

Ornette Coleman: The Prophet of Jazz

Philip Muse

New Life Fellowship

Abstract

Every once in a while someone comes along who makes an indelible mark on the world. Ornette Coleman is one of them. He literally transformed the way jazz music was experienced by both the musicians in his profession and those who enjoyed listening to it. Born in 1930, in Fort Worth, Texas, Coleman, a self-taught musician, was known as “as one of the most powerful and contentious innovators of jazz music,” according to author Ben Ratliff’s June 15, 2015 article in the New York Times. As saxophonist and composer, Coleman was credited with rewriting the language of jazz. He died that year.

Prophet of Jazz

Ornette Coleman's story, "We can't be against each other. We've got to help each other." The essence of these words, spoken by African American alto saxophone player, Ornette Coleman, is a message that transcends time. Spoken at the end of a long life and career in jazz music, Coleman's words of reconciliation are regrettably and painfully still necessary even in 2018. This brief story of the life of Randolph Denard Ornette Coleman reflects his passion for music, his hunger for change and the collision of both provides a backdrop for a message of freedom. Coleman, an American jazz saxophonist, violinist, trumpeter, and composer, is called one of the major innovator of jazz music, according to the website, All Music.com. His creative sound created a movement which came to be known as the "free jazz" movement. His love for music was birthed in him at an early age. He was born March 9, 1930, in Fort Worth, Texas, and died in 2015 at the age of 85. Although he was called a "genius, an icon, a legend, and one of the most important figures in the history of music," according to his biography at Ornette Coleman.com, his style of music was not always accepted. He was labeled as a music fraud, a rebellious and disruptive individual. He is credited with inventing harmolodics, a sound that flows together with unpredictable rhythms. In short, he propagated a sound that crashed onto the music scene of his day that eventually opened the door to a freewheeling method of performance and expression in the music industry.

Coleman, a very talented musician and composer, skillful wrote and performed jazz music that traveled against the traditional grain of the music industry. According to nytimes.com, his style of music changed the course of jazz music in the 1950s and the early 1960s, causing some to walk out on his performances. He was a trailblazer who not only changed traditional

jazz music, he is also credited with creating a new and innovative style that broke long-standing ways that other music styles were enjoyed. Early in his career, he worked with fellow alto sax player and innovator, Charlie Parker. Coleman's songs "Una Muy Bonita" (bright, bouncy) and "Lonely Woman" (tragic, flamenco-esque) are examples of his cutting edge musical expressions.

Coleman's Music

Although Coleman's early work was not always appreciated, he eventually gained notoriety as a great music and composer. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 2007 for his album *Sound Grammar*, according to a National Public Radio, Inc., article titled "Ornette Coleman in 5 Songs." Other works by Coleman include, but are not limited to the songs "The Blessing", "Lonely Woman", and "All my Life" and albums, *The Art of the Improvisers*, *Change of the Century*, *Tomorrow is the Question* and *Tone Dialing*. Soundtracks of the songs are available at the National Public Radio, Inc., site.

The Shape of Jazz to Come

The album, *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, included the song "Lonely Woman", which is one of Coleman's most famous songs. Recorded by Atlantic Records in 1959, it was his first album. The song and the album demonstrate the uniqueness of his style and flavor of music arrangements, and although his music was not fully appreciated at the time, this innovator of jazz music took his talents from his humble beginnings in Fort Worth, Texas, to the spotlight of many New York stages. The website ornettecoleman.com highlight's his music career. He began his musical journey as a teenager and by the 1950s became a working musician who played with dance bands and rhythm and blues groups. His unorthodox approach to harmony rubbed many jazz fans and musicians the wrong way but the rejection his experienced early in his career did

not deter his efforts. He studied harmony while working as an elevator operator in Los Angeles and played an inexpensive plastic saxophone, according to britannica.com. Jazz improvisation prior to that time was all based on harmonic patterns. Coleman's "harmolodic music theory" changed all of that. He remained in California for most of the 1950s and crafted his first album there. At one time in his early career, he was assaulted and his sax was destroyed by a disgruntled person following one of his performances. Still undeterred, Coleman continued on and even taught himself to play the violin and trumpet.

Conclusion

Coleman's life and career are clear examples of how hard work pays off and one is limited only by the self-inflicted limitations. He died of cardiac arrest on June 11, 2015, but his music and legacy live on through the heart of his music and those who will be influenced by it. These two quotes sum up his passionate cry, "Jazz is the only music in which the same note can be played night after night, but differently each time" and "I didn't need to worry about keys, chords, melody if I had that emotion that brought tears and laughter to people's hearts," Coleman said, (Jazzonline.gr).

Reference(s):

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