



Monument Eternal

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FRANYA J. BERKMAN



Monument Eternal

THE MUSIC OF ALICE COLTRANE



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*To my mother, Lisa,
and my daughter, Sadie*

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Preface



In Search of Divine Songs

My first exposure to the music of Alice Coltrane occurred while I was relaxing in *savasana*, or the corpse pose, on the floor of a Brooklyn yoga studio in the winter of 1993. The instructor started the cassette player, and out came the rich sound of a black woman's tenor voice chanting the name of Siva, accompanied by a Wurlitzer organ and a small violin section. The music expressed an unusual combination of peace and longing. It was penetrating, soulful, and unlike anything I had ever heard. After class, I asked the instructor for the name of the artist. "Alice Coltrane, *Divine Songs*," she answered. "Alice who?" I asked. "Coltrane," she replied. "Coltrane—like John Coltrane?" I inquired. "Yes, his wife," she confirmed.

For weeks, I searched intently for Alice Coltrane's music but could find nothing in any of the major record stores in Manhattan. My instructor kindly made me a cassette copy of *Divine Songs*, which I listened to regularly until I loaned it to a friend, who lost it. I had nearly forgotten about Alice Coltrane when, seven years later, I found two of her old LPs, *Journey in Satchidananda* and *Radha Krsna Nama Sankirtana*, in a colleague's extensive record collection. I listened again to this singular musician. In addition to Alice Coltrane's piano and harp improvisations, these recordings featured Pharoah Sanders's soprano saxophone, the hypnotic drone of the tamboura, and what sounded like a gospel choir singing the praises of Krishna. I was reminded of the Siva chant I had heard, and I began searching anew for her music.

At that time, I was a graduate student in ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University, and I examined discographies, jazz dictionaries, databases, and the World Wide Web. In the process, I learned that Alice Coltrane had played piano with her husband, John Coltrane, in the last years of his life.

Additionally, I discovered that Alice Coltrane had recorded over twenty-five jazz albums as either a leader or side person during the late 1960s and 1970s, working with many of the top names in jazz. I also learned that, with the exception of two or three articles, nothing of substance had been written about her. With the help of friends, I began painstakingly to collect all of her out-of-print recordings. But, alas, I found no *Divine Songs*.

At the time, I had been considering writing my dissertation about female jazz composers. However, after discovering the breadth of Alice Coltrane's music, and contentiously conferring with my friend, who insisted that I write about her, I decided that my doctoral thesis would focus on Alice Coltrane. But it was clear that I faced a huge obstacle. During my initial inquiries, I had learned that Alice Coltrane had become a spiritual recluse in the mid-1970s. She had founded an alternative religious community in Southern California, the Vedantic Center's Sai Anantam Ashram, and her intermediaries claimed that she did not grant interviews.

Stubbornly hoping to meet her, I traveled to Sai Anantam Ashram, intending to participate in one of their Sunday services open to the public. To my disappointment, Alice Coltrane—or Swamini Turiyasangitananda, as she was called, using the feminine form of “swami”—did not lead the prayers and *bhajans* (Hindu hymns) that day. Nonetheless, I found myself in a temple, sitting on the floor with a group of African American devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, an Indian guru, and singing what sounded like black music from a sanctified church. After a full hour of ecstatic song and brief closing remarks, I was invited to drink some iced tea and visit the bookstore. There I finally found a recording of *Divine Songs* displayed with Alice Coltrane's more recent devotional recordings and the spiritual texts she had written. I left with my arms full of her current music, her religious treatises, and more questions than answers.

That was nearly ten years ago, and much has happened since. The summer after my initial visit to Sai Anantam Ashram, Ms. Coltrane graciously granted me an extensive interview, which provided much of the groundwork for this study. I completed my dissertation about her music in 2003 and took a job as a music professor in Portland, Oregon, the same year; then I got married, gave birth to two children—who are now two and three years old—and somehow managed to complete this book before my tenure review. Busy with final revisions to the book, distracted by children, and immersed in my career, I received news that Alice Coltrane had passed away, quite unexpectedly.

I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet Ms. Coltrane, not only because her life's work is rich and remarkable, but also because so many musicians of her generation are passing on now, and they have so

much to teach us. I also feel especially lucky that, amid institutional commitments and the scholarly hurdles involved with getting my first academic book to press, Alice Coltrane continues to inspire me, both spiritually and musically. As I grow as a musician, I find her aesthetic choices increasingly interesting. As I aspire to be more humane and compassionate, her spiritual teachings offer me wisdom. As I journey into motherhood and learn how to be a mentor to college students, her shining example of equanimity and clarity in the face of obstacles and multiple responsibilities offers proof that everything can all be accomplished with grace and passion.

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INTRODUCTION

Alice Coltrane as Turiyasangitananda



As it was in the beginning, let your music forevermore be an expression of My Divinity in a sound incarnation of Myself as *nadabrahma*. For, eternally, divine music shall always be the sound of peace, the sound of love, the sound of life, and the sound of bliss.

—Alice Coltrane, *Endless Wisdom I*

To reach Sai Anantam Ashram, home of Alice Coltrane's Vedantic Center, you must travel on Triunfo Canyon Road, which goes through a lovely mountain pass in Agoura Hills, California, and winds leisurely between horse farms and exclusive homes in the Santa Monica Mountains. When you reach the ashram's entrance—a humble gate that is easily overlooked—music of Alice Coltrane and her devotees emanates from speakers set beside the dirt driveway. Entering the grounds, you find yourself in a small, protected valley, originally the sacred land of the Chumash Native Americans.

The ashram's stunning *mandir*, or temple, rises white as a cloud against the hills. In winter and spring, a brook in front of the temple splashes along, joining a tireless chorus of insects and birds. Several modest homes are set back into the hillside. Ashram inhabitants and visitors—mostly African American men, women, and children—are dressed in South-Asian attire: the women wear saris, the men kurtas. Speaking quietly among each other and greeting Sunday guests, they make their way with visitors to the steps of the *mandir*, remove their shoes, and enter the sanctum, men turning to the left and women to the right. The interior of the temple is simple and unadorned: there is a guest book and basket of hymnals by the entrance, a stretch of blue carpet and yellow cushions on the floor, and a small organ at the far end. Behind the organ stand two life-size posters of Sathya Sai Baba. On the right, out of sight, is a raised altar bearing an oil lamp, flowers, fruit, and images of Hindu deities. Once inside, the members of the small congregation silently sit down on the floor.

If you had the good fortune of attending Sunday services when the

ashram's guru, Alice Coltrane—known in this context as Swamini Turiya-sangitananda—was still alive, you would have seen her arrive dressed in orange robes, and flanked by attendants. She would make offerings at the altar, take her seat behind the Hammond B3 organ, and begin to play. First would be a *bhajan* to Ganesha, the elephant deity to whom Hindus traditionally pray before starting any religious and worldly endeavor. Alice would depress the pedals, and the bass vibrations would pass through the walls and floorboards. Playing syncopated chords with her left hand and a soaring, pentatonic melody with her right, she would signal the song leader in the men's section to start the men singing. The women would respond, and blues-inflected devotional music would fill the room. The hymn would have several tempo increases, propelled by Alice's dramatic modulations and the driving bass lines she would play with her feet. The congregation would create harmonies and counterpoint, and cry and shout in response to members' musical and emotional outpourings. They would clap ecstatically, and join in with tambourines and other hand-held percussion instruments. Their guru would smile and nod in rhythm, acknowledging the moment.

The *bhajans* that followed would be livelier, praising other deities of the Hindu pantheon: Rama, Krishna, Siva. Each hymn would have an extended and improvisational refrain section—similar to the Watts hymns one might hear sung by a Southern black congregation—in which individuals “inject the spirit of their being,” as one member described it to me (Botafasina 2001). After the collective improvisation of the refrain, the hymn melody would return, and the *bhajan* conclude. Immediately, another would begin—with no announcements or conversations in between—and the organ would start again. To end the musical portion of the service, which lasted roughly an hour, the final hymn in praise of Sathya Sai Baba, “O Bhagavan,” would be sung, following by closing prayers.

What kind of music is this? *Bhajans* at Sai Anantam Ashram are clearly sui generis. While it is common today to hear white Americans singing Indian devotional hymns at yoga centers and at concerts—American artists such as Krishna Das and Jai Utal have major record deals these days, and tickets to hear them sing cost twenty dollars or more—Alice Coltrane's *bhajans* are noncommercial, free to the public, and performed in a predominantly African American, gospel style. Furthermore, for nearly three decades they were played by Alice herself, who infused her arrangements with the diverse genres she explored over the course of her life as a church accompanist, bebop pianist, composer, and avant-garde improviser.

What's more, the ritual that one finds at Alice's ashram reflects her own iconoclastic musical and spiritual journey. In the *mandir*, she reproduced

the aesthetics of black sacred music characteristic of her formative years in Detroit. She also maintained an approach to musical worship that reflects the theory of her late husband, John Coltrane, that music has a universal, transcendent nature—a theory she synthesized with elements of Hindu practice learned from her gurus and in her travels to India. And remarkably, although this musical worship at Sai Anantam Ashram clearly recapitulates her own evolution, it has become a ritual separate from any notion of her as an artist. Ashram members do not experience *bhajans* as if they are performing the compositions of Alice Coltrane. They believe, as their beloved swamini did, that “chanting is a universal devotional engagement, one that allows the chanter to soar to higher realms of spiritual consciousness. Chanting is a healing force for good in our world, and also in the astral worlds. Chanting can bring a person closer to God because that person is calling on the Lord” (<http://www.saiquest.com> December 2007).

How do we make sense of these songs? They are at once African American and South Asian. Their histories can be traced to religious revivals spanning India’s medieval period, as well to cultural formations that coalesced in the New World among the descendants of African slaves. They form a genre attributable to an individual composer, yet they are also a ritual that belongs to the whole community. Appreciating and understanding Alice Coltrane’s sacred music at the ashram—and, for that matter, the other music that she recorded and performed over the course of her prolific career—requires that we move beyond reified categories of musical style and religious practice and honor the open-ended quality of cultural production and the ways we pass on the life of cultures. Most importantly, it draws our attention to the formidable role of Alice Coltrane—a woman often relegated to the footnotes of works about her late husband—as both musician and guru.

It may seem odd to begin a book about Alice Coltrane, a jazz icon, by describing her role at Sai Anantam Ashram. The reader probably expects this first part of the book to detail her early musical experiences in a chronological manner, consistent with most jazz biographies. But this is not a jazz biography; rather, it is an exploration of the music of a woman and devotional musician whose contributions transcend such genre-specific constraints. Understanding Alice Coltrane’s superior artistry and her religious music expands the definition of jazz and challenges the process of canonization. It also provides an opportunity to discuss experimental music created by black composers and the phenomena of musical and spiritual hybridity in the late twentieth century on a broader scale. For lack of a single, concise term, this study of Alice Coltrane is best described as an ethnomusicological life history that prioritizes the role of spirituality in her musical aesthetics and in the cultural spaces she inhabited.

Few people in the music business are aware of Alice Coltrane's role as guru or of her musical ministry. She is known primarily as a jazz pianist and harpist, or simply as the widow of the legendary saxophonist and composer John Coltrane. Among jazz aficionados, her importance tends to rest on the controversial role she assumed when she replaced McCoy Tyner as the pianist in her husband's last rhythm section. Accordingly, her important works are seldom considered to exceed the small body of recordings she made with John Coltrane during the last year of his life. Few people are aware, then, of the Hindu-influenced devotional music she composed and arranged with her devotees, despite the current popularity of music for yoga and meditation. Fewer still know that by the mid-1970s, her works included more than twenty albums of original compositions and virtuoso improvisations, which she recorded for the Impulse and Warner Brothers labels with some of the giants of modal and free jazz—Pharoah Sanders, Leroy Jenkins, Rashied Ali, Roy Haynes, Cecil McBee, Reggie Workman, and Ron Carter—as her sidemen. Even more obscure are her formative, pre-Coltrane years in Detroit when, as Alice McLeod, bebop virtuoso, she performed in the company of the Motor City's extraordinary postwar pianists: Barry Harris, Terry Pollard, Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan, and Sir Roland Hanna, to name only a few.

Alice's musicianship, like that of many of John Coltrane's sidemen, has been overshadowed by the contributions of the man many consider to be the last great innovator of modern jazz.¹ One also wonders whether her avant-garde experiments would have received any attention at all had she lacked the Coltrane name, particularly given that her continually expanding musical conception, which coalesced in the hybrid ritual music of the ashram, fell outside conventional definitions of jazz or any other identifiable single genre. After her teen years as a church pianist during the late 1940s and early 1950s, she played and composed in a variety of musical styles: gospel, bebop, rhythm and blues, Western classical, free jazz, and Indian devotional. Her albums feature original compositions for standard jazz instrumentation—bass, drums, piano—as well as works for harp, Wurlitzer organ, strings, and choir. She adapted the works of Stravinsky, Dvorak, and her late husband. She also recorded herself singing and playing her own version of ancient Indian chants and hymns. Yet for marketing reasons, or by association with her husband, Alice Coltrane is classified as a jazz musician, although she herself did not call her music jazz—she believed she played “spiritual music” (interview with author, 2001).

For better or worse, Alice experienced the fate of many exceptionally

talented women married to men recognized for their brilliance: while her own contributions received attention, she never really got a fair shake. During the late 1960s, many of John Coltrane's fans viewed her as an accomplice to the so-called anti-jazz experiments of his final years. Her notoriety was further exacerbated by the tremendous power she assumed when she took control of Jowcol Music, her husband's publishing company, and decided the fate of his unreleased materials after his death. In particular, her choice to overdub her own playing on his signature recording of "My Favorite Things" angered many in the jazz establishment.

While Alice's eccentricities and her role as the wife of a legendary musician surely contributed to the marginal, if not contested, status of her own music, other discursive forces also played a significant part. As subjects of study, black female musicians have been quintessential others, either overlooked because of—or overdetermined by—the categories of gender, race, and class. To a great extent, social constructions of difference burden black male musicians as well: their lives are routinely viewed in light of the pervasive challenges of racial discrimination they encounter, and whether they represent their group as "race men." However, compared to black male musicians, black female musicians rarely transcend difference and obtain the status of artist. Even in the noblest attempts to explore the music and lives of black female musicians, scholars have tended to focus on personal hardships and identity politics. Few have challenged "the current romanticization of the black subject and the refusal of complexity in the representation of the lives of black women," and even fewer have focused adequately on their music (Carby 1992, 178).

When women instrumentalists have garnered attention for their talents in the male-dominated jazz world, their success has usually hinged on the supposedly male qualities of their playing: they are praised for their strong rhythm, big sound, and aggressive improvisations. Conversely, when a woman plays sensitively or with quiet dynamics, her musicianship tends to be dismissed for lacking sufficient masculine characteristics. This gendered mediation is evident everywhere in the assessment of Alice's solo career. Critics who expected to find the aggressive intensity that characterized her work with John Coltrane's ensemble were frequently disappointed. For instance, in his *Down Beat* review of her 1970 release, *Ptah the El Daoud*, Ed Cole wrote: "It seems incredible that a group so heavily stamped by the late John Coltrane would not be able to pull off an album, but that's just what happens here. It's not that this is not good music, because it is, but it doesn't come close to the potential of the individual players. It seems that each subdued his talents to accommodate the others" (1971, 20). In his review of *A Monastic Trio* (1968), John Litweiler commented: "the harp side of this LP

presents waves of sound, a wispy impressionist feeling without urgent substance” (1969, 22). Ekkehard Jost asserted that “Alice Coltrane is not a ‘hard’ pianist who drives the music with rhythmic accentuations” (1974, 98).

Listeners also tend to equate musical characteristics such as loud dynamics and jarring timbral effects with the counterculture and political resistance, especially during the 1960s, when such explorations were still novel. As a result, Alice’s more intimate albums from the late 1960s did not have the palpable political innuendo that one could feel in the music of her avant-garde colleagues. She may indeed have lost some of her avant-garde audience by 1970, at least those louder-is-better “free-jazz” fans who were unaware of her aggressive approach in albums such as *Universal Consciousness* (1971) and *Transfiguration* (1978). Alice’s seemingly apolitical choices have also placed her at odds with the models of resistance and radicalism that black women of historical importance typically embody.² Although during the height of the civil rights movement she was playing dissonant, freely improvised jazz—a style that tends to be associated with cultural nationalism and black militancy—she opted not to engage in a direct or public manner with “the struggle.” She was not a song leader or educator such as Bernice Johnson Reagon,³ who used black spirituals to effect social change. Nor was she politically outspoken like Abbey Lincoln or Nina Simone. Gentle in demeanor, a devoted wife and mother of four, Alice’s persona was, in many respects, consistent with the patriarchal helpmate image that the revolution espoused, an image that has since been scrutinized by black feminist theorists.⁴

While Alice conformed in her domesticity to this conservative aspect of black liberation ideology in the 1960s, her universalist views ultimately challenged many of the Afrocentric tenets of black liberation popular at the time. In her writing and interviews, she consistently expressed the importance of transcending category and limitation. Beginning in the late 1960s, she expressed belief in a transcendent oneness, a “universal consciousness” that subsumes all creativity and religious faith. Despite the ostensible forms of ethnicity one finds in her devotional music and religious practices, cultural specificity and racial identity did not figure in her religious or creative philosophy. Her universalist views, therefore, were—and still are—at variance with those of musicians and scholars who make blackness or an African worldview central to African American cultural production.

Spiritual Aesthetics

A religious sensibility steadily guided Alice Coltrane’s artistry—a feeling that music “had to come from the composer’s heart and spirit and soul, not just his mind” (quoted in Lerner 1982, 23). This attitude, combined with her

uncanny musical skills and an experimental temperament, led her along a path that was not only musically but spiritually daring. Compared to the conservative Christianity of her childhood in Detroit, Alice Coltrane was a religious maverick. During the late 1960s, she and her husband began to explore meditation and a universalist approach to religion. Their spiritual pursuits as a couple extended to the bandstand, where they played a personalized version of spiritual music in the form of dissonant, free-meter improvisation. After her husband's death in 1967, Alice experienced what she called a "reawakening." From that point on, her music either attempted to express her experience of the divine or was written and performed as an offering to God.

In 1969, she befriended the Indian guru Swami Satchidananda and discovered the philosophical and spiritual teachings of the Vedas. She was still raising her four children when she recorded the majority of her albums, which, like John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (1965), included extensive liner notes that testified to her personal transformation. The albums feature devotional compositions and improvisations that increasingly drew on both free-jazz idioms and the *bhajans* that she discovered on her pilgrimages to India, as well as semi-orchestrated works and harp pieces reflecting her deepening mysticism.

In 1976, she had a revelation in which she was instructed to become a Hindu swami. She had founded the Vedantic Center in 1972, and in 1983, after she had joined the monastic order, she established Shanti Anantam Ashram, later renamed Sai Anantam Ashram. She served as spiritual director for the ashram and regularly played for services and delivered sermons until her passing on January 12, 2007. After a long hiatus from public performance, interrupted only periodically by benefit concerts in honor of her late husband, she returned to touring in the last years of her life, playing with a jazz quartet featuring her son, the tenor saxophone player Ravi Coltrane, and her former bassists, Reggie Workman and Charlie Haden.

During her monastic period, she wrote four little-known spiritual treatises—*Monument Eternal* (1977), *Endless Wisdom I* (1981), *Divine Revelations* (1995), and *Endless Wisdom II* (1999)—all of which were published by her own Avatar Book Institute. *Monument Eternal* documents her spiritual rebirth from 1968 to 1970. As she described the work in its preface, it is "a book based upon the soul's realizations in Absolute Consciousness and its spiritual relationships with the Supreme One." The two volumes of *Endless Wisdom* make up a comprehensive treatise that explores the nature of the divine and the proper relationship between humanity and God. Here Alice claims no authorship; in the preface to the first volume, she explains that she was "divinely sanctioned" to "inscribe" the words of the Lord based on

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