

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICES OF ORNETTE COLEMAN AS
DEMONSTRATED IN HIS SMALL GROUP RECORDINGS DURING THE 1970S**

by

Nathan A. Frink

BA, Nazareth College, 2009

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This thesis was presented

by

Nathan A. Frink

It was defended on

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and approved by

Deane Root, PhD, Department of Music

Matthew Rosenblum, PhD, Department of Music

Nathan T. Davis, PhD, Department of Music

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This study is an examination of the musical output of Ornette Coleman's small ensembles during the 1970s. The primary goal of the paper is to define the specific changes that took place in the early part of the decade that distinguish the artist's later musical conception from that which he employed during the previous years. In order to create such a discussion, the study explores several areas of both Ornette's life and music, and asserts that throughout this decade Ornette's creative processes frequently exceeded the boundaries that existed in his music of the previous period.

The paper is divided into three sections: historical background; Ornette's "Renaissance"; and an analysis of compositional techniques and improvisatory style between 1971 and 1979, the years that comprise his most extreme departure from the practices in his earlier and more commonly accepted recordings. The overall trend shows an apparent shift in Ornette's musical thinking represented by several experimentations with ensemble, tone color, and compositional practice. The result of these undertakings eventually gave rise to a new vision for his art represented by the electric group, Prime Time.

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PREFACE

The construction of this paper is largely indebted to Dr. Paul Smoker, a great teacher and friend who introduced me to Ornette's music during my undergraduate studies in Rochester, NY. His guidance, encouragement and musical convictions have helped me to find my own voice as both a musician and a scholar. I also owe a great deal to thanks to my advisor Dr. Nathan Davis, as his dedication to seek out the truth and his deep knowledge of jazz have been an inspiration for several areas of my life. In addition, I would also like to thank Mr. David Murray, whose mentorship has also helped me enrich my music and to continuously better myself. His insight into the methods of composition in the jazz avant-garde has also been invaluable.

Finally, I would like to give my deepest appreciation to my parents and my brother, who have always encouraged me in my musical journey, and my fiancé Karli, for her constant support even in the times of greatest struggle. I couldn't have made it this far without you.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over fifty years have passed since Ornette Coleman's first appearance in New York at the end of the 1950s, but few musicians in jazz have remained as controversial. The events that transpired on the first night of his engagement at the Five Spot have since found their place among the legends of the genre, and his recordings from that period still sound as fresh as they did years ago. Yet one thing is frequently neglected in all of the documents, analyses and jazz history textbooks. Somehow, all of these sources forget to mention that Ornette's work continued to push the constraints of jazz even after the initial discoveries of his first quartet. His ensembles and compositions have taken on many permutations, sometimes including instruments or artists that would normally be considered outside the realm of jazz music. As guitarist Pat Metheny notes, "Ornette is the rare example of a musician who has created his own world, his own language, his own reality..."¹ By this Metheny certainly means that Coleman has never been hindered by the boundaries of what others would define as jazz; he has instead endeavored to create his own definition of the word. So if Ornette has indeed created his own reality, what consequences does it have for the world of jazz or music in general? Perhaps, more importantly, what comprises this reality, and through what processes did the artist arrive at such a stage?

If Ornette's ideas are in constant flux and continuously evolving, his musical life can be seen as dividing into individual periods, each successive timeframe with a distinctive quality that

¹ Peter Niklas Wilson, *Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music* (Berkeley: Berkeley Hills Books, 1999) Forward 1.

had previously been absent. When was his musical identity actualized, and has it been ever exactly codified?

Pat Metheny's opinion may reflect that of the jazz establishment. While Ornette's initial innovations have certainly withstood the critics and found a place in the jazz canon, little attention has been paid to his later work, which may in fact present a more radical departure from tradition and because of the innovator's journey through constant self-discovery. Therefore, it may be argued that Ornette's musical "reality" has never been fully realized, and that each decade of creation brought forth new elements as the result of an ongoing search.

This study is an examination of the musical output of Ornette Coleman during the 1970s. The primary goal of the paper is to define the specific changes that took place in the early part of the decade that distinguish the artist's later musical conception from that which he employed during the previous years. In order to create such a discussion, the study explores several areas of both Ornette's life and music, and asserts that throughout this decade Ornette's creative processes frequently exceeded the boundaries that existed in his music of the previous period.

The paper is divided into three sections: historical background; Ornette's "Renaissance"; and an analysis of compositional techniques and improvisatory style between 1971 and 1979, the years that comprise his most extreme departure from the practices in his earlier and more commonly accepted recordings.

In Chapter 2, I have described Ornette's early life and career in order to give the reader some insight into his musical personality before his transitional period. The focus of this section is to describe the formation of Ornette's unique approaches from the time that he first began to perform his music up until his subsequent "discovery" and recognition by the jazz community and later loss of popularity in the late 1960s. The section identifies the creative construction of several of Ornette's records in order to showcase the capacity that the musician already possessed for the exploration of new musical ideas and to form descriptive analyses of his music during a less revolutionary period.

The third chapter comprises historical documentation of several of Ornette's recording sessions during the time period 1971-1979, in which I discuss stylistic differences between individual records during this time period and those of the previous decade, frequent changes in personnel, and how he struggled against the confines of the music industry in order to develop complete artistic statements. The section also identifies several important musical relationships between Ornette and his sidemen and the direct influence of his music on the formulation of their own respective styles.

In Chapter Four, I have singled out specific tracks from each album and compiled a thorough discussion of the music through established theoretical methods of addressing free jazz in conjunction with spectral analysis. In addition to this, the work will highlight the usage of Ornette's own "harmolodic" theory in the construction of his recorded material. These analyses provide evidence that Coleman's work in the 1970s, while drawing on his innovations from the previous decade, continued to develop and investigate new possibilities for free jazz in the areas of tone color, texture, "form" and thematic variation. They also assert that the body of work from this period comprises a transitional period between the artist's early work and his clearer, more fully realized vision.

Since live recordings do not necessarily allow for the same amount of control and preparation, the analytical sections focus solely on the studio recordings that were made commercially available by Ornette Coleman or the recording company that he was currently affiliated with. Notational transcriptions of the recordings, prepared by the author, are included as well as a selected discography, which includes all recordings mentioned in the following passages. As the nature of jazz would denote, the composed sections that have been transcribed are played with some variation during their repetitions on the recordings. Therefore, the transcriptions in the analysis section are not intended to be exact representations of what is played but rather approximations of the overall melodic character of the pieces discussed.

2.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to truly gain a sense of the vast variety of Ornette's musical output, it becomes necessary to examine the events of his life and his musical contributions that transpired before the period in question. Likewise, knowledge of his career is essential both to understand his personal style and to demonstrate the great contrast between his music of the 1970s and of previous decades. The information here is not intended to be a highly detailed study of Ornette's life. Such an exhaustive effort has already been undertaken in various forms and models.² The biographical information presented here serves only to further educate the reader and to highlight the creative processes of the musician. The minor descriptive analyses of the records produced during each time period are included to provide a fundamental understanding of the nature of Ornette's music and his stylistic direction before 1970.

² The most detailed source of information on Ornette's life is John Litweiler's *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life* (New York: William and Morrow, 1992). Other examinations including large transcribed interviews with Ornette can be found in A.B. Spellman's *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966) and Peter Niklas Wilson's *Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 1999). All three of these resources have been used extensively in the compilation of this section.

2.1 EARLY LIFE AND WORK IN TEXAS AND LOS ANGELES (1930-1958)

Ornette Coleman was born into poverty in Fort Worth, Texas on March 19, 1930. A child of a single-parent household, Ornette remembers his mother working as a clerk in a funeral home to support them both during the midst of the Depression. His father, he was later told, was a construction worker and sometime cook who died when Ornette was seven years old.³

When he was 14, his mother purchased an alto saxophone for him. It was her hope that he would begin to play the instrument in the church band and that it would help to keep him out of trouble. However, by the following year, Ornette was already playing in local blues bands in several honky-tonks and in the red light districts of Fort Worth. His first heroes as a young saxophonist were Gene Ammons, Arnett Cobb, Louis Jordan and Cecil "Big Jay" McNeely, whose music he learned from their recordings and live appearances in the city.

Ornette's work with rhythm and blues groups was his primary means of income at the time, but he was also well acquainted with the school of jazz improvisation known as "bebop." He frequently listened to artists like Charlie Parker and Bud Powell on the radio and committed several of their compositions to memory. He eventually began to pick up more and more work in Fort Worth, to the point where his mother, although she didn't approve of the places in which Ornette was playing, decided that the extra income that these gigs provided was necessary to ensure the family's survival. By the time he was 17, Ornette was making roughly 100 dollars a week. He even joked that he was earning more than the teachers in his high school.

Ornette attended school on and off as he continued to work as a full-time musician. Now playing the tenor saxophone, he earned a place in a band run by saxophonist, and local celebrity, Red Conners that frequently incorporated bebop tunes into its working repertoire.

³ As Litweiler notes on page eight of *A Harmolodic Life*, Ornette's early memories of his family differ greatly from those of his older sister Truvenza "Trudy" Coleman. It is possible, and in fact likely, that his mother was employed in numerous other occupations in addition to this one throughout most of their childhood.

Although the band used head arrangements for most of its performances, it was Connors who first helped Ornette to realize the importance of reading music.

It was during his stint with this band that Ornette took his first step in the direction of free music. In 1948, he was playing in Connors's Band in a small club for an all-white dance. The band was playing "some standard theme like 'Stardust' and it was my turn to solo on the chord changes of the tune. In that situation, it's like having to know the results of the all the changes before you even play them, compacting them all in your mind. So once I did that, and once I had it all compacted in my head I literally removed it all and just played."⁴ This was the first of Ornette's many investigations into how to improvise without reliance on commonly accepted chord changes. However, it was a moment unappreciated by the audience and fellow band members alike; Ornette was promptly fired following the last set.

Having realized that he preferred to play this way despite still needing to make a living by playing rhythm and blues, Ornette began to look for a way out of Texas. The harsh racism of the South reinforced his decision. Upon graduation, he received an offer to study and play in the band at Samuel Houston College in Austin but he turned it down. He later remarked,

When I finished High School, all the kids I knew who'd been to college and came back, they had porter jobs. What's the reason for going to college? That's why I didn't go. You got to try to get a job teaching in the colored school system, or that's it. People have been teaching there for fifty years. You have to wait for them to die... Even the principal where I went to school worked in the summer at the hotel where I worked as a busboy. I saw him doing some things. I didn't have respect for him.⁵

By now Ornette had studied music theory and learned what he felt was enough to pursue his new musical direction.⁶ He began sitting in with touring groups from out of town but

⁴ A.B. Spellman, *Black Music: Four Lives* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970; first published as *Four Lives In The Bebop Business*. NY: Pantheon Books, 1966.)

⁵ John Litweiler, *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992) 19.

⁶ Coleman's knowledge of music theory was based on a series of misunderstood notions; the most fundamental of which included his approach to the transposed nature of the saxophone.

would lose his engagement when the groups left for another city. Ornette finally realized his goal to leave Texas via a traveling tent show, Silas Green from New Orleans. Ornette, then 19, began touring with the show to Oklahoma and as far east as Georgia. Yet, this was hardly the environment that the young Ornette envisioned leaving Texas for. The music was old fashioned and often pre-dated World War I by date of composition; likewise, the acts of the show reflected primitive stereotypes of blacks and often resorted to derogatory racial humor. Ornette later remarked to A.B. Spellman, "It was the worst job I ever had. I was miserable."⁷

Ornette was fired when the show passed through Natchez, Mississippi, and he began to play tenor for the Clarence Samuels Blues Band. Not long after joining the group, Ornette decided to inject some of his new ideas into a solo while playing in a dance hall in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As he recalls, the audience was infuriated and he stopped playing while the band continued. Later outside this dance hall, Ornette was assaulted by a group of men, who beat him and smashed his tenor saxophone in the street.

After losing his instrument and primary means to earn a living on the road, Ornette took up a brief residence with trumpeter Melvin Lastie's family in New Orleans until he received a draft notice for the Korean War in 1950. But the army rejected him after a physical examination determined that a broken collarbone from a childhood injury had never healed correctly. Ornette decided that it was time to head back to Fort Worth where he found steady work running a dance hall band. It wasn't long before Ornette got a second chance to leave Texas as Pee Wee Crayton was putting together a traveling band. Among the musicians recruited was Ornette's

Since Ornette was primarily self-taught he began to believe that because the musical alphabet was written ABCDEFG and the transposition of the alto saxophone was a minor third down from the written concert pitch, that C on the alto was A concert, when in fact the opposite is true. Ornette's harmonic misunderstandings are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

⁷ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 21.

former boss Red Connors, who hired him right away. Then the band left for Los Angeles where almost upon arrival “everybody in the band got draft notices”⁸ and Ornette was left alone.

Los Angeles proved to be a difficult environment for the young musician. He quickly earned a bad reputation because of the way he played and rarely found paying gigs or even a day job. Before, long Ornette was relying on shipments of canned food from his mother in order to feed himself. His saxophone fell into disrepair and he lacked the money to purchase a new one. Eventually he would telegraph for his mother to send enough money for a train ticket home.

Back in the frustrating environment of Fort Worth, Ornette formed his own band and began to make a payday, once again playing rhythm and blues, but this time on a plastic alto saxophone⁹ that he had bought in Los Angeles. He had said the new horn was the price of a used Selmer and a bargain in his financial circumstances. He began sitting in regularly with the better-known bands that came through town and eventually formed another rhythm and blues group and was playing for dancers at a local show venue.

Ornette gave Los Angeles another shot in 1953. This time he found his friend Ed Blackwell on arrival and the two rented a house at the south end of the city. But their collaboration was hindered by a multitude of factors. First of all, the pair had a difficult time finding a regular bassist, and secondly, the rejection of both Ornette and Blackwell by the local musicians was legendary. They struggled to find gigs, sometimes offering to play for as little as ten dollars a night. Sitting in was also incredibly difficult. Ornette began to hitchhike to the San Fernando Valley, nearly thirty miles away, in order to sit in with Gerry Mulligan. He was twice stopped by police officers, who ordered him to put his horn together and play a few lines “just to

⁸ Ibid. 27.

⁹ The “Graphton” plastic alto saxophone was an attempt at an affordable mass production musical instrument. It was manufactured in London by John E. Dallas and Sons Ltd. Due to the difficulties of 1950’s injection molding, the company only produced altos. Ornette was known for a time as “the man with the plastic horn,” a moniker acquired from his extensive use of the instrument in the late 1950s.

be sure he hadn't stolen it." Ornette was once playing with Dexter Gordon's rhythm section when Gordon returned and kicked him off the stage before he could even finish a full chorus.

However, Ornette was making some important connections in the music world, and by 1954, began to gain some traction. He had attracted a small group of admirers who were faithful in attending his shows. One such admirer of his music was the poet Jayne Cortez¹⁰ who was also an amateur cellist and friend of some of the younger, more adventurous musicians of the LA jazz scene. She also made her own clothes and eventually Ornette's as well. The two were married later that year.

The second of Ornette's networking connections was another musician from the Dallas–Fort Worth area, trumpeter Bobby Bradford. Bradford had heard Ornette around Fort Worth on several occasions but the two of them met in LA on a streetcar. Ornette had been working on some music and asked Bradford if he'd like a spot in the band, which Bradford accepted. Bradford also talked to his boss and got Ornette a day job as a stocker in the department store where he worked. After a short time, Ornette was moved to "elevator man" and began sneaking up to the top floor when the store wasn't busy to read music theory books.

Yet, the first Ornette Coleman group was short lived. Bradford was drafted and began a tour of duty with the Air Force band, and Ed Blackwell went back to New Orleans. Ornette was fired from his day job in 1956 after the department store installed self-service elevators; he made up the difference by taking on a series of other odd jobs around the city. His son, Denardo Coleman, was born that April, and Ornette joined the Jehovah's Witnesses but quit after he called the church to ask for service times and was told to go to a "colored witnesses" hall instead. It was around this time that Jayne Cortez introduced Ornette to the man who would become perhaps his most important musical collaborator, a high school student named Don Cherry.

¹⁰ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 49-50.

Cherry, along with his friend and partner, drummer Billy Higgins, were already earning a reputation for themselves in a small combo known as the Jazz Messiahs. Cherry was the leader of the band, which featured saxophonist James Clay and pianist George Newman. The group performed original compositions by both Clay and Cherry during intermissions at The Haig, a famous LA club that had previously spawned the great quartet of Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker and was a hot spot for both local and nationally renowned musicians alike.

After a brief introduction at a record shop, Clay and Cherry persuaded Ornette to practice with the Jazz Messiahs in Newman's garage. Soon, Ornette was bringing his original compositions to rehearsals, and while Clay merely shrugged them off, Cherry and Higgins began to discover new ideas within them. Up until that point, Ornette's music had never seen such acceptance, and musicians still routinely walked off the bandstand at sessions where Ornette came to play. However, a turning point arrived in 1957 when Cherry hustled a gig with the Vancouver Jazz Society at the Cellar, one of the most popular jazz venues in the city. The group consisted of Ornette and Cherry with pianist Don Friedman, bassist Ben Tucker and an unnamed drummer playing all original Ornette compositions. Two of the sets were recorded and later broadcast over radio station CFUN, likely being the first time that Ornette's music was ever captured on tape. Shortly after, Ornette met Red Mitchell, one of the most respected bassists in the LA jazz scene. Mitchell listened to Ornette play some original music and decided to refer him to his label, Contemporary Records, in order to sell a few of his compositions.

The owner of Contemporary Records, Lester Koenig, was a movie producer and friend of Arnold Schoenberg. He had been recording jazz since 1941 and produced music by Duane Tatro, Shelly Manne and Sonny Rollins's first pianoless trio. He invited Ornette and Cherry to audition some of their songs in early 1958 and upon learning that Ornette couldn't play piano, held the audition with two horn players demonstrating the music on their preferred instruments. When they finished, Koenig not only offered to buy seven compositions at 25 dollars each, but also liked Ornette's saxophone sound enough to suggest he lead a recording date.

Ornette hired Cherry, Billy Higgins, pianist Walter Norris¹¹ and bassist Don Payne to record in three sessions in February and March of 1958 what was to become *Something Else! The Music of Ornette Coleman* for Contemporary Records.

According to Ornette, the songs were all written between 1950 and 1953 and all use chord changes in a pseudo-bebop style. In the original liner notes Ornette had said, "On this recording, the changes finally decided on for the tunes are a combination of some I suggested and some the musicians suggested. If you feel the lines different one day, you can change the harmony accordingly."¹² In several instances on the album, Ornette and Cherry escape the "agreed upon" harmony and play sections of freely improvised music. It was about these areas, which Walter Norris commented, "Ornette doesn't seem to know his own tunes."¹³ In other words, Norris had played all the written changes correctly, but noticed that Ornette's solos did not fit with his harmony. The fundamental training of pianists seemed then to be completely at odds with Ornette's vision. He later remarked to Nat Hentoff, "I would prefer it if musicians would play my tunes with different changes as they take a new chorus so that there'd be all the more variety in the performances... Rhythm patterns should be more or less like natural breathing patterns."¹⁴ After this first recording, Ornette decided that the piano was too great of a limiting factor for his music. He began to minimize his use of the instrument in recordings, and abandoned it entirely by 1960.

Praise for the record came in mid-1958 with several critics hailing Ornette as a unique voice on alto, but with a certain reservation about his technique and unorthodox sound. *Down Beat* critic John Tynan wrote,

¹¹ Ornette's first choice for a pianist was George Newman but Newman was currently unavailable due to a struggle with emotional problems.

¹² Nat Hentoff, Notes to Ornette Coleman: *Something Else!*, Contemporary, 3551.

¹³ Keith Raether, "Ornette: Bobby Bradford's Portrait of an Emerging Jazz Giant," *Jazz*, Spring 1977.

¹⁴ Nat Hentoff, liner notes to Ornette Coleman: *Something Else!*, Contemporary, 3551

Ornette is far from a reincarnation of Parker. About the closest parallel I can make from this 28-year-old Texan's passionate, sometimes almost inarticulate playing is to the piano approach of Thelonious Monk. There is in it the same reaching, striving feeling and also the frustration of not being capable of attaining the heights yearned for so desperately...
On first hearing, this album raises goose bumps. One is puzzled by Coleman's jagged, fragmentary playing, and it is easy to imagine listeners quickly taking sides for or against him...¹⁵

Earlier in the year, the same publication, through the influence of Tynan and Nat Hentoff, had named Ornette an "Alto Saxophone New Star" in its annual critic's poll. The two critics then campaigned, unsuccessfully, to get the Monterey Jazz Festival to include Ornette's group on that year's program.

Yet, despite all of the attention he was getting, Ornette was still living a life of modest record dates and sitting in with whoever would let him. The record had not sold well.¹⁶ He and Jayne had separated before the *Something Else!* record date, and the only other playing he had done was as a sideman in pianist Paul Bley's quintet at the Hillcrest Club on Washington Boulevard. But late in the year, Bley decided to fire vibraphonist Dave Pike and hire both Ornette and Don Cherry. (Billy Higgins and bassist Charlie Haden were already working with the band.) Finally, the band began to attract some positive attention, mostly because Bley had invited the Modern Jazz Quartet to several performances. Both Connie Kay and Percy Heath were impressed with the band's music but John Lewis was reportedly incredibly enthusiastic.¹⁷ It was through his influence that Ornette finally was able to find success in Los Angeles and so much so that he would never need to return to the juke joints of Fort Worth.

¹⁵ John Tynan, record review of *Something Else!* In *Down Beat*, October 30, 1958.

¹⁶ In 1981 Ornette remarked that he still had not seen any royalties from *Something Else!* and according to Contemporary, he still owed the company money for the recording.

¹⁷ Wilson, *Ornette Coleman*, 18-19.

2.2 THE SHAPE OF JAZZ TO COME, FREE JAZZ AND MORE: ORNETTE'S LIFE IN THE NEW YORK JAZZ SCENE (1959-1964)

By 1959, pianist John Lewis had become a major proponent of Ornette's new directions in music. He sought out new connections for the band and booked them a recording contract with Atlantic Records through his own influence on the west coast. So enthusiastic was Lewis that he wrote about the two musicians to a European jazz magazine, stating:

There are two young people that I met in California-an alto player named Ornette Coleman and a trumpet player named Don Cherry. I've never heard anything like them before. Ornette is the driving force of the two. They're almost like twins; they play together like I've never heard anybody play together. It's not like any ensemble that I've ever heard, and I can't figure out what it's about yet. Ornette is, in a sense an extension of Charlie Parker and the first I've heard. This is the real need that I think has to take place, to extend the basic ideas of Bird until they are not playing an imitation but actually something new. I think that they may have come up with something new.¹⁸

Thus, in the spring of 1959 the group headed into the studio to record their first album for Atlantic Records. The lineup was the same as Ornette's group at the Hillcrest but without pianist Paul Bley. The end result was *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, a record signaling with both its name and music a new direction in jazz. Furthermore, the compositions "Peace" and "Lonely Woman" found their way into the repertoire of other jazz musicians. After several years of struggle, Ornette had finally found some acceptance among his peers.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about *The Shape of Jazz to Come* was how accustomed the group had become to playing in extremely fast tempos and how often the elements of Ornette's composition placed seemingly opposing musical elements in juxtaposition against one another. For example, "Lonely Woman," which may be the most frequently recorded of Ornette's pieces, begins with the rhythm section playing in a quick tempo, while the horns

¹⁸ Joe Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1965) 228.

play a slow, sustained melody over the top of it. Likewise, the steady swing rhythms of Billy Higgins's drumming are a stark contrast to the melancholy of the arching theme.

The record also marks the beginning of Ornette's rise as an innovator and was his first recording to draw high levels of controversy. While *Something Else!* had raised a few eyebrows among musicians and critics, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* began to bring Tynan's vision of "musicians taking sides for or against" his music into reality. The totality of the record was shocking to several reviewers. Even John Litweiler's book, which overall gives a favorable take on Ornette, describes the songs on the record as exhibiting certain degrees of "terror." This is most likely due to the complete omission of the piano or any other chord-playing instrument on all the tracks on the record. Also during the making of this album, Ornette's primary focus was on a specific model that all of the pieces on this record follow. The form was composed of a statement of a theme in unison or near unison by all of the wind instruments while the rhythm section kept some kind of time. After stating the theme in its entirety, the instruments were then "freed." The musicians could interact spontaneously in any way they chose; each decision determined the next. Without the presence of any agreed-upon harmony, there was no familiar area for the improvisers to rely on. The performance essentially succeeded or failed based on how well the performers understood each other. The moments of "terror" referenced by Litweiler may be points at which something completely unexpected occurs within the ensemble, or moments when the music seems drastically unfamiliar and there is no recognizable structure or form.

By this time in 1959, John Lewis was acting as something of an ambassador for the band. He was on the board of directors for the Monterey Jazz Festival that year, and made sure that the group was on the program. He also arranged for Atlantic Records to pay for Ornette and Don Cherry to attend the summer "School of Jazz" in Lenox, Massachusetts, where controversy about their music continued to arise. Reportedly, trombonist Bob Brookmeyer resigned his faculty position at the school that summer in "disgust" of the amount of attention

paid to the two musicians and Ornette in particular. But others on the faculty, including Gunther Schuller, found both the man and his music fascinating.

In some deep sense he wasn't a student there--he could have taught any of the faculty at Lenox. He burst on the scene completely intact. The only thing that I felt I was able to teach him there, I did all of the history courses. I remember vividly Ornette Coleman just going out of his mind the first time he heard Jelly Roll Morton's "Black Bottom Stomp"--he thought it was the best thing he'd ever heard in his life. I played a lot of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, God knows what, and a lot of it was a revelation to him about his own heritage.¹⁹

The final concert at the Lenox School that year included three of Ornette's compositions: "The Sphinx," "Giggin" and "Compassion." The time that the duo had spent in Massachusetts seemed to serve John Lewis's purposes. Ornette was now a topic of discussion in several jazz circles, and had made important industry connections to help improve his career. One of those industry connections, critic Martin Williams, began to lobby for Ornette to take a shot at the New York market, and set him up with a two-week engagement at the Five Spot in November.

As November 17th approached, the hype of the band's appearance reached dramatic levels. Journalists actively reported the opinions of several musicians who detested the fact that someone who had not "paid his dues" in a known big band or even proven himself in a technical sense should be given so much publicity. And after the first night of the band's engagement, the opinions and hostility escalated.

Nonetheless, the band's arrival in New York was a great success and the original contract of two weeks was extended to nearly ten.

By January of 1960, Ornette found himself the unexpected center of attention in the jazz world. His second record for Atlantic, *Change of the Century*, had sold over ten thousand copies in less than two months. The controversy continued to bubble. For conservative musicians like Roy Eldridge, the resistance was naturally strong. But Ornette found that he was also being

¹⁹ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 69.

eyed by the small, New York avant-garde community, who resented his rise to success without spending years of struggle in the city as they had.

Fortunately, Ornette had some supporters among the critics. Nat Hentoff, Martin Williams and LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) became supporters of his music and artistic vision. Likewise, Ornette had found some recognition among his peers, most notably the unimpeachable Charles Mingus and the increasingly popular John Coltrane, who stepped forward to praise him.

Following the Five Spot engagement Ornette took the group on an extensive tour including two weeks at the most famous jazz venue in Chicago, The Sutherland Hotel Lounge. By April, however, the band was back in New York minus one member. During most of the mid-twentieth century, New York's laws required any nightclub performer to have a "Cabaret Card" in order to gain employment in any venue within the city limits. On several occasions, jazz musicians found themselves to be the victims of discriminatory actions by the police and had their cards revoked.

So it came to be that on April 4th 1960, Billy Higgins was arrested on a charge of drug possession and his right to seek employment as a musician was suspended. The management of the Five Spot, which had hired the band for a second time, demanded that he be replaced.

As luck would have it, Ornette's old friend Ed Blackwell and his wife were in town after skipping bail in New Orleans for the "crime" of miscegenation. Ornette, who had at first referred Blackwell to John Coltrane, hired him immediately. They continued working steadily. The second engagement at the Five Spot lasted nearly six months. The only change in venue that the group saw was at the request of Charles Mingus. They played a two-hour set at the Newport Rebel Jazz Festival, organized after Mingus was locked out of the original Newport Jazz Fest, which was eventually permanently shut down due to the infamous riots. But the group was still only averaging 632 dollars for a six-night week, much less than one would expect for all of the publicity that they were attracting.

In the summer, Ornette decided that it was time to take the group into the recording studio again. The first New York album was titled *This Is Our Music*, with the notable tracks of “Kaleidoscope” and “Blues Connotation.” Once again critics were divided, but several reviews were favorable. Most interesting is what George Russell wrote in *Jazz Review* about the “pantonality” of the improvisation on the record.

It seems logical to me that jazz would by-pass atonality because jazz is a music that is rooted in folk scales, which again are strongly rooted in tonality. Atonality, as I understand it, is the complete negation of tonal centers either vertically or horizontally. It would not support, therefore the utterance of the blues scale because this implies a tonic. But pan tonality is a philosophy which new jazz might easily align itself with... Ornette seems to depend mostly on the over-all tonality as a point of departure for the melody. By this I don't mean the key that the music might be in. His pieces don't readily infer key. I mean the melody and the chords of his compositions have an over-all sound which Ornette seems to use as a point of departure. This approach liberates the improviser to sing his own song really, without having to meet the deadlines of any particular chord... Pantonal jazz is here...²⁰

In this passage, Russell highlights an important aspect of Ornette's playing. Since there is predetermined chord structure to the music, the musicians, specifically Ornette, must find a method to bring unity to the piece of music. Rather, than relying on a tonal center as a means of resolution, Russell is saying that the musicians use the opening melody as a starting point for their improvisation. Focus can be centered on as little as a single phrase in the starting passage and then developed into a completely new idea. Since there is nothing for the band to aim for as far as form is concerned, there is liberation for them to make a new form with each solo.²¹ This is seemingly in line with Ornette's own explanation of his music: “The theme you play at the start of the number is the territory, and what comes after, which may have little to do with it, is the adventure.”²²

By, mid-August, the quartet was playing a three-week engagement at the Village Vanguard. Tired of being underpaid, Ornette had hired a booking agent at Milt Shaw's Artist's

²⁰ George Russell and Martin Williams, “Ornette Coleman and Tonality” *Jazz Review*, June 1960.

²¹ Ornette's technique and improvisatory style is discussed further in Chapter 4, Section 5.

²² Ken Burns, *Jazz, Episode 9: The Adventure*, PBS, 2000.

Corp., a well-recognized agency whose clientele also included Art Blakey and Miles Davis. His latest performances were earning an average of 1200 dollars per week, nearly double what he had made for his previous year's work at the Five Spot. Unfortunately, Charlie Haden had dropped out of the group at the close of the engagement due to issues with substance abuse, and bassist Scott LaFaro joined for a short tour to Los Angeles and a two-week stint at the Vanguard again, this time opposite the Modern Jazz Quartet. The band went on hiatus for the most of the remainder of 1960.

Ornette used the time to begin taking lessons in composition from Gunther Schuller, who recalls the difficulties of reconciling commonly accepted musical practice with Ornette's own self-taught understanding of harmony.

He'd write things down, and they'd never make any sense. He'd write B flat when he was really hearing D flat, and it was all screwed up. So he said "Let me study with you." He came to my apartment religiously every week for something like eight months--he never was late. All of that ordinary teaching he had gotten as a kid in school, none of that had worked, so I knew I had to think of some new, ingenious ways of breaking through this mental barrier that he had. It never quite happened.²³

On December 21st the group went back into the studio. Yet, this time the focus would be different. Rather than use a series of compositions for the record, the musicians intended to create one spontaneous album-length track. For this project, Ornette used his new connections in New York to secure two individual quartets, which would improvise freely together but also at times independently of one another. The first group's personnel included Ornette, Cherry, LaFaro and Billy Higgins. The second was organized of Blackwell and Haden along with Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet, and trumpeter Freddie Hubbard. The resulting, nearly forty-minute improvisation was then issued by Atlantic Records as *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* by the Ornette Coleman "double quartet." It was perhaps Ornette's most controversial record to date.

²³ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 94.

Several aspects of the album are stunning, even by today's standards. Most interesting is the fact that *Free Jazz* has very little thematic material in which all the wind instruments play unison passages. Ornette's compositions up to this point had relied on a type of opening/closing melody for both the listener's ability to decipher some kind of form, and the benefit of the improvisers to share some collective foundation. There is no such presence in this recording. The instruments begin with a series of fanfares whose harsh dissonance seems to suggest that their rhythm was the only restrictive element. Likewise, the length of the solos seems to exhaust the listener's capacity. Ornette's solo alone is just over ten minutes. Surprising for musicians and critics, however, was the agreement of Eric Dolphy even to be involved with the record. For the past year, several of them had been praising Dolphy as the model of appropriate jazz exploration due to his great technical prowess on most woodwind instruments. The idea that he had embraced Ornette's music rather than showing disdain for an artist who had neither his technical abilities on the saxophone nor his professional background²⁴ shocked and confused several of them.

Three months after the *Free Jazz* recording session, the band was recording *Ornette on Tenor* when a disagreement arose between Ornette and Don Cherry. Following the completion of the record, Cherry decided to pursue his own career as a leader. He was replaced briefly by Bobby Bradford. Ed Blackwell also decided to pursue new ventures. Unfortunately, bassist Scott LaFaro had died during the summer of 1961 in an automobile accident in western New

²⁴ Dolphy had acquired a great deal of respect through his work with both Chico Hamilton's big band and the Charles Mingus Quintet. Unlike Ornette, who had come to New York seemingly out of nowhere, Dolphy was known as being able to play in several jazz contexts, from bebop to Latin jazz, in addition to his avant-garde work. In the same year as *Free Jazz*, Dolphy also made records with Mingus, Max Roach and composer/arranger Oliver Nelson. Some critics and musicians alike believe Dolphy to be the true "father" of the avant-garde despite the title being frequently given to Ornette, although there is little evidence in terms of precedence in the style on either side of the debate. Ornette's consideration as the leader of the movement is largely based on the idea that he was the first to gain widespread attention for his music in 1959. Further information on both Dolphy and Ornette and their respective roles in the avant-garde can be found in Todd S. Jenkins's *Free Jazz and Free Improvisation: An Encyclopedia*, (New York: Greenwood, 2004).

York. In his place, Ornette had hired Jimmy Garrison, who would also soon leave to become a permanent member of the John Coltrane Quartet.²⁵ The recording session would also be Ornette's last for Atlantic.

Over the next year Ornette's groups had a steadily rotating cast of musicians. He quickly found a new label to work with, Blue Note, who issued the next few Coleman LPs starting with a live recording of a concert at New York's Town Hall on December 21st, 1962. Among the most prominent of the musicians hired were bassist David Izenzon and drummer Charles Moffett. But the touring of the new group was short-lived as Ornette decided to withdraw from active performing shortly thereafter.

Between 1963 and 1965, Ornette Coleman made no public performances and refused to record. Unlike fellow saxophonist Sonny Rollins, whose fabled departure from music is something of a legend in jazz, Ornette's retreat was unplanned. Rollins had deliberately decided to stop performing in order to perfect his art. Ornette was not unsatisfied with his playing, nor was he road-weary from a demanding schedule. Quite the contrary, his body of work in 1962 was light when compared to the demands of previous years.²⁶ The reason for his hiatus was rather based in the principles behind how he was marketed. As Ornette told A.B. Spellman, "In jazz the Negro is the product. The way they handle the publicity on me, about how far out I am and everything, it gets to be that I'm the product myself. So if it's me they're selling, then the profits couldn't come back to me, you dig? I don't know what percentage Negroes make from jazz, but I know it's got to be very small."²⁷

With these beliefs in mind, Ornette began the process of marketing himself, nearly always unsuccessfully. The reason for this was that now, he was charging an amount that he

²⁵ Garrison had recorded previously with Ornette in 1959 on a few tracks for *Art Of Improvisers*, which became a compilation record for Atlantic, and was eventually released in 1961. He was used frequently as a studio bassist for several recordings on the Atlantic label.

²⁶ Wilson, *Ornette Coleman*, 41.

²⁷ Ibid. 41-42. Originally quoted in A.B. Spellman, *Black Music: Four Lives* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1966) 130.

deemed to be fair in accordance with the what he felt record companies would make off of his music or what nightclub owners would earn through tickets and drinks. He began to ask for very high sums for any public appearance, and soon no club owners were willing to meet his salary demands. Eventually, he began to offer to play for his pre-exile rates, but by then the massive publicity had died down and most prospective employers couldn't seem to build enough interest to justify his hiring.

Yet, during his absence, Ornette took on several projects. He attempted to open his own jazz club but the plans fell apart after it turned out that the location that he selected was already leased. There was also an attempt to start a publishing company whose first product might have been Ornette's theory book on the harmolodic method.²⁸ Both projects were aborted seemingly during their initial conception. But perhaps the greatest undertaking that Ornette undertook during this period was his effort to learn both the trumpet and violin.

Reportedly, Ornette began sitting in on both instruments in late 1963, first with Albert Ayler's group and later with John Coltrane in January of the following year.²⁹ The addition of these two instruments would be a vital outlet for Ornette's increasing creative capacity. Also, throughout the entire sabbatical, Ornette never stopped composing, creating new music for his eventual comeback.

²⁸ Ornette has mentioned this theory and its application in several instances but has never published any text regarding the subject. It is unlikely, however, that the term was coined before 1970. Harmolodics is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, Section 3.

²⁹ Peter Niklas Wilson, *Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 1999) 44-45.

2.3 ORNETTE'S RETURN TO PUBLIC PERFORMANCE (1965-1969)

The return of Ornette Coleman on January 8th 1965 was a big event for both musicians and the jazz listening public. The initial three-week engagement at the Village Vanguard was publicized in both *Time* and *Newsweek*, the most interesting part of which was the revelation of his recent experiments with the trumpet and violin. Out of the two new instrumental additions, the violin received the majority of the attention largely because Ornette played it left-handed, but also because of the nature of the sounds he produced and his strange, almost circular bowing method.³⁰ The reception of his new music was uncharacteristically kind. It seemed that the jazz world had finally caught up with him.

Following the gig at the Village Vanguard, the trio (Izenzon and Moffet had returned to working with Ornette full-time) had nothing scheduled. Ornette found some work as a composer in May by writing a score for an independent film titled *Chappaqua*. His resulting piece, "Chappaqua Suite," wasn't used because the editors favored a combination of works by Phillip Glass and Ravi Shankar, but Ornette was still paid a five-figure commission. He decided to use the money to organize a European tour and left for London in July of 1965 to pursue avenues for making it into a reality. Unfortunately, this goal proved to be more difficult than anticipated.

The British musicians' union was to become an obstacle for the trio's European ambitions. Under an agreement with the US, American jazzmen were only allowed to perform in the country if English musicians were able to play in the US in return. Ornette got around this technicality by composing a wind quintet. Since no such restrictions applied to "concert musicians" he was able to organize a self-financed concert in London's Fairfield Hall on August

³⁰ Ornette's violin technique was at first merely employed to make large dramatic gestures instead of fine melodic material. Over time, however, his approach has evolved.

29th, at which he premiered his new wind quintet, “Sounds and Forms,” as well as music by the trio.

Ornette’s arrival in Europe was an instant success. Following the concert in London, he was named “Musician of the Year” in the journal *Melody Maker* and the remaining dates that had been open at the inception of the tour filled quickly. Before long, the group had played festivals in Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Berlin followed by two weeks of shows in Stockholm, the best takes from which are captured on the two-disc LP, *Live at the Golden Circle*. Blue Note released the recordings in the US later that year.

The trio setting that is showcased on *Live at the Golden Circle* is unique in the tremendous amount of freedom that allowed for both Ornette’s and the group’s improvisation. Often, as heard on these recordings, the bass work of David Izenzon, which incorporates a distinct variety of bowing and plucking styles, is liberated to the role of a purely melodic instrument. Traditional boundaries placed in regards to instrumental roles in the ensemble are completely removed. Charles Moffett was also able to react appropriately to the lines of the tonal instruments of the band to create distinct polyrhythm or abandon the tune completely in favor of coloristic percussion. Never before had Ornette’s music so completely approached the level of total ensemble improvisation, and never was he more able to utilize the violin in his music than during the first European tour.

The group returned to the States in May of 1966 and was shocked to discover the amount of work that had become available. The *Golden Circle* record had sold remarkably well, giving listeners a taste of how much Ornette had changed since his early recordings. A dozen concerts were soon scheduled in New York and in California. Then, on the band’s return from LA in September, a new drummer began to sit in with them, Ornette’s son, Denardo.

Denardo Coleman had only been playing the drums for about four years when his father recruited him to play at the Village Vanguard. Shortly afterward, on September 9, he went into the studio to record *The Empty Foxhole*. Izenzon had declined to play on an album without his

preferred partner, Charles Moffett, but luckily for Ornette, a previous associate was available. Charlie Haden had returned to New York and was reportedly attempting to establish residency again and “trying to stay clean by drinking.”³¹ Although his personal life had deteriorated to some degree, Haden was now a well-known and respected bassist. He had worked sporadically out west and in Texas where cabaret cards weren’t needed and played frequently with Buddy DeFranco and Hampton Hawes whenever he could, earning a solid reputation as a fantastic musician but a junkie nonetheless. Haden said of Denardo’s drumming on *The Empty Foxhole*, “He’s going to startle every drummer who hears him.”³²

The record caused considerable controversy. The music was fresh and interesting but critics and musicians alike were confused by the inclusion of Denardo, who was only ten years old at the time. The highest praise of his playing by a notable musician came from Cannonball Adderly, who merely described the drumming as “interruptions” of Ornette’s lines. Not exactly a compliment, but still much preferable to the criticisms of others like Shelly Mann, who referred to it as “unadulterated shit.”³³

The switch in drummers was, however, consistent with the direction of Ornette’s new music. As in his violin playing, Ornette had constructed a primitivist approach to the instrument, so he now required that of his rhythm section. In other words, who better to approach the drums in a new way than one who does not yet know the proper technique? Unlike Moffett, who was understandably the most traditional of the new group’s members, Denardo had no reliance on preconceived ideas of what constituted acceptable sound and usage. In this sense, he was the perfect collaborator for his father. One track in particular, “Sound Gravitation,” exposes this, as Ornette with the violin and Denardo on drums both apply their new musical discoveries together.

³¹ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 120.

³² Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 121.

³³ Ibid. 121.

Denardo's involvement with his father's work would be short lived, at least for now, as Ornette decided to return to working with his regular trio. In 1967, he added Charlie Haden to the group permanently and performed with two bassists, preferring to have Izenzon play melodically. With a second rhythmic player, Moffett as well was free to experiment with other percussion instruments like the vibraphone or orchestral bells.

But Ornette's time in performance venues was limited, and he began to focus more and more on his composition. He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in the spring, the first for jazz composition.³⁴ An orchestral work accompanied by Ornette on solo saxophone entitled *Inventions of Symphonic Poems* premiered in May at the UCLA Jazz Festival. Also during 1967, Ornette had realized another important goal. He had purchased an abandoned industrial loft at 131 Prince Street, in the SOHO neighborhood of Manhattan. The building, later dubbed "Artists' House," became a center for musicians to congregate and explore new ideas. Besides the members of Ornette's own groups, the place was frequented by members of avant-garde and mainstream alike. Even John Lennon and Yoko Ono reportedly stopped in on occasion. Several of Ornette's albums from this period were the results of the collaborations that took place in this new project.

Sadly, in that same year, one of Ornette's friends and earliest supporters, John Coltrane, died from complications of liver disease. The two musicians had shared a common respect of each other's music for some time and had planned to record together, but the complicated agendas of each of the musicians never allowed such collaboration. So in late April of 1968, Ornette asked the members of Coltrane's quartet, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones, to accompany him and tenor saxophonist Dewey Redman on a record date.

The sessions took place between April 29th and May 7th and were released by Blue Note as two separate LPs entitled *New York Is Now!* and *Love Call*. They are perhaps, as Peter

³⁴ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 124.

Niklas Wilson writes, “two of the most underrated Coleman records ever made.” The cohesiveness of the rhythm section is just as impressive in these takes as it was with Coltrane, and the polyrhythmic style of Elvin Jones in particular seems perfectly suited for Ornette’s compositions. Similarly, Dewey Redman appears to be almost completely at home in this music. His solos often tended to spur Ornette to push for greater melodic variety. *Love Call* is also notable in that Ornette had decided to record four tracks on trumpet. He actually exhibits a surprising display of ability on the title track and blows through several interesting combinations of note splatters, trills, slides and scoops, playing with a thin but effective tone color.

The recording session was Ornette’s last for Blue Note and he remained without a recording company for the next two years, but he did release a couple of live albums on a single contract basis via the Impulse! label. The first to be released was *Crisis*, recorded during a concert at New York University. It features both Haden and Redman but also the return of trumpeter Don Cherry, and an older and more skilled Denardo Coleman. It also features the distinctive Haden masterpiece “Song for Che.”

The other recording made that year, *Ornette at 12*, continued to stir controversy among musicians and critics alike. This had much to do with the fact that for the third time, Ornette had included his son (now 12 years of age) on a professional album. Proponents of the avant-garde complained that it “cheapened” their message, and opponents used it as evidence that they were right all along in thinking that anyone could play this music. Ornette didn’t understand what either side was complaining about.

I tell you, man, the music world is a cold world. Very cold! The way Denardo is playing now on the record, *Ornette At 12*, would be a novelty for any other race of people. Someone would have gotten in and said, ‘We can make lots of money with this father and son,’ the whole trip. Instead, they put it down... I have never in my life seen anyone explain how and what I’m doing in music. But everybody knows that it’s something that hasn’t happened before, and that it’s not important enough to back.³⁵

³⁵ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 135.

Despite being in the midst of yet another controversy, Ornette Coleman continued to write new music. The interactions taking place on *Crisis* would soon be rediscovered in a new recording project and several new compositions would finally be completed and tested in the next decade. But at least for a short time, during 1969 and 1970, Ornette had tired of public performances and grown sick of the opposition that came quickly to any new venture that he undertook.

I don't feel healthy about the performing world anymore at all. I think it's an egotistical world; it's about clothes and money, not about music. I'd like to get out of it but I don't have the financial situation to do so. I have come to enjoy writing music because you don't have that performing image...I don't want to be a puppet and be told what to do and what not to do... When I can find some people that are in a position to accept me as a human being on my own terms then we can work together.³⁶

In the coming years Ornette would find a record company that would at least be willing to fund some of his new ideas. His first decade in jazz had nearly overturned all the preconceived notions about the music. It was a brilliantly productive period, but also perhaps a test of just how much his music would be tolerated and whether or not it would leave a lasting impression. His second would be even more exploratory, just as controversial, and in it he would finally achieve a lasting version of his own musical theories.

³⁶ Ibid. 135-136.

3.0 ORNETTE'S "RENAISSANCE" (1970-1979)

As Joachim Berendt writes in *The Jazz Book*, the 1970s were a period in American music that almost seemed to mark the end of an age of innocence. The decade before was the setting of a dramatic cultural shift, and the music created was some of the most eccentric and progressive, not just in jazz, but popular music and western art music as well. It simultaneously witnessed the rise of Ornette Coleman's free jazz, the evolution of Miles Davis's musical style, the electronic music of Milton Babbitt, and the psychedelic blues-drenched rock of Jimi Hendrix. It saw the great power and creativity of a youth-driven culture and the demands of a generation for equal rights for all Americans.

Conversely, the early 1970s were a sobering period. Within the first two years, the great rock icons Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison were dead. The Beatles broke up. Popular music had lost its heroes. Likewise, one of the great champions of jazz had already been lost in 1967, with the death of John Coltrane. Before the end of the decade, two of the genre's most influential figures, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, would also be gone. Meanwhile, Miles Davis continued to pursue a musical style that would push him further toward exile from both critics and the mainstream. For documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, the 1970s was a period in which jazz died. But for Ornette Coleman, it was a time of rebirth.

1970 found Ornette Coleman at his residence and collaborative loft project, Artists House, a venue that largely reflected his own take on the music industry and a "do it yourself" attitude. In the late 60s, the place had served as a kind of refuge for both Ornette and several avant-garde musicians. Anthony Braxton and Leroy Jenkins had temporarily moved in during

1970 and used the space to organize a concert resulting in two LPs for their group the Creative Construction Company. By this time several musicians from Chicago had collectivized themselves into a union known as the Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and their success on the scene was undoubtedly the result of Ornette's own breakthroughs a decade before. This younger group was seemingly canonizing his music, which still sounded fresh, and hints of Ornette's style can often be heard in the improvisations of Archie Shepp, Fred Anderson and Roscoe Mitchell. Furthermore, Braxton shows some of Ornette's influence in his compositions, which sometimes imitate free improvisation. Even the more conservative jazz musicians had by this time begun to explore the concepts of modal music.

By this measure, Ornette's music was hardly shocking anymore. When compared with the newer innovations by musicians like Braxton, it seemed even tame, almost a staple of the jazz vocabulary. Furthermore, he performed too little to attract the great deal of notoriety that he had generated during his early days in New York. He recorded *Friends and Neighbors: Ornette Live at Prince Street* at Artists House with his usual group including Redman, Cherry, Haden and Blackwell, with Denardo sitting in on two tracks. This was one of two albums that Ornette would appear on that year, and the only one under his own name. The other was a Louis Armstrong recording date, on which Armstrong sings "We Shall Overcome" and "Give Peace A Chance" along with Ornette and other musicians including Miles Davis.

If that wasn't a strong enough indication that the jazz world had caught up with Ornette, in the following year, he was invited to perform at the Newport Jazz Festival, as no less than the headliner of the Saturday afternoon show. Not long after, he was approached by a major record company, Columbia, with whom he signed a new contract and began working on a new album in early September. However, this is the record in which Coleman would begin once again to push forward and rediscover his musical identity.

3.1 THE SCIENCE FICTION SESSIONS (1971-1972)

The late 1960s recordings on Blue Note had found Ornette in a seemingly stagnant situation. While the records from this period offer new compositions, nothing particularly interesting is added in terms of ensemble or even form. As previously noted, Ornette was no longer “on the cutting edge” of the music. Just as the great innovators of bebop had found themselves surpassed by a younger and more adventurous generation, Ornette’s own contributions now seemed more like common practice than shocking exploration. His role as one of the greatest pioneers of new music was in decline, somewhat due to the enormous shadow that John Coltrane’s music now cast over the jazz avant-garde but also because of his own lack of newly recorded material. In fact, prior to *Science Fiction*, Ornette had not been in a studio to record under his own name for over three years, an unusual amount of time considering the tremendous body of work he had recorded in the previous years. The resulting sessions were perhaps a result of this absence. Ornette had been experimenting with several of the compositions for this record as early as 1969.³⁷ This is where all of his new ideas began to take shape.

On his new label Ornette had the ability to fund a complete artistic statement; he was not limited to a single ensemble, and Columbia’s financial resources ensured that he could hire whomever he chose to play. In total, he ended up leading seven different combinations of musicians throughout a process that lasted for three dates in 1971 and one date in 1972. Nineteen compositions were eventually recorded, comprising what is now known as The *Science Fiction Sessions*.

The variety of ensemble colors on the recording sessions is stunning, as are the great differences in the compositions themselves. Among the musicians hired were trumpeters Don

³⁷ The composition “Broken Shadows,” although not issued on the original *Science Fiction* LP, was recorded live on the album *Crisis* in 1969.

Cherry and Bobby Bradford, Dewey Redman on tenor saxophone, bassist Charlie Haden and drummers Billy Higgins and Ed Blackwell, but perhaps the most shocking participants on the record were singers Asha Puthli and Webster Armstrong³⁸ and the reintroduction of chord-playing instruments represented by pianist Cedar Walton and guitarist Jim Hall. Poet David Henderson is also heard on the album's title track, reading spoken verse over the top of a collective improvisation.

The first combination represented on the record is the reunion of the original Ornette Coleman quartet with Cherry, Haden and Higgins. This group is heard on three sections, "Civilization Day," "Street Woman" and "Country Town Blues." The style that they play in clearly borrows from Ornette's earlier music. "Civilization Day" is played in an extremely fast tempo and follows the model of the early compositions, a pattern of tune followed by improvisation that eventually arrives back at the tune. "Street Woman" keeps that same pattern and borrows a triplet motive from "Lonely Woman," recorded over a decade before.

The second group to be recorded reflects a later period of Ornette's development and utilizes Bobby Bradford, Dewey Redman and Ed Blackwell. Charlie Haden remained on bass for all tracks on the record. Again, Ornette used this ensemble on three tracks, "Law Years," "The Jungle Is A Skyscraper," and "School Work." Of these, "Law Years" probably most accurately reflects the music of Ornette's later periods. Before the initial statement of the theme by all instruments, Haden plays the tune himself in a rubato fashion reminiscent of the melodic qualities of the bass during Ornette's trio period. "School Work" however is also notable as it is the first appearance of a theme that Ornette seems to continually rework in future compositions.

³⁸ Armstrong's takes did not appear on the original *Science Fiction* disc and were instead issued on the LP *Broken Shadows* in 1982. All of his tracks however, were recorded at a date in 1972 and were originally intended as a continuation of the session, hence his inclusion in the above discussion. Sony-BMG reissued the entire set in a collective package called *The Complete Science Fiction Sessions* in May of 2000.

Two other groups are variations of the previously mentioned ensembles, the first being the addition of Don Cherry and Billy Higgins (the tracks involved both drummers and both trumpeters) to the second group for the takes of “Happy House,” “Broken Shadows” and “Elizabeth.” Another omits the trumpet players altogether in favor of a quartet of Coleman, Redman, Haden and Blackwell, with Redman on tenor for “Rubber Gloves” and musette for “Rock The Clock.” Ornette had previously acquired a taste for the “middle eastern” flavor of the latter instrument during several jam sessions at Artists’ House.

Ornette had originally intended to release all of these pieces on one double LP but Columbia attempted to cash in on the tremendous amount of variety during the sessions by slicing them up over two albums. Only eight of the tracks recorded over the three sessions made the original record. The others would need to wait to see the light of day until 1982, with the release of *Broken Shadows*, ten years later and long after Ornette’s contract with Columbia had been terminated.

In fact, the motivations of Columbia in signing Ornette Coleman have never been exactly clear. Based on the previous sales of his records on other labels, it is unlikely that such a large and profitable corporation would view Ornette as an asset. In fact, quite the opposite would be true. Ornette mentioned in several interviews (up until the mid-1990s) that he had yet to receive any royalties from his first record dates with Contemporary. Surely an industry giant like Columbia had other inspiration for offering him a contract.

It seems more than likely that the influence of Ornette’s acquaintance and industry mogul John Hammond may have had something to do with the situation, perhaps an effort to give Ornette the prestige and opportunity that he may have felt he had deserved but never found with other companies. But it is equally likely that Columbia, which attempted and

frequently succeeded in buying the contracts of several musicians during the seventies,³⁹ hired Ornette solely for both his reputation for being controversial and to have another notable musician on its artist roster.

The later was confirmed in 1972. While in London to produce the premier of *Skies of America*, the British musicians union protested the inclusion of a jazz ensemble playing alongside the orchestra and the concert had to be cancelled. Later, during the recording session for the piece, Ornette's rehearsal funding was cut, which caused the exclusion of his quartet from the record. In addition, Columbia again refused to allow the recording to be issued over two LPs, forcing him to remove several sections of the symphony to meet the industry standard length. He later remarked to David Grogan in an interview for *People*:

I'm so pissed off with Columbia. I was put in a situation where they're supposed to be humanitarians, aware of everything that's going on. But I didn't get the same interest in my music as Boulez did recording someone else's music. I didn't even get all of it on the record, only 40 minutes. The budget that Boulez could get for recording a Bartok piece—the rehearsal money—would've allowed me to finish my whole piece. I could've done my record exactly as I wanted to do it, and if it didn't sell, I would have still have had the privilege of knowing that they were *with* me.⁴⁰

The company's dealings with Ornette were not necessarily focused on his music as a commodity. Through such a position they continued to fail to market Ornette's recordings productively and seemingly used his reputation only to increase their image. As Ornette was already being paid a steep fee for his efforts, they saw no reason to increase expenditure for promotion that might not necessarily decrease the financial loss of doing business with him in the first place. By his own admission, Clive Davis, then president of Columbia, kept several artists on the books whose record sales were not worth the cost of their projects, but whose affiliation with his company brought welcome prestige.⁴¹

³⁹ Gary Marmorstein, *The Label: The Story of Columbia Records* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007) 348.

⁴⁰ David Grogan, "Ornette Coleman," *People*, October 13, 1986.

⁴¹ Marmorstein, *The Label*, 334.

However, at least for *Science Fiction*, the record deal with Columbia did have some advantages. First of all, their financial support allowed Ornette a great deal of artistic freedom. The consequences of record sales were not relatively important, so at least the company did not straitjacket Ornette's creative processes or force him to be more commercial. This same support also allowed for the hiring of seemingly any musicians needed, as previously mentioned.

The second real benefit was the involvement of John Hammond as Ornette's advocate and talent scout within the company. It was largely by his influence that Asha Puthli was recruited for the sessions in the first place, and her performances of the content on *Science Fiction* was greatly preferable to any other singer that Ornette had auditioned. She learned the two songs in no more than a few hours and had the recordings done almost immediately following the audition much to the delight of the other band members.⁴²

What attracted Ornette to Puthli's voice was undoubtedly the uniqueness of her approach as she frequently combines elements of her classical Indian vocal training with a more western popular-oriented style. Large glissandi and microtonal bends are frequent components of her improvisations. More important, perhaps, was her ability to improvise within the context of a group.

As a professional singer, her list of credentials was quite short at the time of her hiring. John Hammond had recently learned of Puthli through Ved Mehta's chapter entitled "Jazz in Bombay" in the book *Portrait of India*, found her in New York on a dance scholarship from Martha Graham and promptly brought her into the studio to work alongside several of Columbia's artists.

Her tracks on the album received a great deal of critical acclaim as well, as historian Robert Palmer wrote for the *New York Times*:

⁴² Marmorstein, *The Label*, 335-336.

A sound like raga meeting Aretha Franklin, Miss Puthli's singing is equally extraordinary. There is just enough Indian training left in her style to give it an indescribable fluid quality. Her alternation of timbre from the breathiest of sighs to gospel derived moans is unique. She improvises off an impressive range and generally walks through the album with the assurance of a master performer.⁴³

Welcome praise indeed, but during his first studio album in three years, Ornette had only begun to experiment with new concepts for his sound. *Science Fiction* can therefore be seen as a jumping off point, a time in which he was able to make free attempts to evolve musically. Despite the difficulties with the record label, Columbia had essentially offered Ornette a blank canvas on which to start anew. He wouldn't return to vocal music in the decade but later produced material that can be viewed as substantially more groundbreaking, all in the pursuit of a personal artistic vision, and a new way of both playing and thinking about music.

3.2 HARMOLODICS

Following the release of *Science Fiction*, Ornette went to work on a project of a much larger scale. In mid-1972 came *Skies of America*, a project—though underfunded—that was the realization of a dream Ornette had had for several years: to write and record a piece for symphony orchestra. The liner notes to the album also contained Ornette's inspirations for the symphony, his ideas for the orchestration and the first instance of a peculiar word that would increase the amount of intrigue into his music, "harmolodic."

Ornette mentions his formation of the word stems from the synthesis of three other terms: harmony, melody, and movement. He elaborated on his methods as "... based on a theory book called *The Harmolodic Theory*, which uses melody, harmony and the

⁴³ Mandel, Howard, "Reclaiming Singularity: Asha Puthli," *Down Beat*, February 2007.

instrumentation of movement of forms... The writing is applied to harmolodic modulation meaning to modulate in range without changing keys.”⁴⁴

Almost fifty years later the text still has not appeared, but Ornette has been asked to define the theory on several occasions. He wrote to *Down Beat* in 1983 that “The way to listen to harmolodic playing as soloist or the collective harmolodic whole is to follow the idea of the melody and listen to the many different ways that ideas can affect the melody.”⁴⁵ The quote gives the reader a bit more information but is still quite vague. Another notable mention of the term is in an essay contributed by Ornette to a collection compiled for Paul Buhle’s *Free Spirits: Annals of the Insurgent Imagination*, in which he describes harmolodics as not necessarily confined to musical applications. “[H]armolodics can be used in almost any kind of expression. You can think harmolodically. You can write fiction and poetry in harmolodic. Harmolodics allows a person to use a multiplicity of elements to express more than one direction. The greatest freedom in harmolodics is human instinct.”⁴⁶

In the face of such ambiguity, several researchers have turned to Ornette’s colleagues in order to find a bit more helpful of an explanation. But out of the many interviewees including Don Cherry, James “Blood” Ulmer, and Charlie Haden, none have provided a concrete definition of the theory. Bern Nix did his best to explain his interpretation of the method to Simon Jay Harper in 2009:

It’s a different approach to playing... [Harmolodics] is like [playing] a standard jazz guitar, but only more contemporary—it’s a fresh approach to playing jazz guitar. [It’s] just a way of looking at music—it’s not a system. It’s a way of...[handling] the difficulty of dealing with melody, rhythm and harmony...[by way of utilizing] melodic variables... [It’s] exploratory. [You find] direction with the melody. The harmony doesn’t dictate the direction, the melody does.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ornette Coleman, Notes to *Skies of America*, Columbia/Legacy, 63568.

⁴⁵ Ornette Coleman, “Prime Time For Harmolodics,” *Down Beat*, July, 1983.

⁴⁶ Ornette Coleman, “Something To Think About,” in *Free Spirits: Annals of The Insurgent Imagination*, ed. Paul Buhle (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982) 119-120.

⁴⁷ Simon Jay Harper, “Bern Nix: A History of Harmolodics,” August, 2009
<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=33841>

And of the philosophy, he said:

I always thought harmolodics was an open-ended exploration of the meaning of melody, rhythm and harmony; that's the way I see it. [You're asking] what is melody, what is rhythm—what it is. It's more like that, than a big system, you know—it's ways of dealing with it. [You] figure out the different ways of doing [it].⁴⁸

In this example Nix has mentioned that “harmolodics” isn’t necessarily a theory of music at all, or even a systematic way of approaching composition. It is instead a method of exploration, more of a starting point than a prescriptive formula. However, his mentor, James “Blood” Ulmer seems to add that there is a right and wrong way to approach the theory.

When you create the idea, and then flow your art from your idea, then you are thinking harmolodically. You can say it's your art because you created the feel that you took the art from. Here's a good example of creating art harmolodically: I went to France, and this artist took us way out in the country where he had created this scene that he painted. He made the hills and the valleys, he planted flowers on the water, and he put the pond there in the first place. He created that landscape so he could paint it—which is what separates the concept of harmolodics from other concepts....A harmolodic player is different, but there are rules to playing harmolodically. I learned the rules from Ornette Coleman, and the rules are separate from the Western concept of playing. Scales and chords are eliminated in terms of the Western concept of what you use them for, and you don't use chords and scales in linear situations. All of your rhythm works off a concept that is superimposed on the linear concept. Everything goes in a circle. Nothing is linear. That's the harmolodic concept musically.⁴⁹

And when asked about harmolodic chords he said, “A harmolodic chord is a chord that cannot be inverted. Out of all the chords, there are only five that cannot be inverted, from which you can get major, minor, augmented, and diminished sounds.”⁵⁰

The first quote is quite provocative; the second is undeniably confusing. What exactly does Ulmer mean when he says that the chords “cannot be inverted?” The only thing that might come to mind is the augmented chord (see Figure 1), which when inverted results in another

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Francis Davis, “Harmolodics Redux: James Blood Ulmer's Greatest Moment Recaptured from Sludge Blues,” *The Village Voice*, January 2006.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

augmented chord in root position. For example, C augmented can be written as E, G#, C, but will sound as if the root note is E. The same can be said of diminished 7th chords, which are solely composed of stacking minor thirds. However, if this is in fact the case, Ulmer must have miscounted because there are only four augmented chords if one considers any grouping of these same three notes as a “chord family,” and only three for diminished 7th chords.



Figure 1: The four “chord families” of augmented chords and three “families” of diminished 7 chords spelled enharmonically for ease of reading. Notice how inversion of any of the chords results in another chord of the same quality in root position.

But this would then be slightly different than what Ornette himself, described to journalist Art Lange on the idea of harmolodics, and for whom he sketched this diagram. (Figure 2)

C	E	G	B	=	Cmaj7
E ^b	G ^b	B ^b	D ^b	=	[E ^b]m7
D	F	A ^b	A	=	Dm[+b5]

Figure 2: A description of a harmolodic concept drawn by Ornette for Art Lange. Adapted from John Litweiler’s, *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life* pg. 132. The author has corrected the chord symbols from the original text.

When asked to explain, Ornette elaborated that none of the notes repeated in any of the chord structures. This series of thirds is not much different from the result of the augmented or diminished chord families being played one after another in sequence (except for Ab to A), but what about Ulmer’s descriptions of major and minor variations of this type of phenomenon? The intervallic structure certainly allows for inversion in their case. Even more confusing are

statements by Don Cherry and Charlie Haden, who had worked with Ornette for a much longer time when first interviewed. Cherry said that the harmolodic method was,

a profound system of developing your ear along with your technical proficiency on your instrument... We have to know the chord structure perfectly, all the possible intervals, and *then* play around with it... If I play a C and have it in my mind as the tonic, that's what it will become. If I want it to be a minor third or a major seventh that has the tendency to resolve upward, then the quality of the note will change.⁵¹

And Haden asserted, "technically speaking, it was a constant modulation in the improvising that was taken from the direction of the composition, and from the direction inside the musician, and from listening to each other."⁵²

It would then seem that harmolodics is impossible to decipher by only talking to Ornette's musicians since it has a different meaning to every one of them. This may be because each had worked with Ornette during a slightly different period, but is also likely that that reason emanates from Ornette's vagueness in giving performance direction to his musicians. One could argue however, that Nix and Ulmer may be more reliable since Ornette had already begun to coin the methodology by the time each began his respective tenure with the group. This trend toward vagueness is not necessarily a weakness however. By allowing his musicians to form their own interpretations of the harmolodic ideals, Ornette has empowered them to bring their own individual identities into the music. If Bern Nix for example, feels that the harmolodic principles revolve around counterpoint, then his contrapuntal efforts will serve to add another level of complexity to the ensemble's performances.

Several scholars have also attempted to define Ornette's theory despite his often metaphorical and sometimes cryptic descriptions of what harmolodic is and isn't. The term appears in numerous interviews, but it seems that Ornette is tired of answering questions about

⁵¹ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 131.

⁵² Ibid.132.

it, since most of the subject matter of more recent discussions with him tend to focus on other areas of his music.

Out of the body of research, perhaps the most effective approach to understanding what Ornette means by harmolodics comes from Peter Niklas Wilson in *Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music*. Wilson finds that the easiest approach is not necessarily to ask Ornette's colleagues or even Ornette himself, but to look for evidence of a new compositional approach in the music.

The decision to take such a step may be highly productive but also offers a degree of risk. It is rather difficult to construct someone else's theory just by listening to the music. Who exactly knows what Ornette was actually attempting to do other than Ornette? However, Wilson's descriptions seem to at least make sense of the compositional style on the recordings, and through such descriptions it is possible to understand and even draw parallels to some of what Ornette is talking about.

Wilson defines harmolodics solely by what can be heard on the recordings, and since Ornette originally stated in the notes to *Skies of America*, "harmolodic is the way I play written for symphony orchestra," Wilson argues that any and perhaps all of his music could be considered harmolodic in nature. He then breaks the theory down into what techniques can be observed on any Coleman record regardless of time period. His conclusion is that Ornette's harmolodic theory is not necessarily a codified system with established rules, but instead a loosely defined set of principles based on encouraging group interaction and spontaneous creativity, derived by identifying and exploiting the predominant strengths and characteristics of whatever ensemble he finds himself to be currently a part of.

After analyzing the music Wilson determines that there are also certain "fragments" that define Coleman's style: "Metrical Liberation," "Polymodality," "Tempo Changes," "Transposition by a Third," "Harmolodic Parallel Movement" and an "Orchestral Idea of Sound."

The first fragment, metrical liberation, is something common to almost all Coleman recordings. Some of the most notable examples can be found on *The Shape of Jazz to Come*; for example, “Lonely Woman” can be described as completely free of meter as the rhythm section freely improvises underneath a long, legato melody. Also, several of Ornette’s other recordings feature brief sections of “time keeping” that respond to specific phrases. Wilson argues that therefore Ornette must deem the melody to be of primary importance and all other musical elements must then conform to the melody as the band plays it, whether or not it conforms to regular metric parameters. Bern Nix’s above quotations would also seem to confirm this suggestion.

The second tenet of harmolodics is defined by Wilson as polymodality, which he refers to as the ability of the ensemble to shift suddenly from one tonal center to another in Ornette’s early music, and as the collective use of several tonal centers simultaneously in his later works. The premise here is that all (or at least most) of Ornette’s music is tonal and has a distinct key center at one time or another. Again, the examples of this type of phenomenon can be seen as melody driven, as in “Lonely Woman” (1959) or collectively as in “Crisis” (1969).

Thirdly, Wilson refers to the idea of tempo changes in Ornette’s music. These changes in tempo are often drastic and sudden and are seen in numerous examples of the trio recordings during the mid-1960s. Wilson suggests then that such abrupt contrasts are almost always reserved solely for thematic material rather than in improvisatory sections. Wilson fails to note, however, that occasionally this device is used to distinguish individual solos or transition between the composed melody of the tune and the improvisation, as in “Law Years” (1972) and “Zig Zag” (1967), both of which feature improvisatory sections that are faster than the tempos on the “head” to the tune.

The fourth and seemingly most difficult to grasp section of the theory is what Wilson dubs harmolodic parallel movement. In his compositions, Ornette frequently uses both transposing and non-transposing instruments but has them read from the same score or in



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...Ornette Coleman has had to live with the attitudes responsible for Anton Webern's Music whether he knows that music or not. They were handed to him along with the whole history of Western music, and the musics that have come to characterize the Negro in the United States came to exist as they do today only through the acculturation of this entire history. And actually knowing that history, and trying to relate to it culturally, or those formal Euro-American musics, only adds to the *indoctrination*. But jazz and blues *are* Western musics[,] products of an Afro-American culture. But the definitions must be black no matter the geography for the highest meaning to black men. And in this sense European anything is irrelevant.⁵³

Therefore, in order to truly understand Ornette's concepts of orchestration, one must not merely recognize a systematic misunderstanding but recognize his treatment of symphonic music as its adaptation to his own standards in an autonomous Afro-American culture.

The final characteristic of Coleman's music is his orchestral ideal of sound. Even before 1970, Coleman often strove to go beyond the traditional sonic confines of the jazz ensemble. He used several different textures during the 1960s but always seemed to relate them back to what he thought of as a "melodic line that sounded like it was structured orchestratively in a small group kind of context."⁵⁴ This was also seen in his desire to work with several different kinds of ensembles, each with its own unique display of interplay between instruments. In fact, the thing that the electric and large group acoustic music share is a dense orchestral type of sound. It is for this reason that Wilson doesn't regard Ornette's electric music as an attempt at jazz-rock fusion but instead as an evolution of his previous music towards the direction of a "large improvising orchestra of which he dreams."⁵⁵

Yet, if harmolodics was merely an attempt to describe the style of Ornette's playing, the most interesting developments in his ensemble would occur in the years that followed, when he established a new group with a new concept. An unlikely source of inspiration would lead to a band that would make harmolodics their core philosophy.

⁵³ Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998) 70.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 42.

⁵⁵ Wilson, *Ornette Coleman*, 76.

3.3 ORNETTE GOES ELECTRIC

Ornette's second trip to Africa took place in January of 1973. He had been once before in the previous year, and during his visit spent some time playing with local Hausa musicians in Nigeria. This time the destination was Morocco, more specifically a remote village in the Rif Mountains called Joujouka. Ornette was not the first westerner to visit this area. Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones had been to the region two years prior, and Ornette received word of the Master Musicians present in the village from clarinetist Robert Palmer.

As it turns out, these so called Master Musicians of Joujouka were not exactly a commonplace local group but rather the inheritors of a Sufi musical tradition dating back to the 9th century.⁵⁶ Their predecessors were the official court musicians of the sultan; according to their own sacred texts, the music played by these masters was determined to have magical and medicinal powers and was never played outside of the context of religious ritual function.

When Ornette first arrived in Joujouka, he had the intention of making a recording with these musicians and brought along (at great expense to Columbia/CBS) an entire team of technicians and equipment. He was supposedly transfixed by what he heard, as the communication of these musicians had seemed almost telepathic to many outsiders. The Master Musicians created music with each other that shifted tempos frequently, tuned to microtones, and injected flurries of spontaneous but beautifully intricate counterpoint. This was an eastern equivalent of the ensemble that he, himself, had been striving for.

The preparations for the record began almost immediately. A sequence of musical gatherings were planned that would take place in a consecrated cave and the studio engineers were to record whatever happened during these sessions. The instrumentation of the collective ensemble was unique in its extreme variety. Ornette plays trumpet on one take but alto sax on

⁵⁶ Drew Franklin, "Playing in The Register of Light," *Village Voice Jazz Special*, June 1987, 24.

the others, accompanied by four wood flutes known as *lira*, the double reed *rhaita*, two plucked string instruments (*gimbris*), and three goat skinned drums (*tebel* and *tarija*). The amazing part of the entire experience is that despite the huge cultural differences and the contrast in playing technique, Ornette still found a way to communicate musically and record several selections. Robert Palmer, who came back to Joujouka with Ornette, described the music.

He found a theme, a kind of riff that was a perfect bridge from his idiom to theirs, and by conducting while he played, he managed to weave an entire symphony of changing textures around his riff. And he developed a piece in three movements, so it had a really rich formal symmetry. The rest of the music we recorded in Joujouka was very much a meeting of the worlds. Ornette was soloing in a jazz sense; the Master Musicians were playing their traditional music... But I think that all the musicians on *Music from the Cave* were playing in one world, and I think that world was equally new to all of us.⁵⁷

The music played at Joujouka had extensive consequences for Ornette's future music. When he returned to the United States, he attempted to reinvent some form the ideal that he had witnessed in Northern Africa. He strove to find a group of musicians that could once again create music in which the collective sound eclipses the importance of the soloist, a group that would once again push past the limitations of the traditional western jazz ensemble. Ornette was fueled by the thought that he himself had created his own musical language, one that several other musicians seemed to be ignorant of. Joujouka was his confirmation that he didn't need to pay attention to those who didn't understand him anymore. But at the same time Palmer notes that Ornette missed the ability to connect with his audiences the same way as he had while playing rhythm and blues.⁵⁸ The electric group was then not only an attempt to realize an orchestral sound, but also a means by which he could incorporate dance motives and reestablish such a link.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 25.

⁵⁸ Wilson, *Ornette Coleman*, 78.

A few months after his return from Morocco, Ornette appeared in a live concert with electric guitarist James “Blood” Ulmer. He continued to tour with Ulmer in the spring of 1974, joined by Billy Higgins and bassist Sirone (Norris Jones) who had previously worked alongside Leroy Jenkins. The tour replaced Higgins and Sirone with Denardo Coleman and David Williams in 1975 and made a few recordings that remain unreleased. It was not until December of 1975 that Ornette would finally attempt to release a new record.

The final personnel for the group, by then known as Prime Time, is first documented on the album *Dancing in Your Head*. It included guitarists Bern Nix and Charles Ellerbee, bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma (formerly known as Rudy MacDaniel) and drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson. The record wasn’t released until 1977 due to both funding problems and legal issues with Columbia/CBS records, who had terminated their involvement with Ornette not long after the Joujouka recordings were made. It contained only two tracks, a selection of Prime Time’s material entitled “Theme from a Symphony,” and a brief sample of the music made in Morocco dubbed “Midnight Sunrise.”

The loss of most of the material from Joujouka is quite unfortunate. Ornette had originally intended to release all of the recordings on one double LP, but at around the same time as the music was being made, Columbia had decided to cut several of its most lucrative jazz artists in favor of signing more rock and roll musicians. Ornette’s contract was cut in early 1974 at about the same time as those of Bill Evans and Charles Mingus, whose products had also failed to sell in high volume.⁵⁹ As a result, all of the recordings made by Ornette in Joujouka are either stashed away in the CBS record vault or in Ornette’s personal collection, unable to be released partially due to legal ramifications and partially lack of public interest. It is almost miraculous that Columbia allowed “Midnight Sunrise” to be included at all after Ornette sold the recording to Horizon along with the first Prime Time sessions recorded in Paris.

⁵⁹ Marmorstein, *The Label*, 348.

But despite the minimal amount of variety on *Dancing in Your Head*, the total length is over 20 minutes on the original LP.⁶⁰ It is also interesting to speculate why Ornette decided to place his first recorded track with a new ensemble, side by side with one that he had made nearly three years earlier. Perhaps the concept in this decision is prompted by a comparison study; he may have wanted to see just how well his new music approximated that which he had participated in during the improvisatory sessions in the sacred cave. Also, interesting is the remarkable similarity between the thematic material in “Theme from a Symphony” and the melodic phrases played by the wind instruments in the Joujouka recording. To Ornette, these two sessions utilize the same methodology and the differences in instrumentation hardly can matter when compared to the incredible cohesiveness in structure. By putting them together he is demonstrating his successful attempt to bring the Joujouka ideal of music into a western setting.

It is also likely that Ornette’s separation from the financial support of Columbia played an important part in his decision to move to electric instruments. When the contract was terminated, he lost the ability to rehire the London Symphony Orchestra, and judging by his interviews with J.B. Figi of the *Chicago Reader*, the orchestra would have been his first choice of ensembles with which to premier his new music.

I would like to have a large orchestra for about five years, where I could teach them to play a large composition without always having to reach and get the music, you know? Like when you go to the philharmonic and they pull out Bartok or Beethoven. I mean, does it look more elegant to put out music? It doesn’t sound any better. They have been playing those pieces for five or six thousand performances. I’m sure they must know the parts by now.

It costs \$750,000 to have a large orchestra. And I’d need it for five years. So that needs three and a half million dollars. I need five million dollars. I’d put it all into an orchestra.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Reissues of *Dancing in Your Head* have included alternate takes of both pieces on the record. The current length on CD is over 35 minutes.

⁶¹ J.B. Figi, “Ornette Coleman, A Surviving Elder in the Brotherhood of Those Who Make Music” *Reader*, June 1973.

Without the support of Columbia it was now almost financially impossible for Ornette to hire any orchestra for a sufficient amount of time to teach them his own musical concepts. This time a day of rehearsal and a recording session would not be enough to satisfy his vision. So in his mind, going to electric instruments was the next best thing. It was another way to achieve a dense orchestral sound but without relying multitude of performers and instruments.

About 1974-75, I realized that the guitar had very wide overtones—one guitar might sound like ten violins. Like, say in a symphony orchestra, two trumpets are the equivalent of twenty-four violins: that kind of thing. When I found that out, I decided then I'm going to see if I can orchestrate this music that I'm playing and see if it can have a larger sound—and it surely did.⁶²

The amplification of the electric guitar was almost certainly a factor in Ornette's descriptions. This combined with Ulmer's distinct R&B background may have reminded him of the connection shared with audiences during his youth in Texas. Now he had a group that bridged the gap between all of his previous experiences. The music he grew up with, the music he created, and the symphonic and Joujouka sounds were all rolled into one package for the music of Prime Time.

The following year, Ornette issued a few more of his Prime Time recordings on *Body Meta*, on the very short-lived Artists' House label. John Snyder, former A&M executive and friend of Ornette, had founded the label after selling the Paris Prime Time recordings and Joujouka recording "Midnight Sunrise" to his own company for \$75,000.⁶³ He was fired soon afterwards, but became a trusted representative for Ornette's music. Ornette and Snyder had even borrowed large sums of money from each other. Snyder had borrowed to keep his fledgling company in business; Ornette had borrowed for his own projects and for several other reasons.

⁶² Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 140.

⁶³ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 177.

The business model for Artists' House was unique in the industry. Rather than owning its own sessions, it bought leases to issue material from the musicians on its roster. At its high point, the label was releasing new recordings by Ornette, Art Pepper, Paul Desmond, Hampton Hawes, Gil Evans, Dave Liebman, James Blood, Jim Hall and Red Mitchell.⁶⁴ The company would go bankrupt by 1982 but the importance of Artists House cannot be understated. For the first time, Ornette and Snyder were proving that musicians could determine their own fate and needed not necessarily be at the mercy of a large corporation. The effects of the label on Ornette's own music are also instantly obvious. By working with Artists House, Ornette was finally able to make a totally artistic statement with his new group that would go unhindered by the cash-driven minds of industry executives.

The album *Body Meta* is also fiendishly imaginative. For the most part, the tunes on the record operate in a straight funk-oriented beat. It is perhaps the first Coleman record to actually use large sections of standard time signatures while still frequently rushing into spats of free improvisation. The tempo changes are also somewhat limited, but do give plenty of room for the performers to showcase their versatility. In fact, every track employs a different type of device. Major musical elements of "Voice Poetry" and "Home Grown" are specifically oriented around an increasingly dense ensemble sound and closely voiced rhythmic passages. There are also elements of post-modern treatment of earlier ideas; "Macho Woman" is a revitalization of the "Theme from a Symphony" and "Fou Amor" is a modernized, melancholy, blues ballad. Even the piece "European Echoes" is an electrified waltz with freely improvised sections. All of these ideas point to the grand vision of the album as a rebirth for Ornette Coleman's music.

⁶⁴ Artists House record catalogue. <http://www.discogs.com/label/Artists%20House>

3.4 ORNETTE AND HIS MUSICIANS

From several transcribed interviews with Ornette, nothing seems to frustrate him more than when listeners refer to Prime Time as his “backup band.”

Every time I read a review of my record, it says that I’m the only one soloing. That’s incredible, because that’s all Prime Time is doing. I’m the one that’s stuck—*they’re* the ones that are free... I mean, when you hear my band, you know that everybody is soloing, harmolodically. Here I am with a band based upon everybody creating an instant melody, composition, from what people used to call improvising, and no one has been able to figure out that that’s what’s going on. All my disappointment about it just makes me realize how advanced the music really is.⁶⁵

It seems that listeners have misinterpreted the structure of Coleman’s music partially because of the large sections of time-keeping that take place in several of the Prime Time recordings. But regardless of the public’s assumptions about the music itself it is startlingly apparent how little credit is given to the musicians with whom Ornette works. Even in his early ensembles it was seldom mentioned how important individuals like Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell had contributed significantly to the making of the music and were as crucial to the success of the performance as even Ornette himself. The structural forms of his compositions have always depended on the interplay within the group.

This is not to say that Ornette isn’t a powerful leader. He most certainly is, and that trait may be part of the reason for the absence of his musicians from the discussion of most of his music. In fact, he has a tendency to bring out the best in the performers he has worked with. In some cases these musicians had never sounded better than when they worked in one of his groups and are sometimes forgotten after their tenure in the ensemble has passed. An example of this would be the Old and New Dreams group, which was composed of several Coleman alumni, specifically Don Cherry, Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden and Ed Blackwell, who, after

⁶⁵ Howard Mandel, *Miles, Ornette, Cecil: Jazz Beyond Jazz*, (New York: Routledge, 2008) 17.

Ornette's decision to go electric, recorded their own takes on some of his music in 1976. The interpretations are fresh and interesting but sometimes lack the fire of the earlier sessions that were led by the composer himself. But one only need recall the first Contemporary recordings that included a studio group of Walter Norris, Don Payne, Percy Heath, Red Mitchell, and Shelly Manne, to remember how crucial proper context is to Ornette's music in general.

This is especially interesting since in A.B. Spellman's *Four Lives*, Coleman seems especially interested in talking about his sidemen. Most of the comments are directed towards the abilities of the group to play as a collective unit. He holds his rhythmic instrumentalists in high regard, saying of Haden, "Charlie was probably the most natural of all three white bass players I've ever used," and of Izenzon, that he had "an ability to do anything that's possible to be done on the bass."⁶⁶ In a later interview, he stated of Ed Blackwell, "he played the most perfect phrases. No one else could phrase the melodies that correctly, except now Denardo can too."⁶⁷

The praise is not limited to the rhythm section either, Ornette talks at length about the abilities of his trumpet players stating that "after Bobby and Don, I didn't see anybody who was, like, the same kind of beautiful players that they were, and nobody who could meet all the physical requirements (of being up every night) either. So I just gave up on the trumpet."⁶⁸ Ornette mentioned in the obituary of Dewey Redman in *Down Beat*, "Dewey could play the keys off the saxophone" and "Dewey's creativity was one of the highest forms of spirituality I ever experienced."⁶⁹

A.B. Spellman's work was published in 1966 long before the emergence of Prime Time. But when Ornette was in the process of forming the group from 1973-1974, his favorite

⁶⁶ A.B. Spellman, *Black Music: Four Lives* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970)

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ John Ephland, "Remembering Dewey Redman," *Down Beat*, September, 2006.

drummer, Ed Blackwell, was unavailable due to the complications of kidney failure. Blackwell, who had been living at Artists' House (Ornette's SoHo apartment, not the record company headquarters), now required constant dialysis treatments. Soon, most of the New York avant-garde scene including Sam Rivers, Sun Ra, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and Bobby Bradford had organized a series of benefit concerts in order to pay for his transplant surgery. Ornette similarly lost his partners in Charlie Haden and Dewey Redman when they left to join Keith Jarrett's quartet in pursuit of more steady work and larger financial payoff.

Therefore, the decision to include Higgins on the first Prime Time recordings might have been out of necessity. However, working with James "Blood" Ulmer may have been in fact the introduction that Ornette needed to pursue a course of playing with electric instruments. When he moved in with Ornette in 1972, Ulmer began to assimilate aspects of the harmolodic ideal that Ornette had been pushing towards. He recalled their first meeting during an interview for *Jazztimes*.

I had never heard of Ornette Coleman in my life. I didn't know he was going to be a good teacher. But as soon as Billy [Higgins] took me up there and I met him, I knew he was a genuine person; I knew he was for real. He listened to me play and told me, 'You play natural harmolodic.' I was glad to hear that. He made me think that what I was doing was important. That was the best inspiration I had right there. He made me feel that what I was doing was part of something important.⁷⁰

Ulmer may have been the first musician other than himself that Ornette considered to be "naturally" harmolodic. The obvious connection here becomes the blues influence in both of their playing. Since Ornette grew up in Fort Worth, the territory blues was certainly a familiar sound and a link back to his roots. Several analyses of Ornette's later music have drawn strong relationships to the blues in several of his solos. Ulmer, who had originally begun learning gospel music as a boy, started playing blues guitar his early teens and moved north to

⁷⁰ Geoffrey Himes, "James Blood Ulmer and Vernon Reid: Harmolodic Blues," *Jazztimes*, July 2006.

Pittsburgh to work in soul and rhythm and blues bands sometime around 1959. The two men were thus able to form an immediate musical connection through their past experiences. It is therefore interesting that the only blues musician that Coleman had hired up until that point is also the only performer whom he has ever called a “natural” harmolodic improviser.

Yet, for all the praise that Ulmer would receive from Ornette, there was still work to be done in perfecting his sound for the Prime Time group. Thus began the process with which Ornette began to work with Ulmer on several jazz voicings for the guitar. During their practice sessions Ornette would call out progressions of bebop changes to test Ulmer’s ability. Unfortunately, nothing in his previous repertoire had prepared him for such difficult harmonic material, and eventually Ulmer became frustrated. He told Geoffery Himes, “One morning I tuned all six strings to the same note. When Ornette called out a B-flat, I said, ‘I got no B-flat.’ When he called out an E-minor-seventh, I said, ‘I ain’t got that either.’ So we just started playing.”⁷¹ The resulting guitar tuning is what Ulmer would refer to later as his “harmolodic tuning.” Quite coincidentally, older blues musicians in the Deep South had used this technique, most often referred to as “open tuning,” for years. It was the primary method by which guitarists like Son House would increase the resonance and power of the instrument as to be heard by crowds in packed juke joints. Although it is uncertain whether or not Ulmer knew this when he started to play in this style with Ornette, it is possible that he was one of the first electric guitarists to employ such a method. By this combination of common and unorthodox styles, it is highly likely that Ulmer’s influence increased Ornette’s interest in using the electric guitar rather than continually pursuing the symphony orchestra.

However, Ulmer’s utilization in Ornette’s band was at first purely in a live capacity; he doesn’t appear on any Coleman studio recordings. Quite contrary, on their only studio album together Ornette appears as a sideman for Ulmer’s 1978 *Tales of Captain Black* where he also

⁷¹ Ibid.

receives an arranger credit. His replacement for the Prime Time ensemble was in fact two guitarists, Bern Nix and Charles Ellerbee.

It is seldom mentioned that in addition to being perhaps the most controversial Coleman group, Prime Time was also the longest lasting; the personnel remained the same for nearly 13 years. The switch in guitarists proved productive, but Nix and Ellerbee were of a different breed of improviser than Ulmer had been. Nix was in fact just finishing his studies at the Berklee School of Music when he began to play with the group.

As a conservatory educated musician, Nix in particular, not only displayed a great level of technical skill in his work, but was able to draw from the jazz traditions of previous decades and incorporate a smoother, more flowing musical vocabulary into the music than Ulmer had, which contrasted beautifully with the rock based patterns of Ellerbee. It is also interesting that Nix frequently cites one of his greatest inspirations as Wes Montgomery, imitating the “stops” and “starts” often heard on Montgomery’s recordings and an emulation of his clear tone quality. Also, in Nix, Ornette had also gained perhaps his only guitarist who could read and write music. After having been drilled repeatedly in notation at Berklee, he was a musician who could be given scores rather than needing to learn the parts by rote.

But, perhaps the greatest contributions of Bern Nix to the Prime Time group were not necessarily in the realm of his music but of a more political nature. With Nix, Ornette could point to the fact that one of his musicians had been to music school. He could openly present an argument that he had never made before to his critics and antagonists in the music community who had previously ridiculed him as both a charlatan and a primitive. His argument now was that he not only employed a graduate of a well-recognized musical university, but that this musician had actively sought *him* out. The added bonus was that Nix could present a better explanation of the harmolodic theory than any of Ornette’s previous musicians. In an interview with Simon Jay Harper he mentioned trying to use academic vocabulary to talk about the system with Ornette during a rehearsal.

I [once] said to Ornette that it seemed like counterpoint. I was working with him, rehearsing with him, and we were getting down to a couple of different lines...and I said to him, 'You know, to me this sounds like counterpoint.' He said, 'Well, it's not exactly counterpoint, it's something else.' You know what I mean? The way Ornette uses language, he likes to put his own spin on everything. But to me, it's contrapuntal. ⁷²

By Nix's description we can see Ornette's resistance to oversimplification of the concept. As previously mentioned, it is highly likely that he is only describing a portion of the total theory. However, Nix does put harmolodics into a language that is more easily understood than the dense metaphors that Ornette gives us through his many interviews. For Ornette to hire such a person almost seems to be a challenge for the establishment to attempt to dismiss him again.

After Prime Time was formed from 1974-75, Ornette made fewer recordings with his primary ensemble than he had in the previous decade. One reason for this was that he was no longer financed through a major record company and needed to produce his own content via the Artists' House Company that he was a partner in. The other reason is the great amount of time spent working on side projects with several different musicians from his past groups. Apart from *Tales of Captain Black* with James "Blood" Ulmer, he worked on two records as a sideman with Charlie Haden, both made in 1976 but with vastly different personnel. All of the tracks are duets with only Haden's bass and one other instrument. On the first album, *Closeness*, he is featured with Ornette, Keith Jarrett, Alice Coltrane and Paul Motian. The second pairs him with Ornette again, Don Cherry, Hampton Hawes and Archie Shepp. Both of the recordings with Coleman showcase the deep musical relationship developed between the two men after years of working together in various formats and configurations. The music was so successful that in early 1977, Haden decided that he would like to create a complete album of duets with just

⁷² Simon Jay Harper, "Bern Nix: A History of Harmolodics," August, 2009
<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=33841>

Ornette. *Soapsuds, Soapsuds*, released under Ornette's name for Artists' House, is the culmination of that effort.

Haden, along with Don Cherry and Billy Higgins, was one of Ornette's earliest collaborators. They had met in 1957 after a jam session at the Hillcrest club in Los Angeles, and Haden was invited to play through some compositions at Ornette's apartment. He recalls that there was sheet music...

all over the rug and chairs and bed and everywhere. I got my bass out, and he picked up one of the manuscripts off the rug and said, 'Lets play this.' I said, 'Sure,' but I was scared to death. He said, 'Now I got some chord changes written below the melody here that I heard when I was writing the melody. You can play those changes when you play the song, but when I start to improvise, make up your own changes from what I'm playing.' I said, 'With pleasure.' Man, we played all day and all night. And the next day we stopped to get a hamburger and we came back and we played some more.⁷³

Haden's reaction to Ornette's music was one of the strongest of any of the artists with whom he has worked. He was young (19 years old) at the time of his first experiences playing free jazz, and became instantly drawn to it out of both the influence of Coleman and his own desire to do something different. Haden was the chosen bassist for the quartet on the early Atlantic recordings and half of 1960's *Free Jazz*. He had left the group due largely to a growing addiction to drugs and alcohol, which threatened to unravel both his entire career and personal life, but returned to work intermittently with Ornette's trio in the late 1960s. After cleaning up completely, he was hired to work on *Science Fiction* but again left the group to work with Carla Bley in the Liberation Music Orchestra. Soon, Ornette's focus would switch to Prime Time and he would no longer need to employ acoustic bassists. Yet, Haden had always held a great degree of respect for Ornette and regarded him as something of a teacher and mentor; when Artists' House was founded, Haden quickly found a place on the roster.

⁷³ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 44-45.

The duets on *Soapsuds, Soapsuds*, are a type of signification of mutual respect between Haden and Ornette. Before this album, Ornette had not made a recording of acoustic music under his own name in nearly four years. However, the feel and texture is slightly different in this case; it is not a simple rehashing of the original quartet's music but at the same time seems to hold on to several elements of Coleman themes from the past, akin to the style found on *The Empty Foxhole* but without Denardo Coleman. The lack of drums seems to allow the bass constant freedom to develop several unique approaches to the rhythmic and harmonic shapes presented in the melody. Haden's celebrated lyric bass lines are perfectly suited for such a texture. Also, interestingly, Ornette opts to record on trumpet for the first time since 1973, and on tenor sax for the first time since 1961! The goal is certainly to allow for greater variance in ensemble coloration.

More important, perhaps, is what the making of the record symbolizes. Charlie Haden had always been a student and a sideman to Ornette, as he mentions in his liner notes. "Most of what I have learned about the art of listening can be directly attributed to Ornette. In order to contribute totally to his music one must listen to every note he plays...and then come the endless possibilities."⁷⁴ But in a duet, there is no leader, even more so now that Ornette had demonstrated the complete ensemble improvisation of *Prime Time*. Therefore, the decision to make such a record with Haden is indicative of Haden's transition from Ornette's student to his musical peer. This album is an acknowledgement of that achievement, a type of indication that Haden was now an equally respected and well-versed contributor to the language of free jazz. Ornette's compliments of Haden's playing, in his own written liner notes, would seem to confirm this speculation.

Those who someday find their own musical voice in sound remember: music like all expressions of art removes us from watching to doing. There are only two of us playing on this record, Charlie

⁷⁴ Charlie Haden, Notes to *Soapsuds, Soapsuds*, Verve, 531917.

Haden and Ornette Coleman. Those who haven't heard Charlie or his musical gifts, don't wait any longer.⁷⁵

The world would indeed take notice of Haden's music. Performances with his own ensembles were often structured around politics, giving voice to his own liberal viewpoints. He would be an important leader and composer in the jazz avant-garde for the next two decades with his own groups including LMO (Liberation Music Orchestra) and the Charlie Haden Quartet West.

Haden wasn't the only previous Coleman associate to find a place at Artists' House. Denardo Coleman had followed with his father's ambitious attempt to produce and distribute his own music. Now at age 22, he had developed into a first-rate musician, and much to Ornette's pleasure was James "Blood" Ulmer's first choice for his record *Tales of Captain Black* in 1978, the first time he would be documented on a record since 1969.

In the previous years, Ornette had the privilege of working with one of the finest drummers in free jazz. Ronald Shannon Jackson was a pioneer in the music and had previously performed with Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler before joining Prime Time in 1975. His unique drumming style had been compared to a "hurricane" and could be said to draw as much from military parade drumming as jazz percussion. Needless to say, Jackson was an incredibly technically proficient musician.

When Jackson left the group in 1979 to pursue a project of his own, Decoding Society, Ornette turned to his son to fill in as Prime Time's primary drummer (Calvin Weston would also play for the group). They went into the studio later in that year to record *Of Human Feelings*. Denardo had not been featured on any studio albums in nearly a decade. Now he had made two in the same year and was busy with a third, a collaboration with his mother, Jayne Cortez.

⁷⁵ Ornette Coleman, Notes to *Soapsuds*, *Soapsuds*, Verve, 531917.

He would be the primary drummer for all of his father's exploits from 1979 forward, and later, played an important role as a producer for Ornette's record label, *Harmolodic*, in the late 1980s.

Denardo's style of drumming is largely different than Jackson's, but then again *Of Human Feelings* is a different type of album. It lacks the aggressive, rock-infused rhythms and precision of the first Prime Time recordings and adopts a more casual feeling, relying mostly on grooves generated and perpetuated by the interplay between Denardo and J amaaladeen Tacuma on bass. One can make out the distinct impression that Ed Blackwell had made on the younger Coleman, mostly through the use of his phrasing during ensemble sections.

This was the second record composed completely of Prime Time's material to be recorded, but was not released until 1982 when it was sold to Achilles Records after Artists' House went bust.

However, Denardo's career in music wasn't always a certainty. At the age of ten he had worked with his father on *The Empty Foxhole* and drew a tremendous amount of controversy. His very inclusion seemed to provide new fodder for the critics of the avant-garde, who claimed that anyone could make such music. Although it is obvious that Ornette's desire to include his son was not simply an exercise in upsetting jazz audiences, this glimpse of the music world's ugliness at such a young age might have soured Denardo on moving into the business at all. In the late 1960s he would even refuse to work with his father's group and neglect his instrument. Ornette had told Arthur Taylor about his frustrations with trying to get his son to play music again. "I can't get him to practice or anything. He can read drum music, but he's rebelling. Like, I don't want to be a musician because my father is... Every time I wanted him to play for me, I had to damn near beg him."⁷⁶ It also didn't help Ornette's case that Denardo had spent most of his early musical development away from his father's band. He only lived with Ornette during the summers, and remained with his mother in California for the other three-quarters of the year.

⁷⁶ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 118.

The benefit of this situation was that Denardo's mother was the poet, Jayne Cortez, whose fondness for jazz and other forms of black music had rubbed off on her son. Cortez was also notable for reciting her work to a backing beat often played by a jazz or hand drummer. She was politically informed and influential in her verses and perhaps one of the most highly regarded poets of the Black Arts Movement.

Denardo was exposed to all of these rhythmic ideas throughout his childhood but perhaps more interesting in that regard is that no biography of Denardo lists any drum teacher. It can only be assumed then that Denardo approached his instrument in the same way that his father had done, by learning from imitation and finding his own path via trial and error. In some regard, his father was likely his first instrumental instructor when he joined him in New York to work on a recording session. It is also probably the case that Ornette's friends Ed Blackwell and Billy Higgins offered some tutelage to the boy during his summer visits. In some cases, Denardo's choices of phrasing resemble those made by Blackwell in previous ensembles; this is evidence that he was listening to his father's music either in person or on recordings. By deeply listening to his playing, it is also clear that he was influenced by other masters of free jazz drumming, most notably Sunny Murray, in his use of percussive color behind the other musicians.

It is also a frequently neglected fact that Denardo was the original drummer for Prime Time when Ornette was first conceptualizing the group in the mid-70s and had even gone to Europe on tour with the band. Ronald Shannon Jackson replaced him on the recording sessions for *Dancing in Your Head* when he needed to return to his studies for his senior year in high school. Even so however, Denardo was always Ornette's first choice for a drummer whenever he needed someone to fill in.

Ornette's preference for performing with Denardo certainly was influenced by their relationship as father and son, but there is another dimension as well. As Denardo had spent more time with his father than any of the musicians from any of his groups had, he also held a

more intimate knowledge of Ornette's music including his harmolodic theory. As previously mentioned, the decision to include Denardo on *The Empty Foxhole* was an attempt to perform with a musician who was unencumbered by traditional techniques and thus was free to play only a representation of himself. By 1975, Denardo had combined that pure harmolodic style with elements of jazz drumming that he had acquired by listening to others. While he had gained skill in a traditional sense, he also maintained the memory of working within a freely improvised ensemble, giving him a unique position as a hybrid of the avant-garde and more mainstream styles. Denardo was the only one of his father's collaborators that played this music *before* adopting more orthodox designs. He had been raised with the music and perhaps saw an easier method of incorporating traditional techniques into his own playing than those who had started in bebop. Ornette probably articulated this point the best when he said, "Denardo is something else! I can write a tune with seven bars and he'll play the right thing every time."⁷⁷ Denardo's familiarity with his father's music is largely his greatest strength. Having a harmolodic education before a traditional one certainly had its benefits.

Overall, by a thorough look at the impressions that Ornette has left on his sidemen, we can see a distinctive pattern emerging. It would seem that Ornette is very skillful in selecting musicians that will help to produce the best overall performance of his music in reference to his overall artistic vision. Much like other bandleaders including his contemporary Miles Davis, Ornette can be seen as a mentor and a teacher in addition to being the leader of the group. But the learning experience seems to be a two-way process, as a few of his musicians have had a profound impact on the direction that he would take in his new music. Most of the musicians from Prime Time had lived with him at one time or another and eaten at his table. Naturally, a very deep relationship was established that went beyond simply being musical colleagues. This type of environment was essential for the creative growth of Ornette's music; only by knowing

⁷⁷ Ibid. 118.

each other inside and out could these performers attempt to create something meaningful and powerful solely through collective improvisation. The musicians that Ornette played with were his own society and his own form of the Joujouka phenomenon. He had selected them and worked with them for specific purposes, the most important of these being that they were true to the same musical vision. As Bern Nix says,

...the thing about playing with Ornette is he gets you back in contact with why you wanted to play music in the first place. Because it felt good and it seemed like fun. Somewhere along the line you got into all these rules and regulations and it became a discipline. Plus, you want to make a statement of your own. And there's the interaction with other musicians in something that's larger than music—especially when it starts getting good, you're caught up in something that's bigger than you are. See, Ornette is one of the few musicians you can play with who, whenever you play with, you learn something.⁷⁸

Ornette had expanded the musical philosophies of all the musicians that he had worked with. After spending time in his ensembles they would also set out to leave their own impressions on the jazz landscape.

⁷⁸ Howard Mandel, *Miles, Ornette, Cecil: Jazz Beyond Jazz* (New York: Routledge 2008) 158.

4.0 ANALYSIS

4.1 AN EXPLANATION OF ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGY

The best known early analysis of Ornette Coleman's music comes in Ekkhard Jost's *Free Jazz* published in 1975. In this volume, Jost devises taxonomy for classifying Coleman compositions containing two distinct categories: pieces based on bebop models, and those that can be considered "genuine" original themes due to their unique structure of melodic, rhythmic and emotionally heterogeneous segments.

The first category of "Post-Bop Themes," as defined by Jost, includes Ornette's works that can be considered to be dependent on the phraseology of bebop material—in other words, pieces in which the phrase structure is bebop-derived but which exhibit one specific effect of Ornette's musical conception, that the shape of the phrases alone dictates the form. Whereas most musicians in the bebop school still often placed even asymmetrical phrases into a 4/4 time signature and a 12-, 16- or 32-bar form, the structure and meter of Ornette's pieces of this variety are created by the shape of the musical phrase.

Jost uses the piece "Mind and Time" as an example of this type of construction. As the listener may note, the theme sounds bebop-oriented but in the place of a regular phrase structure Ornette just plays the melody however he feels. Jost transcribes the melody into one eleven-and-a-half bar phrase, and mentions that since Ornette does not count the second half of the final measure, the repeated phrase would place the opening note on beat three rather than beat one, thus displacing the entire melody by two beats and making bar lines in the

transcription meaningless.⁷⁹ The overall effect is somewhat jarring for the inexperienced listener but was almost immediately recognized as “hip” (“Chronology,” “Bird Food,” “Jayne” etc.) by several of Ornette’s contemporaries, resulting in the acceptance of his compositions long before his improvisational style was ever more than tolerated. The transcribed theme to “Bird Food” (1959) in Figure 4 illustrates this concept.



Figure 4: The bebop-derived theme of “Bird Food” (1959) exhibits a structure of 9.5 bars. If repeated, the melody would therefore be displaced by two beats according to the listener’s perception.

As a side note, an unintended consequence of these forms may have been a partial reason for Ornette’s break from using chord-playing instruments in the late 1950s. That is, if the melody is never in the same musical space, bebop-schooled musicians playing the written chord changes will clash with the melody of the tune if they fail to follow Ornette’s leadership exactly. This may have generated some difficulty for the rhythm sections at the jam sessions that Ornette played at in his early career, as well as for the record-industry band (with Shelly Manne) that was originally intended to accompany him on the first Contemporary records; the

⁷⁹ Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (Vienna: Da Capo, 1975) 57.

idea that musicians didn't know how to play "with" Ornette may have had just as much to do with his rejection as his improvisatory style did.

The second group of compositions is defined by the parameters of what Jost considers to be a "Coleman theme." This is a type of piece that was written most commonly in the early 1960s in which the steady beat phases in and out and the melody is sometimes accentuated by the drums. The overall structure of such pieces is then based on several contrasting motivic ideas. Jost uses the piece "Congeniality" to demonstrate this stylistic direction, and alludes to the complexity of the piece's overall feel: "The expression emanating from this sequence of rhythms is neither happy, nor sad, nor hectic, but all three together. It is up to the improviser to choose from the reservoir of emotional content. 'Congeniality,' therefore, is a jazz theme in the truest sense of the word."⁸⁰ This idea of several contrasting elements composing one overall theme is a commonality among many of Ornette's early pieces. Besides "Congeniality," category two would also contain compositions like "Peace" and "Una Muy Bonita." Jost comments that this method of composition could be dubbed the "Coleman theme" much to the effect of the term "Parker theme" which has already been accepted into the jazz canon. The composition "Peace" has been transcribed and annotated to illustrate its contrasting sections (see Figure 5 on page 66).

⁸⁰ Ibid. 58-59.



Figure 5: The tune “Peace” (1959) displays several contrasting phrases in the style of what Jost calls a “Coleman Theme.” Section 1: A bebop style melody played in 4/4 time accentuated by bass and percussion beginning on the low B. Section 2: A melody played in free time with no rhythm section. Section 3: Played in time by all instruments. Section 2b and 3b: played the same way as their counterparts but sequenced down a semitone. Section 4: Played in time with a walking bass line and steady time kept in the drums on the second half.

In addition to discussing both of these main categories for Ornette’s compositions, Jost also devotes a considerable amount of space to dissection of the free improvisations found on recordings like *Free Jazz* and the music of the trio with David Izenzon and Charles Moffett. During his analysis of the 36-minute piece on *Free Jazz*, Jost comments that the work does not necessarily need to be viewed as a single monolithic creation but instead a series of “complexes” each led by a different soloist but connected by ensemble passages. In addition to this he determines that the tonal center and tempo are also more or less “agreed upon” as is the fundamental rhythm played by Ed Blackwell and Charlie Haden. This structural concept is reinforced by the liner notes to *Free Jazz* in which Williams mentions that some of the ensemble passages in the work are written out, or partially improvised “harmonic unisons,”⁸¹ in which the

⁸¹ Ornette’s idea of a harmonic unison, as mentioned earlier, is not the same as the textbook definition that most musicians and scholars would adhere to. Unison in Western music is defined as a sounding of the same pitch or sequence of pitches in a homorhythmic motion. By contrast, a “Coleman Unison” can be thought of as closer to the dictionary definition of “sounding at once, a concord.” The individual pitches do not necessarily matter.

players are provided simple melodic material that is given neither metric nor rhythmic direction. The task is then, as Jost observes, for the musicians in the ensemble to be ready to interact and respond to one another as new ideas are introduced by the individual soloists. The music can then systematically change and evolve based on the group's total cooperation rather than be dictated by one specific voice as in earlier styles of jazz.

Jost's investigations into Ornette's music, however, end in 1970, and it is unlikely that he could have predicted the stylistic directions that Ornette would take in the coming decade. It is worth mentioning though that Jost's original theoretical framework forms the basis of several other scholars' attempts at analyzing free jazz. Notable among works by these scholars are Michael Bruce Cogswell's *Melodic Organization In Four Solos by Ornette Coleman* (1989), Michael Block's *Pitch Class Transformations in Free Jazz* (1990), and Lynette Westendorf's *Analyzing Free Jazz* (1994). Yet, the former of these titles does not discuss Ornette's compositional practices in any real detail and none of them go beyond Ornette's work in 1960.

The next major innovation in understanding Ornette's compositions would then be found in Peter Niklas Wilson's *Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music* (1999), which expands on the taxonomy outlined in Jost's original explorations.

According to Niklas Wilson, Jost's previous observations are adequate for dealing with Ornette's work up until 1973, but the expanded repertoire of the music after that point calls for a more finely tuned method of classification. He then gives us his more detailed system that expands the two classes into five. By his organization, all Coleman compositions would then be divided by their method of creation via usage of one of the following elements: (1) post-bop themes, (2) rubato themes, (3) combinations of 1 and 2, (4) modular themes, and (5) endless riffs.

Class 1 is simply a re-articulation of Jost's initial observation, meaning a theme that is derived from bebop, but not played in a bebop style resulting once again in the angular melody

directing the structure of the piece itself. Niklas Wilson's class two however, is a new addition not completely explored in Jost's conception.

Niklas Wilson states that the "second class" of compositions is in fact a subdivision of Jost's paradigm of "genuine Coleman themes" but is comprised solely of pieces in which the melody of the piece is created by a series of slow moving, "rubato" material in the wind instruments (or later guitars, bass etc.), with freely pulsating time played by the drums. He also gives this category a secondary name as the "Coleman ballad" group, and selects "Broken Shadows" and "Lonely Woman" as examples.

The subdivision of these "Coleman ballads" is a good idea in theory, as by their separation we can determine the method of composition of the work as well as the general mood of the piece in question. However, problems arise in the creation of the third category, or what Niklas Wilson refers to as "combinations" of the first two.

In his explanation of category three, Niklas Wilson is somewhat brief. He merely defines this grouping as containing themes that utilize elements of both categories one and two. He gives the reader the example of "Congeniality" to illustrate his point, as it does contain contrasting motivic ideas. However, Jost defines "Congeniality" as a "genuine Coleman theme," a work that is not necessarily bebop-derived, and concludes that its effectiveness stems from the variety of the metric and rhythmic material as opposed to the utilization of one thematic line played in different musical space each time. Furthermore, Niklas Wilson fails to identify which elements can be taken from either category. Does this only apply to the main motive in the wind instruments or can the rhythm instruments also participate in the morphology? Can it still be classified as category three if the drums do not keep time in the faster moving sections as they would in a "post-bop" Coleman tune? What about when the percussion accents the melody in a "rubato" section rather than playing a "clear or even implicit beat?" Even Niklas Wilson's example piece, "Congeniality," has sections containing both of these phenomena! Can it really

be considered to be just a combination of the two previously mentioned groups, or is there actually more to the piece?

This is also increasingly problematic with a composition like “Peace” (see Figure 5), which contains melodies that are not necessarily rubato, but *do* have bebop-type phrase structures and time played in the rhythm section. Perhaps a better name for this category would be “contrasting thematic models,” or something to that effect.

The creation of Niklas Wilson’s third category does raise an important point though, specifically, that there *are* Coleman compositions that exhibit combinations of his different stylistic models, but in order to recognize them one still needs a firm understanding of the final two subcategories as well.

Niklas Wilson’s fourth class of Coleman composition is the “modular theme,” by which is meant a piece that is based on one or more phrases played and then repeated in another tonal center. In other words, this is a thematic structure based on melodic sequencing. Pieces of this type include “Check Out Time,” “Macho Woman” (see Figure 6 on page 70) and “Perfection,” the latter being a piece never recorded by Ornette but documented on the album *Tenors* by David Murray (1995). The material Ornette is working with in pieces such as these is often short and inconsequential. Only through the sequence is the listener able to understand the work as a cohesive statement. One drawback to these forms, Niklas Wilson appropriately notes, is the tendency of the tune to fall into cliché. Ornette avoids this in many instances, however, by incorporating ideas from other compositional styles, or increasing/decreasing tempos in the separate repetitions of the main motive, or inverting intervals in repeating rhythms.

exploring his harmolodic concept in several different contexts even before the Joujouka experience.

The following analysis section provides a detailed study of several pieces from Ornette's repertoire from the 1970s in order to demonstrate the extreme versatility of his improvisational and compositional practices. In their creation, I have drawn from the established tradition of western musical analysis as well as from those of Jost and Wilson. In addition, I have also created several spectrograms of the Coleman recordings in order to display the distinct characteristics of the individual ensembles but also to form a comparative study between the work of the Prime Time group and the music of Joujouka. It is my intent to show that although the Moroccan experience is frequently cited as the model for Ornette's search for a new direction, it is also largely possible that Ornette was already entering a highly experimental period and that the music of the Master Musicians served as more of a justification and catalyst than as a inceptive element. This examination will also frame the 1970s as a transitional period for Ornette Coleman and a near-realization of his own musical goals.

4.2 ORNETTE'S MUSIC FOR VOICE FROM *SCIENCE FICTION*

During the *Science Fiction* sessions, Ornette began to add new colors and timbres to his compositional repertoire. The most striking of these colors is undoubtedly the inclusion of singers Asha Puthli and Webster Armstrong who appear on two tracks each. Armstrong's takes, as previously mentioned, were not released until 1982 on the *Broken Shadows* LP but both of Puthli's recordings made the original record.

While Peter Niklas Wilson dismisses the vocal works as "irritating," there is much more to these pieces than one might guess at first glance. First of all, most of the instrumental pieces on the record follow methods that Coleman had already explored in his earlier music. The forms

and ensemble are similar to those of the original 1959 quartet as well as the music from the early 1960s. Most of the compositions utilize either of the “Coleman theme formulas” discussed earlier or methods of collective improvisation in some capacity. The only exceptions are “Rock the Clock,” in which Dewey Redman plays the musette, and “Broken Shadows,” where the instruments solo over the head of the tune one by one while the other musicians play the melody in unison. But these concepts had previously been explored on the album *Crisis*. Therefore, the five tracks that utilize vocals are the first conceptually new creative material that Ornette had produced for nearly three years.

Secondly, it is frequently overlooked that this is Ornette’s first real experiment with vocal music. His utilization of voices is unique, as he had never written for singers before. It could be argued that Ornette had previously worked with Yoko Ono, but their collaborations were largely centered on her artistic visions rather than his own.⁸² On the other hand, it is possible that the challenges that Ono presented to conventional vocal practice influenced Ornette’s usage of voices (particularly Puthli’s) in these compositions. The Armstrong recordings are also peculiar because of the inclusion of the guitar and piano. Ornette had not done a recording under his own name that included a pianist since 1958,⁸³ and up to this point had never really worked with a guitarist in any capacity. All of which is evidence of his search for a new musical direction.

Lastly, Ornette’s approaches to the vocal tracks varied slightly from his treatment of instruments. It is important to mention here that the vocal tracks (except for “Science Fiction”) have a closer relationship to traditional forms than the other compositions. In both of Puthli’s tracks the melodies could be considered modified strophic. Similarly, Armstrong sings an almost standard 12-bar blues (“Good Girl Blues”) and an AABC form (“Is It Forever?”). The lyrics,

⁸² In 1968, Ornette appeared on one live recording with the Plastic Ono band. The track on which he appears, “Aos,” is a group improvisation featuring the unorthodox vocals that the singer is known for. Ornette and the members of his group are mostly in the background of the piece.

⁸³ The only recording that Ornette had appeared on that used piano during the 1960s was a Jackie Mclean date that produced *New and Old Gospel* in 1967.

combined with the ensemble's instrumentation and effects, give the feeling of pop songs from an alternate universe. In this sense, Ornette has also extended his repertoire to embrace earlier, more mainstream-oriented forms but in doing so has added his own personal spin on the styles in question.

The songs that Puthli is featured on include two compositions, the first of which is the opening track of the album, obviously placed up front in order to showcase Ornette's new sound on his first studio recording in five years. The tracks, entitled "What Reason Could I Give?" (1) and "All My Life" (6), are the world's first exposure to Coleman compositions for voice.

"What Reason Could I Give?" is a modified strophic form containing frequent embellishments after the first statement of the subject. The meter is not apparent and, although it is likely 4/4 by the patterns of Blackwell's and Higgins' drumming, there is no set tempo for the piece. It seems that either Ornette or Puthli is cueing when the next phrase should be played. The lyrics to the piece and the basic phrase structure are displayed in Figures 8 and 9.

Strophe 1

What reason could I give
to live?
Only that
I love you
How many times
must I die
for love?
Only when
I'm without you.
Where will the clouds be
if not in the sky,
when I die?

Strophe 2

What reason could I give
to live?
Only that
I love you
How many times
must I die
for love?
Only when
I'm without you.
Where will the clouds be
if not in the sky,
when I die?

Coda

What reason could I give
to live?
Only that
I love you

Figure 8: Lyrics to "What Reason Could I Give" (1971)

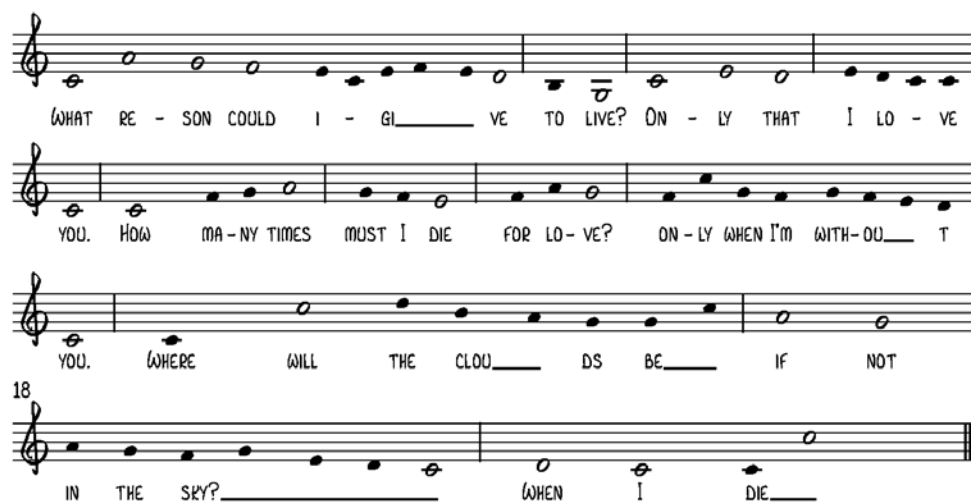


Figure 9: Phrase structure of “What Reason Could I Give?” (1971)

The vocalist embellishes the melody in each strophe but the last time the form is cut so that the song ends on the phrase, “I love you.” The phrasing remains the same in the second strophe despite several interjections from the wind instruments and variation on the original melody.

The instrumental parts are not in themselves particularly interesting. For the most part they merely follow the singer but do add occasional rhythmic and melodic variation. In several instances an instrumental voice will enter before or end after the singer or continue a melodic phrase past the intended cut off point to add more dramatic effect. This also leads to the assumption that there is no real tempo or time signature and that the phrases are conducted by Ornette as he leads the ensemble in the studio, not necessarily an uncommon practice. The musicians are then free to take the written lines in any direction that they feel is appropriate.

This leads to the most important characteristic of both of Puthli's vocal tracks on *Science Fiction*: there are no improvised instrumental solos. In fact, most of the new ground that Ornette is breaking in these pieces is not necessarily in terms of compositional practice or improvisation. Instead, the main focus of these pieces is to experiment with ensemble sound.

When discussing the texture of the piece it then becomes necessary to mention that the lyrics in the work are somewhat difficult to decipher. This is undoubtedly because of the dense instrumental voices that surround the vocal melody. In addition to this, it is also unclear as to whether the instrumental parts are more or less important than the words in the vocal line or even perhaps which of them carries the original subject. But if we follow Ornette's "harmolodic" philosophy, the answer becomes all of them. As Ornette has repeatedly stated, the harmolodic method is one in which all instruments contribute equally to the music. As "What Reason Could I Give?" illustrates, this concept also applies to the vocalist. Asha Puthli isn't put out in front of the ensemble because she is an equal participant. The "irrelevant" lyrics that Wilson refers to in his album review are perhaps a result of a misunderstanding of this ideal. Also noteworthy are the several variations of textural elements present within the vocal pieces. Both compositions sung by Puthli use what may be the largest ensemble on the entire album consisting of voice, alto and tenor saxophone, two trumpets, bass and both drummers. But while "What Reason Could I Give?" showcases the entire group at once, "All My Life" breaks it into smaller sections. Again the words to the piece and the phrase structure are displayed on page 76 in Figures 10 and 11.

Strophe 1

I've waited all my life for you,
and now you're here. [break]
You never knew me though
I knew you long ago
Your name has been my love
always, and now,
I'm yours. [break]

Strophe 2

My heart and I agreed to wait
for you, I'm glad. [break]
It seems so long ago
Joy, that I never knew
Time never will exist for me
And you again [break]

Strophe 3 [Instrumental]

Strophe 4

My heart and I agreed to wait
for you, I'm glad.
It seems so long ago
Joy, that I never knew
Time never will exist for me
And you again

Strophe 5

I've waited all my life for you,
and now you're here.
You never knew me though
I knew you long ago

Coda

Your name has been my love
always
and now,
I'm yours.

Figure 10: Lyrics to “All My Life” (1971)

1.I'VE WAIT-ED ALL MY LIFE FOR YOU AND NOW YOU'RE HERE
2.MY HEART AND I A-GREED TO WAIT FOR YOU, I'M GLAD.
YOU NE-VER KNEW ME THOUGH I KNEW YOU LONG A-GO
IT SEEMS SO LONG AGO - O JOY, THAT I NEVER KNEW
YOUR NAME HAS BEEN MY LOVE AL - WAYS AND NOW I'M YOURS.
TIME NE VER WILL EX - IST FOR ME AND YOU A- GAIN.

Figure 11: The melodic phrase structure to “All My Life” (1971) as sung by Asha Puthli. Shorts and longs approximate. Barlines indicate pauses. Empty measures signify drum and bass fills.

Simply by looking at the lyrics, we can observe that once again Ornette has added a coda for the final ending, and again, there are no improvised solos during the piece. But there are also fewer embellishments in both the vocal and instrumental parts during “All My Life” than

in “What Reason Could I Give?” For the most part, the ensemble plays the parts as they are written, at least rhythmically (since it is difficult to tell if the harmonies were intended). Also, “All My Life” does have a very different and much more interesting usage of texture than the previous vocal piece. The beginning two strophes of “All My Life” are played with only Asha Puthli, Charlie Haden and one of the drummers. The third strophe is instrumental (Figure 12), and the last two involve the entire group and steadily build to a climactic ending in the coda.



Figure 12: The instrumental strophe from “All My Life.” Bar lines mark the end of phrases. Notice the absence of bass and drum fills in this section. Parallel 5ths are likely achieved by alto and tenor sax reading from the same score.

However, both pieces portray a use of extreme oppositions in texture and tone color. As the listener may already be aware, Asha Puthli is no ordinary jazz vocalist; her abilities to embellish the melodic character of both compositions likely stem from her knowledge of several musical styles including both traditional and popular Indian music. The decision to use her for the recording was therefore due to her abilities to use her voice like an instrument and blend with the ensemble. Throughout “What Reason Could I Give?” Puthli is almost always singing at

the same time as the wind instruments in what Ornette would refer to as “unison.” But the held notes contain a wide range of vibrato, which oscillates against the smooth sound of the reeds and brass. As the piece moves into the second strophe the embellishments become more frequent, and the vibrato also becomes wider and more energetic. Compare the spectrograms on page 81 (Figure 13) of Puthli singing the word “you” in the phrase “I love you” at the opening and its reincarnations during the second strophe and coda. The width of the vibrato can even be seen as a microcosm of the complete form of the piece, which builds in overall intensity throughout. The table of sonic oppositions within this piece (page 80) illustrates the formation of rising intensity through areas of increasingly heightened opposition. A listed description of these oppositions has been included below.⁸⁴

The sonic oppositions are defined as:

1. Sparse/Rich refers to the instrumentation; few sounds compared with many sounds. For example section A utilizes only voice and bass/drums while section B includes 4 wind instruments and the rhythm section.
2. Non-Spaced/Spaced is a description of the melodic phrasing of the piece. In other words, does the melody flow continuously, or does it leave gaps and pauses between specific phrases? All sections of the work leave these pauses, which are of varying length.
3. Soft/Loud is a description of the dynamic characteristics; either the section is of low or high amplitude. Since “low and high” are somewhat subjective terms, this category is relative.

⁸⁴ Further information on reading spectrograms and details about sonic oppositions can be found in Robert Cogan’s *New Images of Musical Sound* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984). This thesis primarily deals with the elements of ensemble texture explored in Cogan’s chapter on “Large Mixed Ensembles.” Cogan’s proscribed methodology has been modified and applied by the author during the compilation of this section.

4. Level/Oblique refers to the absence (level) or presence (oblique) of improvised embellishments and effects added to particular phrases that create improvised counterpoint within the melody instruments of the ensemble.
5. Steady/Wavering is a description of the treatment of pitch whether in the voice or in the instrumental lines that creates contrast against the other voices. For example the vocal vibrato in section C is wavering against the steady tone of the wind instruments. The tone is considered steady in the A section because there is no other contrasting instrumental sound playing the melody along with the vocalist.
6. No-Attack/Attack is not necessarily a description of whether or not the particular sound is attacked or not but whether the attack alters the sound in some fashion, for example a slide into a particular note vs. an exact or near-exact articulation.
7. No Reverberation/Reverberation is another relative term. Throughout the entire piece, studio reverb is added to the vocal track but it becomes more noticeable and defined in the later sections of the piece, as the instruments are faded into the background of the ensemble.

*Table of oppositions shown on page 80.

Oppositions: (-/+)	A	B	C	Coda
Sparse/Rich	-	+	+	+
Non-Spaced/Spaced	+	-,+	+	+
Soft/Loud	-	-	-,+	+
Level/Oblique	+	-,+	+	+
Steady/Wavering	-	+	+	+
No-Attack/Attack	+	-,+	+	+
No Reverberation/Reverberation	-	-	+	+
Totals	(-3)	(0)	(+6)	(+7)

Figure 13: The areas of sonic opposition in “All My Life” increase in each strophe and peak in the Coda of the piece.

Puthli’s treatment of specific vowel sounds is also unique, and may have contributed to her selection as the vocalist for the recording. Going back to the example of the word “you,” the relative absence of overtones on the spectrogram is peculiar and indicative of a “dark” or “cold” sound. However, upon listening to the recording, the vowel does not sound particularly “dark” in comparison to the surrounding tonalities. This is partially because of the overtones present in the instrumental sounds, but also largely a product of the warming effect of the widening vibrato. Compare the spectrogram images of Puthli’s vowels “uh” as in “love” and “oo” as in “you” in Figure 13. This ability to blend tonal colors with the instrumental voices is a distinct characteristic of Puthli’s approach and may have contributed greatly to her successful interpretations according to Ornette’s vision of the pieces in question.

Also interesting is the variety effects that Puthli chooses. She frequently moves between octaves but is also able to shift up or down in microtones and incorporate scoops and huge

glissandi into her improvised ornaments much to the same effect as Ornette's own saxophone lines. The note attacks of both Ornette and Asha Puthli are compared in Figure 15. (page 82)

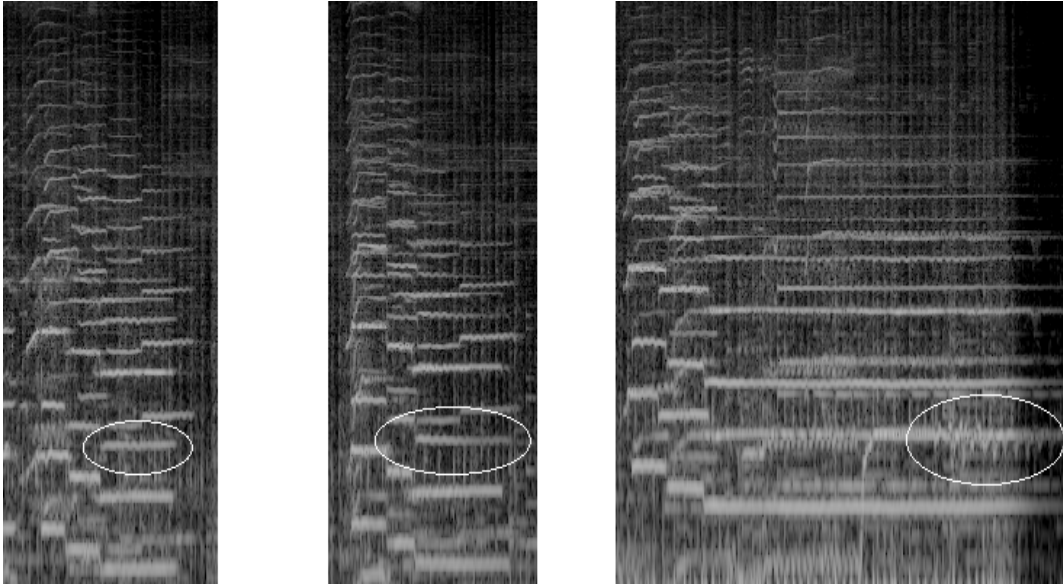


Figure 14: Circled sections highlight the increased intensity of the vibrato on the word “you” from the phrase “I love you” during the three repetitions in Puthli’s performance of “What Reason Could I Give?” Columbia 1971.

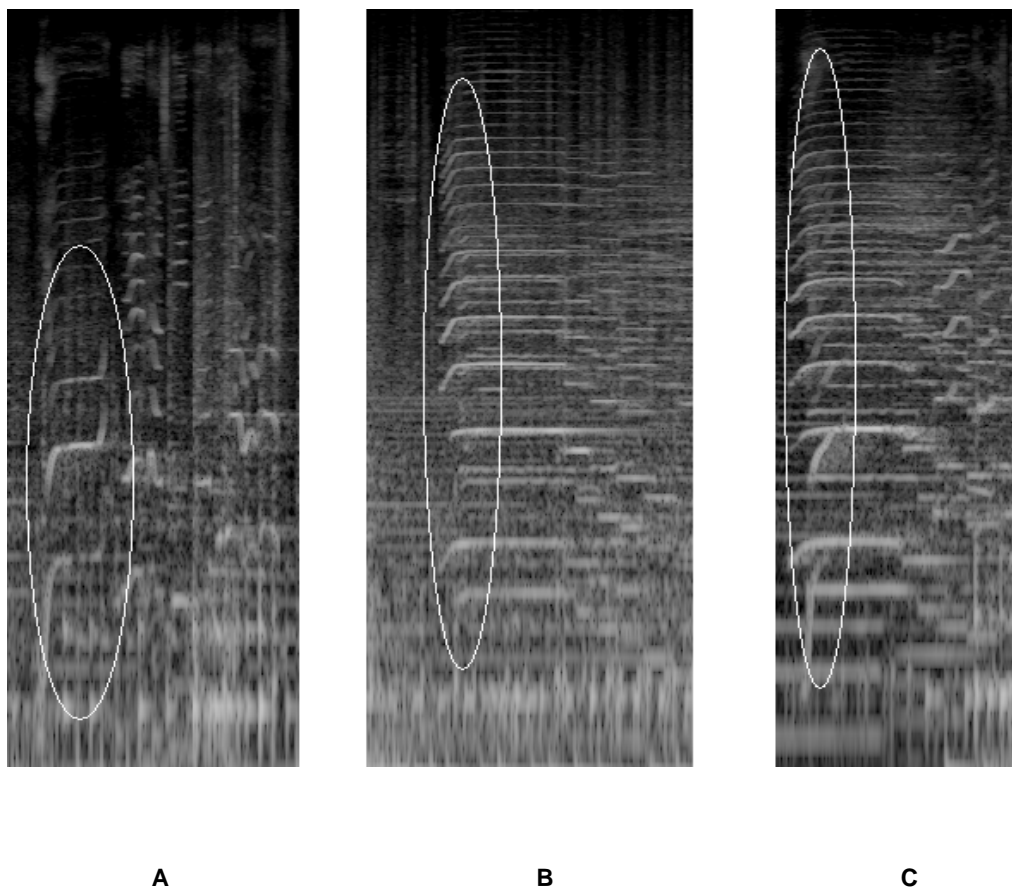


Figure 15: Puthli's attack (A) exaggerates the glissando effect of Ornette's (B). Both attacks on the same vocal syllable can be seen on the word "your" from the phrase "your name has been my love" (C). The compound distortion of the vocal line adds to the feeling of rising intensity in the piece.

As mentioned previously, both Wilson and Jost have discussed Ornette's music in regard to what is or is not a "genuine Coleman theme" or as Wilson further devises a "Coleman ballad" or a non-ballad type. Since neither of these pieces feature Jost's idea of contrasting phrase structure, both would likely qualify as "Coleman ballads." However, there are high levels of opposition in texture, timbre, tone color, sustained pitches and nearly every other area other than thematic material. It seems that Ornette felt that writing in the style typical of his earlier compositions would be too demanding for the vocalist, and instead opted for contrasting material through other methods. The unique sound generated by these recordings makes them

nearly indispensable for understanding Ornette's musical conventions. He is once again striving for the total sonic variety of a large ensemble.

4.3 CHANGING TEXTURES: PRIME TIME'S ELECTRIC APPROXIMATION OF JOUJOUKA

In the mid-1970s, Ornette decided to put his ambitions for orchestra on hold following the loss of funding for the recording of *Skies of America*. As mentioned earlier, his decision left him searching for other areas of exploration, which he then found in the remote Moroccan village of Joujouka. While there, he recorded several tracks with the local Master Musicians in a sanctified cave and came to the realization that he had been on the correct path all along. The Joujouka experience was, in a way, an affirmation of the harmolodic concept. The first Prime Time recordings on *Dancing in Your Head*, *Body Meta*, and *Of Human Feelings*, can all be considered to be examples of Ornette's desire to reach the same level of musical communication with western musicians and instruments.

The only recording from Joujouka ever released appears on the 1975 album *Dancing in Your Head* with the title "Midnight Sunrise," although it is likely that the piece already had a name in the Sufi tradition. It consists of an ensemble of local musicians playing indigenous instruments and Ornette on saxophone. Since it is not a Coleman composition, it becomes nearly impossible to employ the Jost-Wilson system of thematic typography. It is possible, however, to explain at least some of what is happening within the ensemble.

Overall, the structure of the music is created by the Master Musicians. According to Wilson, Ornette had previously devised a few melodic lines that seemed to fit with the music being played in the cave, but it is often difficult to tell what is improvised and what may have been previously composed. The piece initiates with a type of fanfare in the *ghaita*, an indigenous double-reed instrument, but Ornette does not enter until the percussive *tebel* begins

to mark the tempo. The musicians play together for the first few seconds but almost immediately begin to freely interpret the melody independent of each other while playing in microtones. The tebel pattern changes several times in order to mark a change in sections, during which the instruments readjust and shift their own melodies accordingly to mimic or expand on those of the percussion.

Ornette's lines seem to mimic those of the other instruments but he is out of phase with their melody. In addition, his smooth alto saxophone lines are a contrast to the reedy sound of the indigenous wind instruments. While the Master Musicians blend together very well, Ornette seems to stand out strongly.

But there are indications that the ensemble has reached a sincere level of communication. For example, Ornette's quick bebop-style lines at 1:30 are immediately followed by an abrupt change in tempo. The faster tempo remains for most of the remainder of the piece but the section from 3:00 to about 4:20 is certainly the most intense section of the music, during which it seems that all instruments are mimicking the frequently changing rhythmic patterns, which the percussion section uses as several brief ostinati. Ornette even works his solo around a particular rhythmic motive. In fact, the piece can essentially be assumed to be rhythm-driven, as all other instruments seem to adapt to the percussion part, which also adds ornamental figures to the established pattern. By creating such complex counterpoint out of merely listening to one another, the group seems to fulfill Ornette's vision of a freely improvising ensemble more so than any of his previous jazz excursions. There aren't as many contrasts in timbre in this piece as in the vocal works on *Science Fiction* but then again, Ornette isn't in charge of this ensemble. He is instead more of a participant than a leader. Upon returning to the States however, Ornette found a way to blend his orchestral ideas of sound with the lessons learned in Joujouka.

The other recording on *Dancing in Your Head* is one of the first of the Prime Time ensemble. Entitled "Theme from a Symphony," this work is essentially a new version of his

piece previously named both “School Work” and “Good Life,” the former appearing on *Science Fiction* and the later an orchestral arrangement from *Skies of America*. The influence of the Joujouka musicians on Ornette’s work can be seen almost immediately by examining the versions both before and after 1973.

The similar melodies of the two tunes are represented in Figure 16. While the melody stays mostly the same it is noteworthy that the later version completely removes the second section in favor of ensemble improvisation. It seems that Ornette had originally intended the contrasting melody and tempo to make a distinction between themes as in his earlier music, but abandoned the idea following his experience with improvised transitions. The resulting effect creates a degree of spontaneity unlike any in Ornette’s earlier music and allows the group to function as a collective unit similar to that of the Master Musicians.



Figures 16A and 16B: Melodies of A, “School Work (1971-1973) and B, Theme From A Symphony.” (1975) The two-bar C section is omitted in the later version of the piece.

If we combine the Jost/Wilson approach with this observation, there is an even larger distinction between the forms. By using the system of thematic typology, “Theme from a Symphony” can be determined to be of the category of “endless riffs” described in the opening section. However, upon analysis of its previous incarnation “School Work,” one can clearly see individual, contrasting phrases similar to the ideal of Jost’s “Coleman theme,” by listening to the approach taken toward each section by the individual members of the ensemble. Figure 17 shows the “School Work” melody divided into its distinct motives.

Section A could be said to have a “whimsical” quality; all instruments including percussion are playing together in unison rhythm. It gives way to B, which utilizes a wind section melody whilst the drums assume a pattern of keeping time and filling in the pauses. The remaining C section is taken at twice the initial tempo and provides a high level of contrast to the initial two statements. The triplet effect created in the drums is somewhat jarring to the listener as well. The piece also utilizes elements from the category of “modular themes” as Ornette constructs all three sections from melodic sequences, moving either up or down by step.



Figure 17: The thematic variety of “School Work” (1971) before its reduction and transformation on *Dancing in Your Head*.

The simplification of this and other Coleman compositions points to a fundamental shift in his musical thinking. Rather than composition, which he stated was his main goal in the late 1960s, Ornette has reinvented his performance identity in concurrence with the ideal of group interaction as the main focus of his music. The music created by these “riffs” is based solely on the concept of collective improvisation in reference to a melodic framework predetermined by Ornette, but also a rhythmic and harmonic substructure spontaneously created by the actions of the total ensemble.

If this observation is taken into account, Ornette’s music can be compared to that of the early African American brass bands in New Orleans near the turn of the 20th century, who also developed complex improvised music out of simple hymns or folk melodies. But as Gunther Schuller mentioned, Ornette was (at least in the 1960s) largely unfamiliar with jazz history. Therefore, his first real exposure to riff based music could have happened in Joujouka.

The music of *Prime Time* would then lose complexity from a compositional standpoint but gain it in terms of the contrapuntal practice of their improvisations. This simplification can be heard again on *Body Meta*, by a greater presence of steady time in the percussion during the opening themes and the stagnant riffing of Charles Ellerbee.

A similar composition to “Theme from a Symphony” appears on *Body Meta* in the form of “Macho Woman,” a free funk-type piece with a clear, modular tune. The melody is carried in the saxophone and lead guitar (which sometimes plays harmonically) while the drums are keeping time, and the bass freely improvises eighth-note patterns around the main motive presented in Figure 18 on the following page.



Figure 18: Main motive of “Macho Woman,” (1975) as played in the saxophone and lead guitar.

We can clearly see here what Ornette means when he says that “everyone else is free, and I’m the one who is stuck.” While Coleman and Nix are performing this pattern, Ellerbee is working in several punches of chromatic chords and slick glissandos to end the phrases. Tacuma’s bass is equally contrapuntal, opting to mimic the melody in places but never quite play it in exactly the same places as the instruments that carry the main line. Even Nix frequently deviates from what Ornette is doing, both in terms of pitch and length of held notes. When the melody repeats, it does so in true Coleman fashion, refusing to rest for any specific number of beats before it begins again at the top of the form.

In this composition it is obvious that Ornette is making a transition between his former method of composition and his new, Jouvouka inspired one. The ensemble still uses a composed introduction, but is getting closer to the level of total ensemble improvisation.

Another piece from *Body Meta* demonstrates a different utilization of these ideas. The final track, “European Echoes,” is a throwback to Ornette’s earlier work with Charles Moffet and David Izenzon in his trio during the late 1960s. However, it is restructured for Prime Time as a freakishly distorted waltz, with a chiming electric guitar and a boisterous rhythm section of Jackson and Tacuma, a far cry from Izenzon’s beautiful bowing timbre on *At the Golden Circle*.

The piece once again features Ornette's contrasting phrases but leaves the bass and guitar parts open to create counterpoint as well as improvised harmony. The main theme and examples of bass counterpoint are transcribed below.

The image displays two musical staves for the piece "European Echoes". The first system, marked "AD. LIB", shows the initial 3/4 measure. The Alto Sax part begins with a melodic phrase. The Electric Guitar and Bass parts provide a harmonic and rhythmic foundation with sustained notes and a walking bass line. The second system, marked "FREELY", starts at measure 6 and shows more complex improvisation, with the saxophone playing a more active melody and the bass providing a more intricate counterpoint.

Figure 19: The melody of “European Echoes” with added examples of improvised counterpoint by the bass and sustained rhythm guitar backgrounds. Bass lines noted above are not played precisely as written and motives are utilized in different places during separate repetitions.

Just like, “Theme from a Symphony,” “European Echoes” has been developed into a riff-based melody. Ornette's greater interest in writing these types of themes can only reaffirm his objective of creating music that is based on the model of an improvising ensemble. This paradigmatic shift in Ornette's thinking was indebted, at least in part, to the musical experiences in Joujouka where he participated in an ensemble whose primary focus was to develop a cohesive piece of music out of the amalgamation of several individual motives combined with the signals of the percussive instruments. Ornette has evolved his earlier idea of contrasting phrases into a formal typography created solely out of sporadic changes in tempo that occur

through ensemble interaction. His part is now the pivot point around which the group cycles through several unique colors, textures and harmonies.

However, there is material on *Body Meta* that has even less to do with the style of Ornette's early music and takes a still different approach. The piece "Voice Poetry" for example uses a method of layering to create ensemble counterpoint, a method that had not previously been applied to Ornette's music, but something he was obviously familiar with via his work with rhythm and blues bands during his early career. It starts out with a simple drum pattern, which is joined by the rhythm guitar and eventually followed by Nix's lead playing the main melody. The resulting polyrhythm is more indicative of rock and roll or even something from Miles Davis's *Live Evil* record than any of Ornette's earlier music. The rhythmic vamp is transcribed in Figure 20.

The musical score is written for two staves: 'ELECTRIC GUITAR 2' and 'DRUM SET'. The time signature is 4/4. The first system shows the guitar with a whole rest and the drums with a pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes. The second system shows a '3' above the first staff, indicating a triplet, with a melodic line in the guitar and a corresponding drum pattern. The third system continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns.

Figure 20: The rhythmic vamp and staggered entrance to "Voice Poetry" (1975)

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible that Prime Time was fueled partially by Ornette's desire to connect with audiences again through his music. While his previous compositions had been some of the most controversial works in jazz history, the structure of

“Voice Poetry” is just one example of how the simplification of forms could create both an interesting array of free improvisation and an easily accessible “groove.” The listener will undoubtedly recognize the return of a fixed meter during the opening segments of several of Ornette’s pieces.

The transformation becomes even more pronounced on *Of Human Feelings* as the ensemble uses several riff structures combined with the elements of upbeat funk tunes. Overall, it is possible to describe *Of Human Feelings* as the first Prime Time record to completely achieve all aspects of Ornette’s new ensemble vision. The music is fresh, lively and uses concepts that are easily accessible to rock listeners, in addition to freely improvised sections. The motive of “Times Square” for instance is a simple pattern of five notes that repeats sporadically, and is restructured, modified and sequenced through different key areas. Similarly, the theme of “Sleep Talk” is phrased several different ways, repeatedly stretched to various lengths and played in multiple instruments. The tracks could be viewed as Ornette’s approach to a purely improvised form of minimalism.

Overall, Ornette has expanded his compositional repertoire to include a skill set unlike that of any jazz musician before or since. While he had always aspired to an orchestral sound quality, the electric music of Prime Time proved to be an invaluable discovery in terms of exploring the Joujouka concepts, while simultaneously connecting to his own roots in rhythm and blues. Also, the wide array of riff-based compositions allows for the ensemble to freely interpret the music in several different ways, resulting in a unique presentation of the theme in every occurrence. Ornette had reached his goal of a freely improvising electric ensemble by 1979. Yet, a recording made in 1978 would bring him back to a concept that he had first explored nearly twenty years before Prime Time.

4.4 HARMOLODICS IN ACTION ON “MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN”

Soapsuds, Soapsuds, the 1978 record of duets that Ornette made with Charlie Haden, is an interesting addition to his catalogue. While Ornette had endeavored throughout most of his career to work with larger and larger ensembles, here is a situation in which he is placed in the smallest possible environment for musical cooperation.

Haden mentions in his liner notes to the album that he had wanted to record his duets with Ornette ever since they had first played together back in 1957. The material recorded consists of rubato ballad-type themes with the exception of “*Soapsuds*” which utilizes more of a bebop idiom. However, it is not necessarily the formal structures of the individual Coleman tunes that make this album significant. It is, rather, the textural quality of the ensemble, and the fact that for the first time Ornette has chosen to record on his own album someone else’s music, the theme from the TV soap opera, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. His interpretation of this music can perhaps give us a definitive example of the harmolodic approach.

One can only wonder why Ornette had chosen to record this piece. The sappy melodrama of the TV theme’s original string arrangement seems well suited to the form of entertainment for which it served as an introduction, but bears hardly any resemblance to anything in Ornette’s collective of works. Likewise, both the harmonic scheme and form of the piece are nothing particularly interesting. The introductory phrase enters on a long glissando and runs through a series of eight bars in the dominant. The main theme is brought in after a ritardando in the established key of D major and plays for 16 measures, grouped into four, four-bar phrases, the second of which ends on a half cadence. It might be assumed that the last phrase would give us the perfect authentic cadence, but it is impossible to tell due to the studio fade out. The only areas that seem to break up the lush chord voicings in the orchestration are the ritardando and diminuendo at the end of the introduction, which contain a refreshing change in timbre to a woodwind flourish, and the nagging call of a female actor shouting out “Mary

Hartman, Mary Hartman,” in the middle of the same passage. To put it simply, this is simple music for a simple purpose, a typical TV show introduction. It captures the mood of the parody soap opera completely.

Ornette chooses a different direction in his version of the piece. Just by listening it is clear that a great deal has changed, not only in the orchestration but in the formal structure as well. The eight-bar introductory phrase has been shortened to nearly half its original length, from 22 seconds down to a mere 12. Charlie Haden’s plucked bass serves as the solo instrument to display both the melodic and harmonic material for that entire section, as Ornette’s only contribution is to echo the actress’s call. The complete introductory phrase is transcribed in Figure 21.

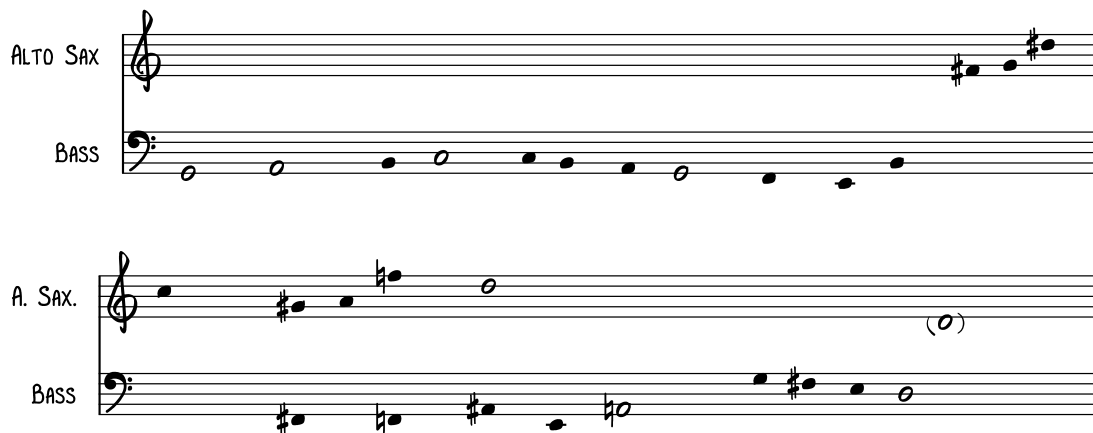


Figure 21: Introductory phrase to “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman” (1978). The bass plays the main line and the saxophone mimics the actress’s call by sequencing the rhythmic material by step.

However, just in this short section we can see two pillars of the harmolodic theory unfolding. By having Haden play the opening section unaccompanied, Ornette must have decided that the melody of the tune was more important than any predetermined harmonic structures. Thus, like in his earlier music, the melody will determine the harmony of this

particular piece through the interactions of the individual performers. Peter Niklas Wilson also takes note of this type of phenomenon in Ornette's music. In his chapter on harmolodics, he refers to it under the basic tenet that harmony is "self created." In this example, Haden is creating his own harmony as he hears it, not based on a written structure.

The second area of harmolodics represented in this passage can be found in Ornette's approach to the previously vocalized fragment. Rather than simply repeat the motive, he chooses to sequence the statement up a whole step. This is consistent with the idea that Ornette determines the quality of musical intervals to be more important than their relationship to a tonic key area. By improvising the statement in sequence he is approximating the emphasis that the human voice places on repetition but also asserting a development of melodic material and the intervallic structure of the musical statement.

After the main theme to the piece enters, a third area of the harmolodic approach manifests almost immediately: the absence of meter. Ornette and Haden interpret the melody freely, a huge contrast to the sweeping, almost dancelike, quickness of the original version. This is a characteristic that Ornette has employed since his first recordings for Contemporary in 1958. The rubato-like structure of Coleman themes is largely the most recognizable characteristic and has been discussed thoroughly in several analyses of "Lonely Woman," and other pieces. By incorporating this compositional practice (see Figure 22), Ornette has transformed "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" into one of his own themes.



Figure 22: Ornette's reconstruction of the theme to "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" (1978). The bar lines group the melody into four rubato/ballad type phrases. Short and long notes are approximated.

The fourth harmolodic characteristic occurs in the first line of the repeated theme. Ornette plays this phrase an octave lower than during its introduction. This “free choice” of register, is mentioned briefly in Wilson’s text and refers to the ability of the performer to seek out his or her own place in the musical creation and the value of intervallic relationships versus preconceived harmonic structures. By taking the phrase down one octave, Ornette is asserting his own musical direction as more important than that of the written melody. The second repetition of the theme is given a different treatment and develops a unique character as a result of this subtle change. Charlie Haden adapts to the lower notes on the saxophone almost instantly by playing a more subdued bass line and leaving his attacks sparse as to allow the melody to come through clearly. The concept is seen again in the piece’s closing statement in which, for the last two phrases, Ornette moves the melody up a fifth rather than continuing in the key of D. In harmolodics a simple gesture of variation can cause a dramatic effect through the medium of free ensemble interaction.

Once the theme has concluded, a fifth characteristic can be observed in the beginning of the solo section. An upbeat blues almost immediately replaces the slow, melancholy theme. Ornette, in nearly all of his previous ensembles utilized this idea of a sudden shift in tempo, but it is found mostly in his trio work from the late 1960s. Here it is obvious that Ornette is using this effect to create a contrast between the composed theme of the tune and the improvised section. The difference in tempos on “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman” can hardly be considered to be as extreme as those of some of Ornette’s earlier works, but the fundamental principle still remains valid.

While all of these topics have been commented on in some form by other scholars, it seems appropriate to use a tune like “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman” as a type of harmolodic measuring stick. Ornette’s approach to composition and improvisation is unique, and that one can only gain so much from analyzing his compositions without gaining perspective from the context of the time period. After awhile, it becomes possible to find a formulaic approach as

Peter Niklas Wilson has done, but in only looking at works composed by Coleman, he has not necessarily accurately described Ornette's methodology. This piece is therefore exclusive in being a Coleman theme created out of a non-Coleman theme. The insight that it gives us can provide a window into Ornette's treatment of form and his own harmolodic world.

4.5 ORNETTE'S APPROACH TO THE SAXOPHONE

"Bird would have understood us. He would have approved of our aspiring to something beyond what we inherited"⁸⁶ –Ornette Coleman.

Several scholars have also discussed Ornette's unique approach to playing the saxophone. In jazz circles, the area of his overall technique still remains somewhat controversial, and while his influence on the genre is now almost undisputable, several detractors in the ranks of musicians and critics have remained. The controversy stems in part from the techniques that Ornette employs on his instrument that musicians seem to either show reserved appreciation for, or dismiss as the inability to play correctly. Mostly, these opinions were a reaction to the challenge posed by the existence of the quartet in the early 1960s, and because the notion of someone sweeping into New York, and taking over, with almost zero credibility in terms of industry connections and recognition among other musicians was somewhat threatening. However, it can be stated that the musicians noted the unorthodox methods of Ornette Coleman's improvisations almost immediately and made their own judgments based upon what they perceived as weakness.

⁸⁶ Ken Burns, *Jazz, Episode 9: The Adventure*, PBS, 2000.

By and large, the criticism of Ornette's playing usually follows one of three patterns. First is the assertion that the group, but specifically Coleman, lacks the ability or even the desire to play in tune with other instruments. This results in a cataclysmic dissonance in the ensemble that is unbearable to those unaccustomed to listening to such music.

The second allegation is that Ornette has little or no skill whatsoever in playing the instrument in regards to proper fingering technique or embouchure position. For the most part, these criticisms point to the fact that Coleman's compositions, though often performed at breakneck speed, do not have the harmonic complexity of the pieces performed by Charlie Parker. Thus, Ornette has never needed to demonstrate his technical skills in any real capacity. He has not undertaken the traditional route of being "tested" in jam sessions or in a big band and therefore his skills are unproven. This is frequently combined with the mention of several recorded examples during which Ornette squeaks on the saxophone or produces any other type of sound that might be determined to be unpleasant to the listener. These instances were frequently cited in numerous bad jokes from the early 1960s.

The third major attack on Ornette's playing stems mostly from older musicians, and critics from decades before Ornette's arrival on the New York jazz scene. Overall, the focus of this assertion is that neither his playing nor compositions have anything to do with the musical tradition of jazz. In other words, this specific group attempted to single out Ornette as an example of everything "not to do" in order to play this music. Musicians of this camp would frequently decry that this music had established rules of performance now and to ignore them gave fuel to opponents of the music who deemed that it did not deserve the same level of respect afforded to Western European music. At a time when jazz artists were fighting to gain recognition as such, this was not a direction that the music should embrace. They felt that Ornette, simply playing "anything that he wanted" on stage with a group of musicians who also did the same, tarnished the image that they had worked so very hard for.

As previously mentioned, the bassist and bandleader, Charles Mingus was one of the first to come to Ornette's defense when he emerged at the Five-Spot in 1959. Mingus, more of a pseudo-sympathizer than anything else, had made a remark that boldly split the difference between schools of thought.

Now aside from the fact that I doubt he can even play a C scale in tune, the fact remains that his notes and lines are so fresh. So that when [disc jockey] Symphony Sid played his record, it made everything else he was playing, even my own record that he played, sound terrible. I'm not saying that everybody's going to have to play like Coleman. But they're going to have to stop playing like Bird.⁸⁷

The quote shows that Mingus at the same time admired Ornette's creativity and condemned what he perceived as his inability to play the instrument. If Charles Mingus, who had worked previously with both Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington, could give his approval to this new music there must have not been so much difference in style after all. By this measure, the third criticism of Ornette's music is probably the easiest one to argue against.

The core of this assertion is that the third argument largely rests on an incorrect assumption and a misunderstanding of jazz history. Those who had dismissed Ornette almost immediately were under the impression that bebop and its predecessor, Swing, were indicative of the original style of the music as descending from traditional New Orleans jazz techniques. These individuals simply did not take the time to connect the music now considered, "Dixieland," to its roots as a synthesis of several other musical styles. Ornette's music is similar in this regard. One can clearly observe several influences in his solos from the Texas blues to the fanfares of brass bands. Even his wailing saxophone timbre has evoked comparisons to blues chant and gospel song sermons. Likewise, the idea of collective improvisation is not necessarily a new idea. It was out of groups like Ornette's that jazz was born. To dismiss this music on the

⁸⁷ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 74.

grounds that it does not come out of bebop is to overlook the importance of the earlier eras of the tradition. Overall, Ornette's music fits easily into this convention but such connections are frequently overlooked.

Perhaps the harshest attack on Ornette's ability mentioned even by his supporters was an inability, or sometimes a refusal, to play "in tune." This is frequently viewed to be the most common criticism of his music and was often used as evidence to suggest that Ornette couldn't really play music at all. In his partial defense, a precedent can again be cited from the annals of jazz history.

It is well known that early African American music frequently employed untempered intervals to express emotional quality. These effects were then assimilated into the European musical system and resulted in what we now consider to be "blue notes." While the modern blues scale uses the approximate estimations of these in the cases of the intervals of a minor third, augmented fourth and minor seventh, it is notable that these are merely tempered substitutions for the real thing, which may have employed microtonal variations.

Critics concerned with Ornette's intonation were merely unwilling to accept an expanded notion of harmony to express individual emotional qualities. The ears of jazz musicians had likewise been accustomed to the western scale and failed to recognize the usage of these elements in such an expanded capacity.

In Ornette's own explanations, these areas of expression come across as "bad tuning" but are merely his musical decisions based on the character of a particular piece. "If I play a F in a song called 'Peace,' I think it should not sound exactly the same as if I play that note in a piece called 'Sadness.'"⁸⁸ This subtle change in intonation was just one way that Ornette was able to expand the expressive range of his instrument. Yet, ill-informed eyes viewed the technique as ineptitude.

⁸⁸ Joachim Berendt, *The Jazz Book* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1968.) 100

The final critique of Ornette's saxophone style comes almost specifically from other jazz musicians. Several of these individuals have mentioned that Ornette's technical abilities are greatly overestimated by the majority of critics and have asserted that he has an almost rudimentary skill set on the instrument. Some still claim that Ornette did not play bebop simply because he wasn't able to. To be fair some of these statements are understandable, as Ornette never really exploits much of the bebop vocabulary in any of his solos. Overall, the bulk of such nasty remarks are a result of Ornette's massive exposure in New York and the attention he received from the musical community.

However, Ornette never exactly seemed concerned with proving his detractors wrong. Later in his career he would issue statements to writers like Leonard Feather mentioning his love for bebop at a young age, and how he had learned several of the compositions of Charlie Parker while trying to earn money playing in dance bands back in Fort Worth. His friends and the musicians of his ensembles would also vouch for his ability in the music, claiming to have heard him play Parker tunes "note for note." Once when asked if he ever played any standards Ornette responded, "Sure, but I've played them so many times, I don't need to play them anymore."⁸⁹

So if not for ability, the lack of bebop idioms in Ornette's playing can only be attributed to lack of interest. If his previous statement is taken at face value, it can be assumed that after a certain point Ornette was only interested in creating his own music and perhaps bored with the tunes that he had played in his youth.

Another explanation comes from the lack of necessity. As is already known, Coleman themes are not designed around a sequence of specific chord changes; so flying through series of melodic clichés is not exactly conducive to the musical statement that he is trying to make. It would seem that Ornette is not in favor of showing off just for the sake of demonstrating his

⁸⁹ Litweiler, *A Harmolodic Life*, 89.

abilities. One need only look at the theme and blistering tempo of a piece like “Civilization Day,” as depicted in Figure 23, to see that he does have some technical skill in the traditional sense as well.



Figure 23: Melody to “Civilization Day” (1971). Tempo for this piece is approximately half-note = 130.

This is not to assert that his technical prowess is the equal of other avant-garde musicians like John Coltrane or Eric Dolphy, but neither is it just an elementary knowledge of the instrument.

These observations aside, Ornette’s solo technique displays remarkable consistency in both his electric and acoustic periods. In almost all instances, with ensembles ranging from the original quartet to Prime Time, his solos utilize several of the same elements. Other than the previously mentioned ideas of “bent” notes and counter bebop phrasing, the solo lines of Ornette’s improvisations contain what Jost refers to as the concept of “motivic chain

associations,”⁹⁰ by which he means Ornette’s tendency to develop his solo out of the theme of the composition. As demonstrated in Figures 24, and 25 one can clearly see the beginnings of thematic development of the written phrases during his solo on “Peace” (1959) and on “Voice Poetry” (1975).



Figure 24: Ornette’s thematic improvisation around 3 phrase structures on “Peace.” Elements of contour and rhythmic sequences are clearly visible in the corresponding passages marked A,A’, B,B’ and C,C’ respectively.

In the above transcriptions, the improvisatory phrase A’ can be defined as a “contour sequence” to its counterpart in the composed melody but tonicising C# rather than F#. The B’ phrase is an expansion of the B melodic idea with both similar motion and melodic intervals.

⁹⁰ Jost, *Free Jazz*, 50.

Finally, C' can be viewed as a rhythmic sequence, placed in the same musical space as the C material, which functions as a “turnaround” to the repetition of the theme.



A



B

Figure 25: Melodic line (A) and Ornette's opening solo line (B) on “Voice Poetry” (1975). Notice how Ornette creates an expansion of thematic material.

In “Voice Poetry” Ornette has similarly constructed an improvisation derivative of the thematic material. However, rather than relying on sequencing, he has opted to elongate (and later embellish) the melody.

The lack of difference in Ornette's approach to his own solos shows that the changes in his musical conception were mainly a result of the musicians with whom he was playing. The rock-inspired idioms in Prime Time as well as the duets with Charlie Haden find him consistently utilizing a melody based construction of his lines indicative of a musical style fundamentally his own, not inspired by the bebop mentality, but also soundly within the jazz tradition.

5.0 SUMMARY

In summation, the period between 1970 and 1979 is a highly experimental period for Ornette Coleman. During this time he not only worked with an astonishing variety of ensembles but also began to finalize a unique compositional philosophy all his own. By looking at the events of his life and the struggles he faced to produce recordings that represented his best artistic interests, it can be seen that the music industry failed to recognize the implications of his individual and collaborative achievements during this time period, and as a result scholars are still attempting to catch up with Coleman's massive breadth of work.

At its outset, this study attempted to answer specific questions about this man and his music—specifically, “How have Ornette's creative practices been codified?”—and to discuss how his later creative output added new compositional techniques and thematic ideas to his repertoire. Through this examination, it has been shown that Ornette's musical aesthetic, while frequently associated with the hallmarks of the avant-garde, is soundly within the jazz tradition, both in style and in spirit. His constant revolution after 1970 may have in fact led to a more fully realized vision of an original, transcendental art form.

Both Ekkhard Jost and Peter Niklas Wilson have created methods of thematic typography in order to discuss how Ornette deals with the concept of form, but likewise failed to recognize the overall shift toward riff-based compositions that had occurred after Ornette's excursions in Morocco. Wilson dismisses Ornette's compositions for voice as merely trivial in the grand scheme of his works but ignores the fact that these compositions are an attempt to expand beyond the confines of the traditional jazz ensemble and introduce new forms and

textures to the music. These are all evidence of a continuous search for a new musical direction.

Similarly, the creation of the Prime Time ensemble, following both the realization of the *Skies of America* recording and the Joujouka experience, is no mere coincidence but a signal of the verification of this new direction. Prime Time is a group with a freely improvised orchestral conception of sound; its creation is the fulfillment of nearly 30 years of searching for a method, which incorporates such tonal qualities with a free structure and the ability to once again connect with a large audience. It would seem that, like Miles Davis, Ornette could be said to be a musician who truly cares if the people understand and identify with his music.

At the end of the 1960s, Ornette had made several statements proclaiming his disgust for the world of performance. Yet, the following decade found him once more leading a touring band. Prime Time was perhaps the only ensemble that could combat Ornette's negative feelings about the performance environment and bring him back to the stage. This change in focus from composer to performer is just as important as any of his innovations within the content of his music. It identifies a paradigm shift in his musical identity.

In examining this specific period in Ornette's creative development, it has been made clear that he can be seen as a visionary in the world of jazz. The collective improvisatory models borrowed from Joujouka quickly found a place in his Prime Time ensemble as the "new sound," with which he had hoped to reinvent himself. His continuous musical exploration however, would not end with this decade; even though in retrospect Prime Time lasted nearly 20 years.

It cannot be denied that Ornette is a musician whose tastes and ideas are continuously evolving. His practices and methodologies may never be completely described by any single analysis. Until the release of his own "harmolodic treatise," all such studies are merely estimations of Ornette's thought processes. However, Ornette's recordings from after 1970 have yet to achieve the level of respect and scholarly appreciation that they deserve. What remains

interesting is whether the concepts explored on these records will ever enter the canon of the genre in the same capacity as those from his earlier, more formative period.

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