harp, Charlie Haden.⁵ The piece, which was written and named for Alice, is entitled “For Turiya,” an affectionately-shortened version of her spiritual name, Turiyasangitananda. Before we played the piece (which also featured Geri Allen⁶ on piano and Charlie Haden on bass), Haden told the story about how he approached Alice to record the piece on harp years after she had stopped playing the instrument publicly. She was adamant about playing it on piano, but then, he remarked while chuckling, he finally got his way. The piece was recorded with him on bass and Alice on harp for his 1976 album of duets entitled *Closeness*. A month after the New York City memorial in 2007, we recorded it with Haden on bass, Ravi Coltrane on tenor saxophone and me on harp. The recording took place at Capitol Studios in Los Angeles, in the same studio where Alice’s last album, *Translinear Light*, was recorded three years earlier. Ravi reminded me that, although Charlie Haden had recorded “For Turiya” a number of times with many pianists, he had never recorded it with another harpist until this very session.

The next year I was invited to play in a number of memorial concerts for Alice, including the JVC Jazz Festival⁷ and, perhaps most moving, in her hometown at the Detroit International Jazz Festival, one of the largest in the country. In the following years, I was also invited to work on projects with several of Alice’s musical colleagues, including the bassist Reggie Workman,⁸ who was a longtime collaborator with

3 Over the years, countless people have approached me to say that Alice Coltrane was the only other person they knew of who played the harp. As a harpist in New York, I have always felt that we were plentiful, but I learned that this is not the case. This also reminded me of how important access and exposure are and that they should not be taken for granted.

4 The musicians at the memorial included tenor saxophonist Ravi Coltrane; drummers, Jack DeJohnette, Jeff “Tain” Watts, and the late Rashied Ali; bassists, Reggie Workman, Cecil McBee, and the late Charlie Haden; on piano, the late Geri Allen; and on flute and alto saxophone, Steve Wilson.

5 Charlie Haden (1937-2014) was an American bassist, bandleader and composer who was also an original member of the Ornette Coleman Quartet. He established the Jazz Studies Program at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California in 1982 where he also taught Ravi Coltrane, son of John and Alice Coltrane.

6 Geri Allen (1957-2017) was an American pianist, composer and educator. Considered a highly influential solo artist, she is also noted for her work with Ornette Coleman and Charlie Haden. She was an associate professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan and the Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

7 I was particularly nervous during this performance because Anne Hobson-Pilot, her husband Prentice, and Edmar Casteneda were in attendance.

8 Reggie Workman (b. 1937) is an American bassist widely recognized for his work with John Coltrane and Art Blakey. He is a professor at The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York City.



Alice Coltrane at a recording session, c. 1968.
Photo: used with permission from the Coltrane family.



Alice Coltrane's at "The Ecstatic World of Turiyasangitananda" celebration at the October 29, 2017 celebration in Los Angeles.
Photo: Koury Angelo.



The soundboard of Alice Coltrane's Lyon & Healy Style 11 harp, Woodland Hills, California, September 21, 2017.
Photo: Brandee Younger.



Ravi Coltrane and Brandee Younger at the Charlie Haden Memorial, January 15, 2013.
Photo: Jacob Blickenstaff (*New York Times*).



Alice Coltrane, Warsaw, Poland, 1987.
Photo: used with permission from the Coltrane family.



Alice Coltrane at the *Journey in Satchidananda* recording and photo shoot, c. 1971.
Photo: used with permission from the Coltrane family.



"The Ecstatic World of Turiyasangitananda" celebration in Los Angeles, October 29, 2017. Brandee Younger with Alice Coltrane's harp.
Photo: Theo Jemison.



Alice Coltrane Memorial at St. John the Divine, New York City, May 17, 2007.
Photo: Michael Weintrob.



Alice Coltrane Memorial at St. John the Divine, New York City, May 17, 2007. Brandee Younger, harp; Cecil McBee, bass; Steve Wilson & Gamiel Lyons, flute; Rashied Ali, drums.
Photo: Michael Weintrob.



"The Ecstatic World of Turiyasangitananda" at the Knockdown Center, Maspeth, New York, May 21, 2017. Ravi Coltrane, sax; Michael McGinnis, bass clarinet; Graham Haynes, trumpet; Brandee Younger, harp.
Photo: Ysa Pérez.



"The Ecstatic World of Turiyasangitananda" celebration in Los Angeles, October 29, 2017. Brandee Younger on Alice Coltrane's harp; Miguel Atwood Ferguson, violin and conductor; string section.
Photo: Carlo Cruz.

John and Alice,⁹ and with Pharoah Sanders and his band at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

The collaboration with Sanders arose when my parents and I attended one night of Pharoah Sanders' week-long engagement at Jazz at Lincoln Center in 2012. I had always dreamed of playing "Blue Nile" with him as a child. We went backstage to say hello and after a wonderful conversation about Alice and Ravi, he invited me to play with his band the very next night and for the rest of the week. Since there were no rehearsals between that night and the next, I was extremely nervous. However, since I had attended a number of his concerts in the past, I had some understanding of his music. Beautiful memories were created on this evening, and in future performances, that I will forever treasure.

After the memorial in 2007, a cherished mentorship and friendship began between Ravi Coltrane and me. Over the years, he shared many wonderful stories about his mother and his upbringing. Well aware of his father's great admiration of Carlos Salzedo, Ravi asked if I could combine several different elements into my playing: Alice's spiritual style, Dorothy Ashby's straight-ahead style, and Salzedo's classical style. In working to achieve this musical idea, my playing grew in accordance and my style began to change.

I am especially appreciative of Ravi's patience with me over the years. Coming from a background of studying purely classical music, every single rehearsal and performance was, and still is today, a steep learning curve. For example, in 2009, I was asked to play at the Bluenote with the renowned drummer, Jack DeJohnette.¹⁰ Ravi was also a guest on this concert and no rehearsal was scheduled. Thankfully, Ravi took the time to go over the extremely difficult music with me beforehand. (The

pieces included "Like Sonny" and "Central Park West" by John Coltrane and "Light Blue" and "Pan-nonica" by Thelonious Monk.) There have been numerous situations like this in which he helped me learn to navigate all this difficult music. Then, when he felt I was ready, he placed me in challenging settings. I have learned a great deal "on the job" and his approach to playing music has helped me grow by encouraging me to focus more on the music itself, on being musically in the moment, and on the creative process.

In August of 2011, I had the opportunity to spend time at Alice's ashram in Agoura Hills, California in preparation for a concert on her birthday.¹¹ Before the concert, I was introduced to more of her devotional music and arranged some of it for harp trio. This was when I was made fully aware of how powerful she was, not only as a musician, but also as a spiritual leader. I learned that she had created all of the music that was sung in devotion and at services and heard first-hand how the gospel and bebop elements intertwined with the Indian classical tradition.

As I began to work more as a leader of my own ensemble,¹² I incorporated Alice Coltrane's compositions into my repertoire. It did not matter if the song was recorded on harp or on piano, as it was the music that spoke to me. I found great pleasure in arranging some of her piano pieces for harp and embraced the challenge of trying to transfer certain effects from the piano to the harp. From watching Ravi and other established leaders, I learned how to lead an ensemble and convey the diverse musical elements that I wanted to integrate into the music that we played.

9 In The Workman String Summit, we played many of the compositions that Workman played with Coltrane himself, as a member of the John Coltrane Quartet in the 1960s. The ensemble was a non-traditional string quintet consisting of violin, viola, cello, bass and harp. Workman was so heavily inspired by his work with both Coltranes that he bought a Troubadour harp and plays it from time to time in performance.

10 Jack DeJohnette (b. 1942) is an American drummer, pianist and composer widely known for working in the Miles Davis band in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

11 Alice Coltrane established the Vedantic Center as a non-profit organization in 1976 and the Sai Anantam Ashram in 1983. Located on a 50-acre estate in the Santa Monica Mountains of Agoura, California, the ashram serves as a place of sanctuary, residence and reflection for spiritual seekers of all faiths.

12 The Brandee Younger Trio/Quartet/Quintet consists of concert harp, bass, drums, tenor saxophone and flute. Dezron Douglas/Rashaan Carter on acoustic & electric bass; EJ Strickland on drums; Chelsea Baratz and Stacy Dillard on tenor saxophone; and Anne Drummond on flute, respectively.

One piece that I arranged for harp trio was Alice's "Jagadishwar," which can be heard on two of her recordings: *Turiya Sings*, where she plays keyboard and sings; and *Translinear Light*, which features tenor saxophone, bass, drums and synthesizer. I was inspired to write this after hearing Ravi mention on a number of occasions that his mother would often sing this as a lullaby to him and his siblings. With the thought of a lullaby in mind, I gave the second harp part most of the lush chords in running arpeggiated eighth-notes and was sure to highlight the suspended chords at the end of each phrase. The melody was in the first harp part with a supportive bass line in the third.

Perhaps one of my favorite pieces to arrange was "Rama Rama." The original recording featured organ, voice, tamboura¹³ and percussion. Because the harp could not duplicate the sustained passages of the organ and tamboura, I decided to add a rhythmic bass line in the left hand of the harp, which also helped maintain the energy of the piece. In addition to the harp trio version, I later arranged this piece for harp and bass to continue experimenting with this idea about sustaining energy for different instrumental combinations.

"Blue Nile," my favorite piece of hers to play, was a more literal transcription of the original recording. The piece is a minor blues with an eight bar extension and the tonality of the glissandi change according to the chord. Over the years, I have learned to substitute rapid arpeggios for the many glissandi in order to keep the energy moving along, and to avoid too much stress on my callouses. It is challenging to play as a solo on concert tours because I have to play the bass, flute and harp parts on the harp. I found creative ways to play the bassline by transcribing some of what Ron Carter plays on the original recording, by listening to and transcribing some of the bass and piano parts of John Coltrane's "Equinox," (which has a similar feel to "Blue Nile"), and by creating alternate basslines of my own.¹⁴ I especially

enjoy hearing Alice's music in various instrumental combinations and love the different ways that each player in my ensemble chooses to interpret the parts.

Anniversary Commemorations and Alice's Harp, 2017

The tenth anniversary of Alice's passing was celebrated in 2017 with a host of concerts presented all over the world, as well as the release of *The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda*. This recording is a compilation of devotional songs from four of her records that were recorded at the ashram, primarily for her followers, and was released on the Luaka Bop label. The first concert in a series presented by Luaka Bop and the Red Bull Academy took place at the Knockdown Center, a warehouse performance space in Maspeth, New York, on May 21, 2017. On one side of the warehouse, a sacred concert of Alice's devotional songs, sung by the Sai Anantam Ashram Singers, was presented. The other side of the venue featured performances of some of her earlier works and was led by Ravi Coltrane.¹⁵

Later in the summer, we played two nights of Alice's music featuring her organ works. The instrumentation was organ, harp, piano, acoustic bass, drums, percussion and tenor saxophone. Ravi mentioned that the pieces we played that night had not been performed with that exact instrumentation since she performed them herself in the 1970s. I took great joy in my unofficial role of assisting with the programming of the music for this concert, as I have for many of the tributes that we present. To this day, I always take notes on how the pieces are arranged from concert to concert and maintain a library of the transcriptions and recordings that we play to help prepare for the next.

On October 29th, 2017, the Cooper Design Space in downtown Los Angeles was transformed into a sacred space, designed to look like Alice's ashram.

13 Tamboura is a fretless Indian lute that creates a drone by sustaining a long single tone.

14 Ron Carter is the bassist on the original Alice Coltrane recording of *Blue Nile* from the album *Ptah the el Daoud*. Steve Davis plays bass and McCoy Tyner plays piano on the John Coltrane recording of "Equinox" from the album *Coltrane Sound*.

15 This concert featured Ravi Coltrane, tenor sax; Brandee Younger, harp; Reggie Workman, acoustic bass; Dezron Douglas, acoustic bass; Jeff "Tain" Watts, drums; David Virelles, organ, piano; Courtney Bryan, organ, piano; Michael McGinnis, bass clarinet; Graham Haynes, trumpet; Jay Ghandi, bansuri; Hany El Diwany, tamboura; and the Sai Anantam Ashram Singers.

Before the large warehouse of fans and devotees seated cross-legged on yellow cushions at sundown, I performed on this tribute concert three of my favorite Alice Coltrane compositions,¹⁶ along with Miguel Atwood-Ferguson and an eight-piece string section.¹⁷ I was playing Alice's harp, which was placed in the center of the circular stage directly below a beautiful mobile made of gold thread that hung from the ceiling.

Alice's personal harp was a gold Lyon & Healy, Style 11, which was one of the company's most ornate designs. The harp was a gift from her husband John, who purchased it at the Lyon & Healy showroom in New York City in 1967. Unfortunately, he did not live to see it, as he died before it was delivered in 1968.

When I first saw her harp, I noticed two interesting details: the gold was hardly tarnished, in spite of its age, and the soundboard appeared to have a hand-painted design of morning glories in gold along its length. It appeared to be a simpler design than those typically found on Style 11 harps.

After listening to the harp on so many of her recordings, I was very eager to hear it live in her daughter Michelle's living room in Los Angeles. When I first played it, I was blown away by the massive, warm and rich tone that the fifty-year-old harp produced. Its sound was huge and it seemed to embody her spirit. Fully strung in gut,¹⁸ with the exception of the first octave and the wires, it had an even tone, without any harshness. After tuning it, I began to play "Rama Rama" to finally hear her music live and on her instrument. Instead of choosing one of her original harp pieces to play first on her harp, I

chose "Rama Rama" in an attempt to show respect for her work and to honor the growth that I have personally experienced over the last decade.

But, it was onstage on October 29th that it all hit me: a decade after her passing and many more years before that since her harp had been played, I was now the one bearing the great honor of performing on it. It all felt joyfully surreal. After the concert, one of the Ashram choir members said to me, "You sounded like Swamini for a moment up there. I think she came into you while you were playing today. Do you think Swamini was here?" I joked that she probably didn't want to let her harp out unsupervised, and so she was definitely there.

Transfiguration¹⁹

As Alice transitioned from role to role—teen church musician to jazz pianist, then wife, single mother, wife of jazz icon, widow, solo artist and, finally, to spiritual leader—she left a legacy of spirituality and strength every step of the way. I can only wonder what effect so many personal losses²⁰ in her life may have had on her spiritual development as well as on her musical development. Through the many phases of her life, spirituality remained a constant. It may have been this spiritual foundation that allowed her to find so many paths along the way. One may call her merging of religious practices radical, as well as her treatment of improvisations that did not necessarily follow traditional conventions of jazz harmony. However, this independent approach is the very thing that attracted me (and so many others) to her music. There is an art to knowing the rules and breaking them, and doing so unapologetically.

Every concert that I play pays tribute to Alice Coltrane's legacy. There were times when I fell flat on my face and situations where I felt I was out of my league. However, more important was that the spirit of her music felt more powerful than anything technical or on paper. It was more powerful than any

16 "Journey in Satchidananda," "Blue Nile" and "Prema" were the three pieces I performed. Miguel Atwood-Ferguson arranged the string accompaniments, played violin and conducted the string section.

17 This concert featured the Sai Anantam Ashram Singers with special guests Dwight Tribble, Michelle Coltrane and Georgia Anne Muldrow; Brandee Younger, harp; Miguel Atwood-Ferguson, violin/conductor; The Miguel Atwood-Ferguson String Ensemble; Flying Lotus, DJ and grand nephew of Alice Coltrane; Surya Botofasina, piano; Joe Grissett, drums.

18 The harp was recently regulated and fully restrung by Colin Campbell in preparation for the October 29th concert.

19 "Transfiguration" is the title track of her 1978 live album and, in my opinion, one of her most powerful recordings.

20 Her brother died in a drowning accident in 1969, John Coltrane died of liver cancer in 1967, and their oldest son John Coltrane Jr. died in a car accident in 1982.

industry standard and to me, it came from a place of selflessness and humility. This influence has helped me immensely over the years in my approach to playing the harp and interpreting music. It has allowed me to be flexible and to resist conforming to a particular genre or style. I am grateful for the extraordinary opportunities that have come from my years of study and from the meaningful experiences of working closely with her family and her musicians. These collaborations have informed so much of my career as a harpist. Thinking back on that afternoon so long ago when my parents handed me my first Alice Coltrane recording, I little knew that hearing her music would have had such a transfigurative effect on my own life and career path.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandee Younger is an international performing and recording harpist. As one of the leading contemporary harpists of her generation, she has worked with many renowned jazz artists such as Pharoah Sanders, Charlie Haden, Christian McBride, and Ravi Coltrane as well as with popular artists such as John Legend, Lauryn Hill, The Roots and Common. Miss Younger currently teaches at the Greenwich House Music School in New York City and has led master classes at the Royal Conservatory of Music (Toronto), Drexel University, Princeton University, Tulane University, University of Birmingham (UK), Howard University and the Hartt School of Music. She is the Vice President of the Long Island & Metro NYC chapters of the American Harp Society, Inc. and serves on the AHS Board of Directors. 



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