

A Faith in Music

A Profile of Alice Coltrane

by Alyssa Franklin

John Coltrane left an indelible mark on jazz music, but his wife, Alice, also paved new roads and broadened the scope of jazz and sacred music. She was a musical pioneer, who happened also to play the harp.

Felice Pomeranz

The name Coltrane holds a special significance in the world of jazz. According to Felice Pomeranz, professor at the Berklee College of Music, Alice Coltrane was “visionary.” From beneath her husband’s shadow, she ignited a flame of followers, and is recognized in death both as a pioneer of women in jazz and also of spirituality in music. Although she was primarily known for her unique jazz vocals and piano prowess, Coltrane’s use of harp melodies in traditional jazz pieces, enriched the genre and the musical culture of which she has become a part.

Born on August, 27th 1937, the daughter of Solon and Anne Mcleod, Coltrane began her musical training at an early age. The Detroit native first played the piano at the age of seven, studying the works of Rachmaninoff, Beethoven, Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky. Although she maintained an appreciation for classical music, Coltrane was introduced to jazz by her brother, bassist Ernie Farrow, and it quickly became her passion. “Classical music for me, was an extensive, technical study for many years. At that time, I discovered it to be a truly profound music with a highly intellectual ambiance,” Coltrane said. “But I will always appreciate it with a kind remembrance and great esteem. The classical artist must respectfully recreate the composer’s meaning. Although, with jazz music, you are allowed to develop your own creativity, improvisation and expression—this greatly inspires me.”

Coltrane graduated from high school with a scholarship from the Detroit Institute of Technology. Continually developing her musical prowess, she played the piano in music halls, sang in church



choirs, for weddings and even for funerals. But Coltrane’s appetite for jazz was insatiable. By the early 1960s, she was sharing the stage with vibes player Terry Gibbs, and jamming with masters like guitarist Kenny Burrell and saxophonist Lucky Thompson. It was on tour with Gibbs, in 1963, that she first met saxophonist, John Coltrane.

Two years later, in 1965, John and Alice were married. “We were both traveling in a particular spiritual direction, John and myself, so it seemed only natural for us to join forces. It was like God was uniting two souls together,” Coltrane said of her marriage. According to Rachel Stiffler Barron in her recent book, *John Coltrane: Jazz Revolutionary* (Morgan Reynolds, 2002), Alice truly understood his music and the overwhelming presence it had in his life. When John’s pianist McCoy Tyner set out to pursue his own musical endeavors, he was quickly replaced by Alice. With his wife by his side, Coltrane’s music continued to evolve. Heavily influenced by their op-

position to the Vietnam War of the 1960s, and their study of Eastern religion, the couple's music began to delve deeper into their perception of the divine. Together, John and Alice experimented with musical color: painting a new jazz genre with the influence of their religious and spiritual pursuits.

Shortly after their marriage, the couple bought a house in the Dix Hills section of Huntington, Long Island. John's first purchases were a grand piano and a harp for Alice. But Coltrane would never get to see his wife play the magnificent instrument. In 1967 he died of liver cancer, leaving behind three children: John Jr., Ravi and Orin, along with an influential musical legacy.

Stiffler Barron vividly depicts the period in music history following Coltrane's death:

"As Coltrane's body was lowered into his grave at Pinelawn Memorial Park in Farmingdale, New York, violence continued to rock America's cities and college campuses. People increasingly took to the streets to speak out against oppression and the madness of war. The country's value system was in an upheaval as America's young people rebelled. They grew their hair long; wore shredded jeans, tie-dyed shirts, sandals, and beads; experimented with drugs and new sexual freedoms; advocated a return to ecological awareness and peace; and adopted left-wing political ideas. ...The country needed to be put back on the right track, they believed, since the dramatic shift in their parents' generation. There was much disagreement about which track was the right one, however."

(Barron 82)

Jazz, like all of the arts in the 1960s, reflected this nationwide turmoil. People looked to music as an escape from the chaos and a cure for the sorrows of war. Alice Coltrane's music strove to provide such an antidote, and did so through her exploration of Eastern philosophy and the harp.

"She really, really cared about uplifting people, even in the most simple ways—uplifting somebody's spirit with her music," said Ravi Coltrane, son of John and Alice Coltrane. Following her husband's death, she was left with a strong need to find spiri-

tual fulfillment, and, according to Pomeranz, John's music became a "spiritual wellspring" for her. In the late 1970s, her music became infused with Hindu religious chants, and she turned to her husband's teachings for inspiration and guidance. Although their relationship was brief, their short marriage was pivotal to the rest of her life. "John not only taught me to explore, but to play thoroughly and completely," Coltrane said.

Through her natural ability and experimentation, Coltrane developed her own style on the piano, organ, harp, and even on Indian instruments such as the tamboura, releasing many recordings with *Impulse! Records*. As an artist, she collaborated with greats like Carlos Santana and Pharoah Sanders, and also studied in Paris with the legendary Bud Powell. As her career took off, she re-released many John Coltrane recordings, including her own version of "A Love Supreme," and "Cosmic Music and Infinity," to which she added overdubbed strings. According to Pomeranz, in her obituary of Alice Coltrane, "Making her Own Mark on the Jazz World," Alice "dragged the harp onto the jazz bandstand and used it as a textural instrument," at a time when few women had infiltrated the genre.

"The harp facet of her music was John Coltrane's suggestion, and she only pursued the harp with vigor after his death," Pomeranz said. "Her musical drive and thirst for knowing more drove her to experiment with the harp, melding Eastern and Western influenced music and looking for ways to blend the music of her roots with the music of the spiritual culture she chose to embrace." According to Ravi Coltrane, both of his parents were admirers of the harp and the musicians who played the instrument. In the years following her husband's death, Alice would commence her self-study of the harp, as a tribute to John's memory. "My mother didn't study the harp formally: she played it her way," said Ravi. Alice's harp, still housed at the family home in California, was a memorable part of Ravi's musical childhood. "Every day after school seeing your mom playing the piano, or sitting at the harp was sort of a built-in component to living; it wasn't something she did for work," said Ravi.


In the decade following John Coltrane's death, Alice Coltrane immersed herself in all music: performance, practice, recording. But gradually, in the 1980s, she stopped performing professionally, choosing instead to follow her spiritual path. Coltrane became known to her followers by her Hindu identity, Turiya, and founded the Vedantic Center in Agoura, California, for Hindu studies. Coltrane later founded the John Coltrane Foundation, which awards scholarships to young musicians. "The rest of her life was spent in service to others, as a spiritual helper and student of Hinduism and still as a musician," Pomeranz said. Although she prematurely put an end to her professional career, Coltrane still considered herself a musician, and her musical studies continued to be a significant aspect of her life. "The music is within your heart, your soul, your spirit. It's not really in some intellectual realm in your brain. And this is all I do, I just go within," she said.

On January 12, 2007, Alice Turiya Coltrane passed away. The jazz virtuoso and spiritual seeker left her musical mark, strumming it into history with the passion of a musician and the heart of a saint. "I still meet people today who were touched and moved by her music," Ravi said.

In the words of Rachel Stiffler Barron: "For Coltrane, life was the interplay of music, love, and the divine, which at certain creative moments one realizes are three words for the same thing." ♪

About the author:

Alyssa Franklin is an aspiring journalist, and Skidmore College senior. As the editor of her weekly college paper, The Skidmore News, Alyssa has had the opportunity to write about many differing, yet equally talented individuals. She plans to continue her journalistic endeavors in the future.



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