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Universal Consciousness: Black Music, Hindu Thought, and Decolonizing the Spirit

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of Neo-Vedanta philosophy on Black jazz musicians in the 1960s and 1970s, with a special focus on Alice Coltrane. By using what I have come to understand as a decolonial analysis, I situate the artists whose works I discuss in the context of a wider decolonial turn in the late twentieth century. In addition to tracing the transmission of Neo-Vedanta philosophy, *guru-sisya* (guru-disciple) relationships, and ideas about universal religion into the US, this article also traces how various Black artistic and political figures rethought religion and spirituality in terms of radical liberation. Amid this convergence of new religious movements and Black activism, artists like Alice Coltrane became more open to Eastern spiritual transformation, and her own work ultimately made no distinction between spiritual and musical practice. While this is a historical essay, I bookend my historical analysis with personal reflections on how I have received this lineage in my own artistic practice.

Decolonizing from the Inside/Out

The main trajectory of this article follows the impact of Hindu Neo-Vedanta philosophy on Black music in the US in the 1960s and 1970s. Understanding the transnational character of the Black Liberation movement within that history reveals a deeper connection between the reception of Hindu philosophy and its integration into the jazz of the period. Where dominant sociocultural historiography on jazz treats these connections as individual spiritual journeys—of Alice Coltrane (1937–2007), John Coltrane (1926–1967), Don Cherry (1936–1995), and others—I argue that it is important to see these

musicians as situated within a broader global and historical context. However, I am also writing from the perspective of an active musician within the lineage of this history. In order to provide an entry point into a broader discussion of developing a decolonial relationship with the entangled histories of Black American jazz and South Asian spirituality, I would like to begin by tracing the origins of my own expansion of critical consciousness in the 2000s and my current practice as a vocalist, improviser, and composer back to my upbringing in Hindu Neo-Vedanta traditions and encounters with decolonial thought and how these not only changed how I listen to and understand jazz of the period, but also impacted my creative practice.

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area in a South Asian community, my listening and vocal practice emerged from the same root—communal devotional *bhajan* singing as followers of Guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba, meeting in a Unitarian Universalist church. These bhajans, although directly derived from the Hindu call-and-response song form, had a pantheistic character, evoking the names of gods in many religions and languages, from Sanskrit, Hindi, and Telugu to English and Spanish. One bhajan I loved singing was “Sai Hamara,” with the Hindi lyrics, “Hindu Muslim Sikh Isai Sab Ka Palanhaar,” or, “Sai is the nourisher and protector of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians.” I would sing and play *kanjira* (tambourine) with my cousin on acoustic guitar and others on tabla, castanets, hand cymbals, and harmonium. Recounting these early encounters with sound, it occurs to me that my listening practice grew to mirror the ecumenical philosophy that the lyrics of the bhajans professed.

This practice at first developed separately from my “American” musical activities. My elementary school choir teacher taught us Black American spirituals and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, and we performed as the children’s choir for the *St. Matthew Passion* at Santa Clara University, where I later interned under an indie rock DJ at their radio station. My first cassette purchases at Tower Records were Louis Armstrong, Bach, and punk bands; I moved between sections noting down artists I would later research in music magazines and at the public library. At the library, I checked out a CD of John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* (1965), and it struck a familiar chord, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on without any historical or theoretical knowledge. The clearly devotional quality, the drone, and the melodies all somehow felt closer to home than the public spaces where I was desperately trying to assimilate as an American teenager.

In college, however, I began to make explicit the connections already present between Black American jazz and South Asian music. Moving to Los Angeles to study at Loyola Marymount University, I continued to explore my interest in jazz as a DJ on campus radio. My professor in jazz studies, also a DJ at the same station, periodically quizzed us on our readings in class and rewarded us with CDs. I won a copy of Pharoah Sanders’s *Karma* (1969). The cover depicted Sanders adorned in an African-printed tunic, sitting in a meditative pose with a glowing orange light behind him. The melodies which I now understood as “modal” were ornamented with bends, slides, and shakes

that felt close to South Indian Carnatic *gamaka*, the microtonal inflections and connectors between notes of the modes or ragas. In researching a paper on John Coltrane, I learned about John and Alice Coltrane's shared interest in Hindu spirituality, and while browsing the latter's website came across an image I instantly recognized—a photo of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. This image of the Indian guru who preached universalism resonated deeply, as my own family has followed him for decades, displaying the same photo on our family altar.¹ The website also showed the location, not far from my college, of the Sai Anantam Ashram, where Alice Coltrane, known to her congregation as Swamini Turiyasangitananda, would hold services.² Suddenly, my musical, cultural, and spiritual worlds collided. This was a full-circle moment, one that set me on a path of self-discovery toward a more authentic creative expression as a vocalist, improviser, composer, harmonium and synthesizer player, and bandleader of the free jazz-punk-protest group Elder Ones since 2015, giving me a unique perspective within the history I narrate in this essay.

I have come to understand this personal, spiritual, and musical journey of self-realization as a process of decolonizing, deconstructing the internalized biases formed from growing up in American culture and from the Eurocentric strictures of my Western classical training, rediscovering the music of my South Asian heritage, and identifying deeply with the social and political struggle of Black Americans and their creative and liberatory expression. This type of decolonization is an internal process that occurs through external relationality. It is akin to what postcolonial Caribbean cultural theorist Édouard Glissant calls a “modern form of the sacred” that acknowledges a “collective consciousness” but also “allow[s] the individual to discover [her]self there.”³ In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant articulates a theory of creolization, the idea that generative, unpredictable, and hybrid cultural and artistic forms emerged relationally from encounters defined by power during slavery and in imperial and colonial conquest. Creolization “approximates the idea of Relation [...]. It is not merely an encounter, a shock [...], but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, [...] in harmony and in errantry. If we posit *métissage* as [...] the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*.”⁴

I understand this process of decolonization as a sacred movement between individuals and the collective history formed by the *métissage* of Black American jazz and Hindu spirituality. The historicization of the turn to Eastern spirituality by Black jazz musicians must take into account the history of decolonization, theorized in this essay as a decolonization of the spirit. Framing these musicians and their spiritual journeys through Glissant's postcolonial *métissage* and sacrality provides new insight into their artistic work. Revisiting this work in our current context of late capitalism, globalization, and social upheaval, reveals new resonances. The meeting and mingling of Black American, African, and South Asian cultures and subjectivities subvert hegemonic Western culture in radical and culturally transformative ways. Looking at how Eastern spirituality was encountered and absorbed by musicians such as the Coltranes

and Don Cherry and their subsequent spiritual, cultural, and musical transformations allows us to understand their journeys and the musical traditions in which they are situated as part of the broader American and global historical context of the late 1960s–70s. In the conclusion of this article, I will return to how, in my own personal transformation, a decolonial and transcultural analysis has helped me synthesize seemingly disparate threads in my own musical language.

Historical Awakenings

Concurrent with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States, the Vietnam War, Pan-Africanism and South African Apartheid, and the changing world order in the postcolonial era, the personal transformations of musicians like the Coltranes and Cherry were counterhegemonic moves away from dominant Western religious and musical systems. Like the 1955 Bandung Conference, which convened to build alliances between newly formed nations across Asia and Africa in the postcolonial period outside of the poles of Western dominance, these musicians spiritually reoriented themselves Eastward in a decolonial turn.⁵ As Robin D. G. Kelley observes in his introduction to Martinican theorist Aimé Césaire’s seminal, incendiary, decolonial text *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), “[t]he Africans, the Indians, the Asians cannot possess civilization or a culture equal to that of the imperialists, or the latter have no purpose, no justification for the exploitation and domination of the rest of the world. The colonial encounter [...] requires a reinvention of the colonized, the deliberate destruction of the past—what Césaire calls ‘thingification.’”⁶ The “thingification” or dehumanization of the Other and the violent severance and degradation of cultural memory of traditions, spirituality, and music is particularly severe for Black American and Caribbean descendants of enslaved people, separated by the Atlantic from an African homeland. Viewed through this lens, the increased contact in the Americas with Eastern culture in the 1960s can be understood as creating a political and intellectual framework in which spiritual and musical self-determination and transformation supported and extended each other.

While the dominant sociocultural analysis in jazz historiography of the 1960s focuses on jazz and the American Civil Rights movement, there is much less understanding of the transnational interactions and implications of the Black Liberation movement, internationalist solidarity with postcolonial struggles, and transcultural encounters. In this article, I will explore this period specifically through the lens of Hindu thought and Neo-Vedanta philosophy by examining the relationship of Black American jazz musicians to the profoundly resonant and transformative Hindu concepts of universalism, self-realization, and the *guru-sisya* (guru-disciple) relationship, also known as *parampara*.⁷

The 1960s–70s were a tumultuous period of social, political, and spiritual upheaval across the United States, catalyzing a reevaluation of previous modes of thinking and religious identification. Religious studies scholar Robert Ellwood identifies the

1960s as a “spiritual awakening,” a defining turning-point in American religious life: “It wrought immense changes in social and political life, but perhaps on a profound level nowhere was the change greater than in religious life, or more precisely in the way religious paradigms were shifted, redirected, and recharged in both formally religious settings and in nominally secular ones.”⁸ This paradigm shift occurred distinctively within the Black American community who, activated by various political and spiritual movements, asserted personhood and self-determination and demanded equality in the fight for civil rights. Many Black Americans became disillusioned with the institution of the Black Church, gravitating to nonwestern ideologies such as Hindu philosophy and guru-led movements for spiritual and religious alternatives.⁹ The evolving humanistic variant of Vedanta which emerged in the West in the early twentieth century emphasized three principal concepts: universalism, self-realization, and the guru-disciple relationship. Using Alice Coltrane as a case study, I will show how these concepts had profound resonance in the Black American jazz community of the 1960s and 70s.

Although there is a wealth of scholarship on spirituality and jazz, particularly in relation to Christian spirituality, there is a relative dearth of research on the interaction of Black American jazz musicians with nonwestern religious and spiritual philosophies and traditions. Franya J. Berkman initiated the most significant scholarship in this area, and her essay “Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality” (2007) and her book *Monument Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane* (2010) lit a path for my investigation. In “Appropriating Universality,” Berkman issues this invitation: “There is great room for further exploration, particularly in the study of avant-garde jazz musicians whose compositions and commentary frequently refer to spiritual themes.”¹⁰ Tragically, Berkman passed away in 2012 after a yearlong battle with cancer, and her further scholarly work remains unfinished. In this article, I intend to build upon on Berkman’s research by contextualizing the relationship of Black jazz musicians to nonwestern thought and sacred traditions, with a focus on Neo-Vedanta Hindu spirituality.

It is important to acknowledge the distinction between the terms spirituality and religion while establishing a framework for discussion. While I will not attempt to define these categories at large, I am inspired by Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927), Indian Sufi mystic and founder of universal sufism, and his notion of harmony with the cosmos: “To attain spirituality is to realize that the whole universe is one symphony in which every individual is one note. His happiness lies in becoming perfectly harmonious with the symphony of the universe. It is not following a certain religion that makes one spiritual.”¹¹ Spirituality differs from religious systems in that it is “an individual and unique journey” based on a desire for harmony with self, society, and the universe.¹² This distinction is particularly reflective of the Neo-Vedanta Hindu worldview and the individual spiritual journeys of Alice Coltrane and other musicians of the period.

Early American Encounters with Hindu Spiritual Teachings

The emerging Neo-Vedanta Hindu philosophy in America at the turn of the twentieth century deemphasized ritualism, caste divisions, and deity worship, placing a higher emphasis on the universality of core principles across religions and the divinity of each individual and humanity collectively.¹³ The arrival in the United States of two gurus, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) in 1893 and 1920, respectively, helped to spread and codify the new Vedanta in speeches, writings, and publications and to establish centers for yoga and Vedanta. Ellwood identifies the emergence of Neo-Vedanta in the early twentieth century as a “second stage” in the development of Hindu thought in the United States: “Part of a broader ‘Hindu renaissance’ aligned with the sentiment from which the Indian independence movement was growing, [Neo-Vedanta] managed to combine a liberal modern temperament with broad affirmation of Hindu culture as a whole.”¹⁴

Religious studies scholar Frank Whaling posits that the formation of a new Vedanta was necessary to merge the notions of philosophy and religion for the secularizing Westerner: “At the heart of this tendency to incorporate philosophy with religion is the coming together in Hindu thought of what westerners would separate as philosophy and theology. This is especially evident in Vedanta philosophy [...] in which ‘philosophy’ and ‘theology’ are combined.”¹⁵ As the disciple of Ramakrishna, one of the proponents of the *Advaita* Vedanta philosophy, Vivekananda continued the tradition of the guru-disciple transmission of knowledge by establishing the Ramakrishna Mission, a Hindu monastic order that would produce several gurus and teachers of Neo-Vedanta in India and the West. As a foundational belief in Vedanta, *Advaita* refers to the nonduality of *Brahman* (Absolute Reality) and *Ātman* (Self), implying that the nature of reality and universal truths can be ascertained by an individual by turning inward through self-discipline and meditation.¹⁶ For Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna order, the guru was a necessary component whose purpose was to guide the devotee or disciple away from spiritual darkness toward enlightenment.¹⁷

In 1893, Helena Blavatsky, one of the founders of theosophy, invited Swami Vivekananda to be a keynote speaker at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, an extension of the Chicago World’s Fair, which presented delegates from the Eastern religions.¹⁸ His widely publicized and disseminated speeches were the first formal introduction in America to the teachings of Hinduism by a Hindu guru from India. Vivekananda put forth a coherent formation of Hinduism that was universalistic, treating Hindu mythology, deities, and symbols as allegories for philosophical concepts and moving from religious formalism to a broader spiritual philosophy.¹⁹ In these speeches, universalism becomes a foundational Hindu concept, opening a lane of engagement for disciples of any religion or background. In one address, Vivekananda theorizes the requirements necessary for the establishment of a truly universal world religion, emphasizing the equality and universality of all belief systems: “a universal religion [...] must be one which will hold no location in place or time; which will be infinite, like the

God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints or sinners alike; which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace [...] every human being.”²⁰ Gaining notoriety and popularity from his appearance at the World’s Fair, Vivekananda established several Ramakrishna Vedanta societies for the study of Vedanta, yoga, and meditation in New York and San Francisco and inspired the Vedanta Society of Southern California, led by Swami Prabhavananda (1893–1976).²¹ Perhaps the most distinct departure of Neo-Vedanta philosophy from earlier iterations of Vedanta is a rejection of Brahmanism and caste hierarchy. Vivekananda instead claims a Hinduism where divine knowledge can be attained by any individual with a desire to seek: “A man from the highest caste and a man from the lowest may become a monk in India, and the two castes become equal. In religion there is no caste; caste is simply a social institution.”²² The disruptive notion that anyone regardless of caste, class, race, or creed can become enlightened is inclusive of someone such as Alice Coltrane, a Detroit-born Black woman and musician of Protestant Christian background, who eventually ordained herself a *Swamini*, or Hindu spiritual teacher.

Another foundational guru in Hindu spiritual teaching was Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952). In *Paramahansa Yogananda’s Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), he writes candidly about his devoted personal relationship with his beloved guru, describing his *bhakti* and his experiences on the path to enlightenment. *Bhakti* is the practice of complete devotion and surrender to a guru or deity, an essential component in the guru-disciple relationship.²³ Yogananda describes the transfer of energy and transformative capacity of *bhakti* in surrender to his guru: “I always thrilled at the touch of Sri Yukteswar’s holy feet. A disciple is spiritually magnetized by reverent contact with a master; a subtle current is generated. The devotee’s undesirable habit-mechanisms in the brain are often as if cauterized; the grooves of his worldly tendencies are beneficially disturbed.”²⁴ For Alice Coltrane, this *guru-bhakti* characterizes her relationship with Swami Satchidananda and later Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Yogananda’s spread of yoga practice through the Self-Realization Fellowship was the foundation for the establishment of several subsequent yoga centers by gurus in the 1960s, like the Integral Yoga Institute of Swami Satchidananda.²⁵ His interpretation of Universal Religion in *The Science of Religion* (1925) reiterates the importance of the “inner-experience” to gaining an understanding of universal truths and experiencing bliss: “Universal Religion [...] says that the *proof of the existence of God lies in ourselves*. It is an inner experience. You can surely recall at least one moment in your life when, in prayer or worship, you felt that the trammels of your body had nearly vanished, that the duality of experience—pleasure and pain, petty love and hate, and so on—had receded from your mind.”²⁶ The same text elaborates further on the universalistic concept, acknowledging the divinity of the teachers and prophets of the major world religions: “It is not the physical bodies of Jesus, Krishna, and Mohammed that we are

primarily interested in, nor [...] the historical place they occupy. [...] We revere them because they knew and felt God.”²⁷

The shared belief in a universal God and sound was foundational to John and Alice Coltrane’s personal, creative and spiritual partnership. The spiritual journey of John Coltrane began in the years leading up to *A Love Supreme* (1965) through an exploration of spiritual and philosophical texts from a range of nonwestern religions including Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. John and Alice Coltrane married in 1965, not only joining paths as musical partners, but also sharing deep spiritual exploration and practice. As Franya J. Berkman explains, their wide-ranging exploration was rooted in the belief in the universal nature of God: “Mr. Coltrane found strength and solace in a well-reasoned, non-sectarian view of God, which Lewis Porter calls ‘a kind of universal religion’ [...]. Included in his spirituality was an array of world traditions: Zen, Zoroastrianism, the writings of Yogananda and Krishnamurti, and a commitment to daily meditation—all of which he explored with his second wife, Alice Coltrane, who became his partner in 1963 and his pianist in 1965.”²⁸ One of John Coltrane’s intellectual influences was Jiddu Krishnamurti, an Indian Telugu philosopher and author of *Truth and Actuality* (1977), a collection of notes, speeches, and conversations with theoretical physicist David Bohm in the 1960s. Krishnamurti uses a nonsectarian philosophical framework to challenge religious hierarchy, including the caste system, and emphasize universality while reinforcing the Hindu notion that truth can only be discovered through self-realization: “The many religions throughout the world have said there is an enduring, everlasting truth, but the mere assertion of truth has very little significance. One has to discover it for oneself, not theoretically, intellectually, or sentimentally, but actually find out if one can live in a world that is completely truthful.”²⁹ In his book *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West* (2006), Peter Lavezzoli discusses the centrality of spiritual texts to his musical and spiritual practice: “he was a voracious reader, and his library included *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Coltrane found a particular interest in Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which recounts Yogananda’s search for universal truth, a journey that Coltrane had also undertaken. Yogananda believed that both Eastern and Western spiritual paths were efficacious, and wrote of the similarities between Krishna and Christ.”³⁰ These texts and speeches of Vivekananda, Yogananda, and Krishnamurti, along with Vedic texts and the *Bhagavad Gita*, became the scriptural basis for the guru-led movements of Neo-Vedanta in the 1960s, influential documents which circulated within the countercultural movement and among Black American jazz musicians.³¹

The Transformation of Black Spirituality in the 1960s

The spiritual awakening of the 1960s brought a new wave of gurus and philosophers, including Swami Satchitananda, the guru of Alice Coltrane. These gurus continued to emphasize the ideals of universalism, self-realization, and the guru-disciple relationship

toward the formation of an increasingly inclusive and personal Neo-Vedanta philosophy. The texts of their predecessors and the teachings of the new gurus, along with associated classic counterculture texts like Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* (1922)³² and the writings of Hazrat Inayat Khan, transmitted an eclectic Eastern philosophy that was disseminated throughout the Black American jazz community.³³ There are precursors to conversions to Eastern religions within the Black American jazz community as early as the 1940s, with several musicians, including multiinstrumentalist Yusef Lateef, drummer Art Blakey (Abdullah Ibn Buhaina, 1919–1990), and pianist Ahmad Jamal (1930–2023) converting to the Ahmadiyya Islam movement, founded in Punjab, India, toward the end of the nineteenth century.³⁴ Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1917–1993) and bassist Charles Mingus (1922–1979), giants of the bebop era, also adopted non-Christian faiths: Gillespie converted to the Muslim universalist Bahá'í Faith (another late nineteenth-century movement) and Mingus to Neo-Vedanta Hinduism. Though perhaps singular, the philosophy of jazz composer Sun Ra (1914–1993), influenced by theosophy, Egyptology, and pan-Africanism, can also be seen as part of this shift.³⁵

David W. Stowe connects this early wave of conversions in the 1940s to US State Department-sponsored tours from that time that utilized jazz to emblemize purported US virtues of “freedom, creativity and democracy,” increasing, as a side effect of these soft power initiatives, musicians’ awareness of “Third World” cultures and their religions.³⁶ The outburst in the exploration of so-called Third World religions, cultures, music, and political struggle in the 1960s coincided with a period of growing social unrest for Black and white Americans, reaching critical mass domestically with the convergence of the Civil Rights movement; growing anti-Vietnam War sentiment; the rise of Black Nationalism and Black Liberation movements; the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and multiple Black Civil Rights leaders, including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.; and uprisings in urban centers across the country.

In *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening* (1994), Ellwood refutes the common notion that the 1960s was a period of increased secularization, asserting that it was imbued with spiritual fervor by the very nature of its causes: “[T]he religious and political sides of the Sixties should not be set against each other so much as seen as bands in a single spectrum. Both are spiritual in that they touch on values of ultimate significance.”³⁷ After decades of dehumanization and a denial of basic human and civil rights, Black Americans reached a collective tipping point. The rising tensions stoked by the hypocrisy of professing ideals of democracy, progressive liberalism, and modernity while oppressing Black citizens and waging war in the Third World made for an increasingly untenable status quo. Unable to experience the full benefits of citizenship and personhood, many Black Americans began to reevaluate their relationship to their history, nation, race, and religion.³⁸

Contemporary Black Arts Movement writers and theorists Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) articulated a dissatisfaction experienced by segments

of the Black population with what Neal terms the “Old Spirituality.”³⁹ They called for Black artists and intellectuals to develop new moral paradigms. Larry Neal’s 1968 quasi-manifesto “The Black Arts Movement” links the struggles of Black Americans to oppressed subaltern populations in a rebuke of the Black Church: “The colonized native, the oppressed must, of necessity, subscribe to a *separate* morality. One that will liberate him and his people.”⁴⁰ This alignment with global colonized populations is indicative of an expansive worldview, one that included Eastern spirituality as a “counter-hegemonic” alternative.⁴¹ Baraka, in his 1966 piece “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” argued that the Black Church was no longer capable of addressing the changing needs of Black people, that it could “no longer provide for their complete vision of what this world ought to be, or the next.”⁴² In a move that anticipates Josef Sorett’s “spiritual grammar,”⁴³ Baraka ties Black expression inextricably to Black spirituality and alternative spiritual wisdom: “the New Black Music is expression, and expression of reflection as well. What is presented is a consciously proposed learning experience. [...] It is no wonder that many of the new Black musicians are or say they want to be ‘Spiritual Men’ [...], or else they are interested in the Wisdom Religion itself, i.e., the rise to spirit. It is expanding the consciousness of the given that they are interested in, [...] the *unknown*. The mystical.”⁴⁴ The “Spiritual Men” to whom Baraka refers are Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and Pharoah Sanders, “God-seekers” who would rescue Black Music from the disease of commercialism, ushering in an era of deeply spiritual and revolutionary New Black Music.⁴⁵ Baraka sidesteps the spirituality and contributions of women, including Mary Lou Williams, a Catholic convert, Hazel Scott, a convert to the Bahá’í Faith, and Alice Coltrane, whose artistic expression and personal life exemplify this “rise to spirit” in her embrace of Hinduism and the breadth of eclectic and spiritual records she produced.⁴⁶ Baraka’s diminutive view of Alice’s spirituality is evident in his review of her album *A Monastic Trio* (1968), her first record after John Coltrane’s passing. He writes, “Alice is one earth bound projection of John’s spirit,” implying she lacked a spiritual will of her own.⁴⁷

Alice Coltrane attests to the applicability of Hindu spirituality to her life, pointing to the failure of the Church in her turn to gurus for guidance: “The Western Church has failed, especially with young people. It was set up to serve needs it’s not meeting. Ask a Swami, Hindu monk, or someone else from the East about life after death and you’ll get answers that are real, about direct experience, about looking to God. It has helped me to go on.”⁴⁸ This growing disillusionment led to a series of conversions or the adoption of alternative wisdom within the Black musical and intellectual community. Scholar James Hall attributes these shifts of faith and ideology to the ways in which “previously held cosmologies cease to produce comfort,” emblematic of a “general dis-ease or disappointment with American culture and the resources, both material and spiritual, that that culture provides to the black artist.”⁴⁹ The “motion” of religious and ideological conversions becomes a “rich means of organizing the self in which a sense of alienation from modernity often resides.”⁵⁰ Ellwood also suggests

a relationality between Black Americans' spiritual awakening and the contradictions of modernity: "[T]rouble started in the Sixties when blacks and their numerous white sympathizers [...] began to require progress faster than the modern machine could grind it out. [...] [T]he modern democratic ideal found itself at violent odds with the modern unitary state ideal over Vietnam and soon enough [...] began shifting into postmodern pluralism and privatization."⁵¹ Black intellectuals including James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. questioned the efficacy of previous modes of thinking.⁵² King's resistance movement was partly modeled on Gandhi's Hindu-derived concept of *ahimsa* (nonviolence).⁵³ These counterhegemonic responses to domestic oppression and apartheid in both the United States and South Africa, American imperialism, and colonialism, had significant bearing on the lives and music of those within the Black American jazz community.

A second wave of conversions occurred in the Black American jazz community on the heels of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, which created the conditions for the passing of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, bringing new immigrants from Asia along with their daily spiritual and religious practices.⁵⁴ The law enabled the emigration of charismatic gurus and movements from India, including Swami Satchidananda, Swami Prabhupada, Sri Chinmoy, Guru Maharaj Ji, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.⁵⁵ Conversions were prevalent in the late 1960s–70s jazz fusion scene, with hybrid spiritual identities mirroring the polystylism of the music; John McLaughlin of the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Carlos Santana were followers of Sri Chinmoy, and Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Bennie Maupin, and Chick Corea converted to Nichiren Zen Buddhism.⁵⁶ The "motion" of these musicians toward Eastern religious and spiritual practices coincided with their engagement with the music of these cultures, with many musicians incorporating nonwestern instruments and musicians, chanting, modality, and spiritual themes. Rock fusion guitarist Carlos Santana collaborates with Alice Coltrane (credited as Devadip Carlos Santana and Turiya Alice Coltrane) on *Illuminations* (1974), which features ecstatic modal improvising, the drone of the Indian tambura, tabla, bells, and lush string arrangements, harp, and electric organ by Coltrane.

The album opens with the voice of Santana's guru, Sri Chinmoy, chanting a mantra: "Om. / Om. / Om. / The love / is God's / life breath / within us."⁵⁷ Musician Joachim Berendt, in his book *Nada Brahma: The World is Sound*, refers to Don Cherry as "the most universal jazz musician," or "the jazz musician with the strongest and most comprehensive awareness of world music."⁵⁸ Don Cherry's music is distinctly hybridized, embodying the universalist concept by drawing from a diversity of sounds and world music traditions. Cherry became deeply interested in Buddhism after reading Hesse's *Siddhartha* and was also inspired by the writings of Hazrat Inayat Khan. Joachim-Ernst Berendt claims that Inayat Khan's texts have been circulating informally among the jazz community since the end of the sixties and that it was Cherry who first made him aware of these writings.⁵⁹ In these texts, Inayat Khan professes the universalist concept, relating it directly to sound and music: "All the religions have taught us that the

origin of the whole of creation is sound. [...] The music of the universe is the background of the small picture which we call music. Our sense of music, our attraction to music, shows that there is music in the depth of our being. Music is behind the working of the whole universe. Music is not only life's greatest object, but it is life itself."⁶⁰ Other musicians such as late saxophonist Sonny Rollins (1930–2026) incorporated philosophical ideas while remaining in the emerging American jazz vernacular. His interest in Hinduism, Buddhism, and the practice of yoga had little bearing on his musical aesthetic. Rather than incorporating overtly Eastern sounds or musical concepts, Rollins drew from the spiritual and mental discipline: "My music is my yoga. [...] And I've found out that to play my instrument, to concentrate and get inside of [...] myself, is my way of doing all of these spiritual things."⁶¹

The second wave of Indian gurus and their movements in the United States reinforced the concepts of the Neo-Vedanta with variations on the themes of universalism, self-realization, and the guru-disciple relationship of parampara. Although the movements which proliferated in the 1960s within the United States vary in style and daily spiritual practice, they retain these three essential philosophical tenets. Each movement encouraged followers to accept the guru as a spiritual guide and to practice spiritual disciplines, including meditation, yoga, and chanting or singing mantras, with the aim of self-realization. Many also preached some iteration of the universalist concept. These movements included Alice Coltrane's first guru, Swami Satchidananda (1914–2002), and the Integral Yoga Institute; Guru Maharaj Ji (b. 1957) and the Divine Light Mission; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008), founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement and famously associated with The Beatles; Meher Baba (1894–1969); Bhagavan Shree Rajneesh (1931–1990), known as OSHO; and Alice Coltrane's second guru, Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011), whose movement grew in the 1960s and the 1980s in the US and globally through the South Asian diaspora and was internationally disseminated through texts.⁶² I will now focus on the exemplary teachings of Swami Satchidananda, who exerted significant influence on his pupil Alice Coltrane, guiding her in her individual spiritual transformation.

Parampara: Swami Satchidananda and Swamini Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda

In the introduction to Alice Coltrane's rendition of John Coltrane's masterpiece "A Love Supreme" on *World Galaxy* (1972), we hear the tranquil voice of Swami Satchidananda over a bed of Indian tambura drone, strings, and harp, speaking of the "Supreme Love" concept:

Love.
 Love is a sacred word.
 Love is the name of God.
 The entire universe is created with love, by love, and in love.
 Love is the beginning.
 Love is the continuation and love is the end.⁶³

Sat-Chid-Ananda, which means Absolute-Existence-Knowledge-Bliss in Sanskrit,⁶⁴ encapsulates the guru's teaching that truth and happiness can be found within and that "Absolute Consciousness" can be achieved in one's lifetime through self-realization.⁶⁵ Swami Satchidananda's philosophy reflects the values of parampara, universalism, and self-realization through the disciplines of yoga and meditation using simple and direct language with real-life application for the Westerner and non-Westerner alike. Born in 1914 in Tamil Nadu, India, Swami Satchidananda was initiated in 1949 by his chosen guru, the Himalayan sage Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963). It was after his master Sivananda's teachings that Satchidananda modeled his own universalism; speaking of his guru, he said: "His teaching was plain, open, and his outlook was very modern, suitable to everybody. He preached and practiced an ecumenical way, Integral Yoga. He respected every faith and he always taught unity in diversity."⁶⁶

In establishing his own version of Neo-Vedanta, Satchidananda continued to disassociate Hindu philosophy from ritual practices, teaching: "If religious rituals are properly understood, they may help you. But they can also bind you, if you do them without knowing the meaning. That's why so many people are discarding them."⁶⁷ Satchidananda arrived in the United States in 1966, one year after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, and became an American citizen in 1976. In the US, he established several centers of the Integral Yoga Institute for the study of yoga and meditation to spread his guru's philosophy and distinguish his own branch in the West.⁶⁸ The swami gained widespread recognition after his onstage appearance at the 1969 Woodstock Festival in upstate New York, where he told an audience of four hundred thousand youth: "The whole world is watching you. [...] The entire world is going to know what the American youth can do for humanity."⁶⁹

Alice was introduced to her guru by her friend and collaborator, bassist Vishnu Wood (William Clifford), who took her to Satchidananda's weekly lectures at the Unitarian Universalist Church on New York's Upper West Side.⁷⁰ Shaken by the death of her husband and spiritual ally, John Coltrane, two years earlier, Alice found comfort and solace in the Swami's teachings. Satchidananda preached the teaching of parampara, saying, "until you are able to get clear answers from within, you can ask somebody who already knows the way."⁷¹ Alice soon became his pupil, traveling with him on a tour of India in 1970, visiting the Hindu pilgrimage site Rishikesh at the holy Ganges river, Mumbai (then named Bombay), Chennai (formerly Madras), and the World Scientific Yoga Conference in New Delhi. Shanti Norris, who also went on the trip as Satchidananda's personal assistant, confirms that while Satchidananda and Alice had a close personal friendship, their relationship was that of a teacher and a student,⁷² following in the parampara tradition. This tour of India with her guru was the inspiration for her most well-known album *Journey in Satchidananda* (1970), her first album to incorporate nonwestern instruments, including tambura and oud. In the liner notes she writes of the album's inspiration, embodying guru-bhakti (devotion): "I am speaking of my own beloved spiritual perceptor [*sic*], Swami Satchidananda. Swamiji is the first example I have seen in recent years of universal Love or God in

action. He expresses an impersonal love, which encompasses thousands of people. Anyone listening to this selection should try to envision himself floating on an ocean of Satchidanandaji's love."⁷³ It was also on this trip that Alice first encountered the bhakti practice of singing bhajans at the *satsangs* (community gatherings) for the Integral Yoga Institute.⁷⁴ Alice would reinvent the devotional song-form and chanting on the subsequent albums *Transcendence* (1977) and *Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana* (1977), eventually using the repertoire in bhajan singing sessions at her own ashram. Alice used her guru's simple and efficacious mantras, "Hari Om" and "Om Shanti,"⁷⁵ for meditation, employing them as sung or chanted lyrics in many compositions. Satchidananda taught: "A mantra is not just a word. It's a sound vibration, mystic in nature, which more or less aligns the whole system and harmonizes it."⁷⁶

Following pilgrimage and intensive study with her guru, including disciplined practice of yoga and meditation and completing her *sadhana* (spiritual struggle), Alice documents having received a divine revelation in 1976 instructing her to renounce her secular life and become a Swamini, establishing her ashram in Woodland Hills, California.⁷⁷ As Swamini Turiyasangitananda, meaning, "the Transcendental Lord's highest song of bliss,"⁷⁸ she adopted many of her guru Satchidananda's teachings. Satchidananda articulates the ideal of self-realization, and in effect God-realization, as the path to true happiness or bliss: "The goal is to realize your true nature. To realize your peace, your happiness, your godliness, your image of God. Without that you can never be a hundred per cent happy."⁷⁹ The influence of her guru's teachings of self-realization and universalism are clearly revealed in Alice's/Turiyasangitananda's own: "enlightenment, or 'God-realization,' is a possibility here on earth; [...] establishing a personal, devotional, and unmediated relationship with the Lord is a prerequisite for spiritual advancement; [...] God does not belong to any one religion."⁸⁰ The presence of the *Advaita* Vedanta philosophy of the nondualism of Brahman and Ātman is also apparent in her discourse as a Swamini: "God is one with you. You are one with God. Endeavor to attain that exalted status of God Realization."⁸¹

She not only articulated these ideals in her teachings but also manifested them in her creative method, which harnesses self-expression as a vehicle for self-realization. These ideas were mirrored in her approach as a bandleader, which endeavored to create an ideal environment for her musicians to exercise a significant degree of agency and self-expression as cocreators within her musical vision. Bassist Reggie Workman attests to Alice's unique egoless spiritual guidance in the way she led her band: "She didn't think about being a bandleader, she thought about being a voice, in us dealing with a collaboration. She was about having the people around her who could engage in this type of dialogue, that would take the music to a higher place. She would always give you much latitude, much room, to do what you needed to do, within the parameters of the ideas she wanted to project."⁸² The universalist concept of Neo-Vedanta is expressed in Alice's incorporation of the breadth of her musical interests and identities, drawing from her roots as a Gospel musician in Detroit, Indian musical sonorities and song forms such as bhajan, quotations of Igor Stravinsky, classical string

arrangements, harp, and her virtuosic jazz improvising talents as a bebop and avant-garde musician on the Wurlitzer electric organ and piano.

In the liner notes to her groundbreaking album *Universal Consciousness* (1971), Alice refers to this amalgamation as the “Totality concept,” writing, “The Creator bestows on the soul many of his Attributes, and names one, a New Name. This experience and this music involve a Totality concept, which embraces cosmic thought as an emblem of Universal Sound.”⁸³ The association with liberation, which can be viewed as simultaneously personal, political, and aesthetic, is reflected in her comments regarding the departure from previous strictures of chord changes and traditional structures in John Coltrane’s band: “They couldn’t go outside the chord changes and they had to fall in right on the beat, you know. You have got to stress the freedom of music to really branch out and be universal.”⁸⁴

In the early 1970s, Alice Coltrane resettled her family in Woodland Hills, where she began to organize study sessions with a small group of religious aspirants in Vedantic scripture. She reported receiving divine instruction at the age of 35 to renounce her secular life and don the orange robes of a *sannyasin* (religious ascetic).⁸⁵ She adopted the Sanskrit moniker “Turiyasangitananda” and established The Vedantic Center as a self-ordained *Swamini*, leading her own disciples and continuing the parampara tradition.⁸⁶ Perhaps more fully than any other musician of this period, Alice Coltrane embodied the Neo-Vedantic concepts of universalism, self-realization and parampara in all aspects of her personal, musical, and spiritual life as a mother, disciple, composer, improviser, and finally, *Swamini*.

Around the time I began my research, Luaka Bop (the label of Talking Heads frontman David Byrne), released the first volume of their World Spirituality Classics series, *The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda* (2017). This album played no small part in the renewed interest in the music of Alice Coltrane, spawning countless modern tributes, exhibitions, and tours by the Sai Anantam Ashram singers, directed by keyboardist Surya Botofasina, who was raised in the ashram and trained directly by Coltrane herself. The compilation features ten selections from recordings completed between 1982–1995, originally released as cassettes for the exclusive devotional use of members of *Swamini Turiyasangitananda*’s Sai Anantam Ashram in Agoura Hills, California. The cassette tapes *Turiya Sings* (1982), *Divine Songs* (1987), *Infinite Chants* (1990), and *Glorious Chants* (1995) are filled with richly orchestrated compositions inspired by bhajans, the same Indian devotional song form Coltrane explored on her late-1970s albums, *Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana* and *Transcendence*.⁸⁷ While many perceived the period between her late-70s Warner Bros. albums and her final commercial release, *Translinear Light* (2005), as a musical hiatus, the members of her ashram testify that it was perhaps the most musically prolific period in their *Swamini*’s life.⁸⁸ The album cover features images of her multiethnic Ashram members wearing white *salwar kameez*, kurtas, and saris surrounding their beloved *Swamini*, in the typical fashion of Sathya Sai Baba devotees at Sai Center services. In the mid-1970s, Alice Coltrane embraced the Indian guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba as the *Avatar* (God-

incarnate) of our age, changing the name of the ashram from *Shanti* (peace) to Sai in 1994.⁸⁹ Coltrane led the Sai Anantam Ashram from the mid-1970s until her passing, the same period she produced *Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana*, *Transcendence*, and the cassettes featuring Coltrane and the Sai Anantam Ashram. Some of the most popular bhajans sung in the ashram during this period appear on the studio albums *Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana*, which features “Govinda Jai Jai,” “Prema Muditha,” and “Om Namah Sivaya,” and *Transcendence*, with “Sivaya,” “Ghana Nila,” and “Bhaja Govindam.”⁹⁰

While these bhajans are generally considered standard repertoire in the Sai songbook, their musical treatment on these recordings is distinctive. “Prema Muditha” (lyrics in Hindi meaning “with the heart full of love”), for example, is typically sung in a minor mode with *gamaka* (microtonal ornamentation) in the vocals, derived from Indian classical music. In Coltrane’s adaptation, we hear the typical bhajan form, hand-clapping, and percussion; however, the piece is transposed to a brighter major key, with harmonic movement in the style of gospel in the piano and electric organ. In “Sivaya” (lyrics in Telugu meaning “Oh Shiva”), another bhajan featured on her album *Transcendence*, she maintains the minor mode, treating it as a minor blues progression in the organ and utilizing the pitch bend wheel to imitate *gamaka*.⁹¹ Surya’s mother, Radha Reyes-Botofasina, sings lead vocal on the track, using an expressive gospel and blues singing style, with bends, slides, runs, and vibrato. Another distinctive feature from traditional bhajan renditions is the rhythmic character, which Surya identifies as “a strong back beat feel,” which he says has “‘Detroit’ written all over it.”⁹² This final period of her commercial output makes no distinction between her spiritual and musical practice; this unity was the culmination of years of spiritual and musical exploration throughout the 1960s and 1970s and the sublime manifestation of her “totality” concept of musical and spiritual universalism.

Revolution from the Inside/Out

Rereading and relistening to the musical offerings of Alice Coltrane and Black musicians of her generation may offer some spiritual wisdom on navigating today’s worldly challenges. As I write this in 2026 amidst global cataclysmic events, backsliding into fascism and colonial and imperial violence, I am compelled to draw a parallel to the late 1960s, which saw a complete overhaul of the established world order, from the cultural and political, to the spiritual and personal. According to some interpretations of Hindu scripture, we find ourselves in the Kali Yuga, or the “age of destruction,” which is followed by the great awakening of the Sathya Yuga, or “age of truth,” brought about by an expansion of human consciousness.⁹³ The idea is that illumination is only possible when preceded by darkness, which we must acknowledge before we can collectively mobilize against it. Perhaps we are in a transformative period of awakening or reorientation and the gravitation toward healing music and renewed interest in “spiritual jazz,” specifically the music of Alice Coltrane, is part of this impulse towards building another, more just world. Just last year, in 2025, the Hammer Museum in Los

Angeles curated a month-long exhibition around Alice Coltrane's life and work, programmed alongside performances by contemporary jazz harpists including Brandee Younger and Nailah Hunter.⁹⁴ Ravi Coltrane curated "Cosmic Music: The Celestial Songs of Alice Coltrane" at Carnegie Hall, featuring the Sai Ashram Devotional Ensemble with Michelle Coltrane, Flying Lotus, Jeff "Tain" Watts, David Virelles, and others.⁹⁵ The merging of spiritual and decidedly political jazz can be seen and heard in such projects as the collaboration between Saul Williams, Carlos Niño, and Surya Botofasina,⁹⁶ or in my own spiritual protest music with Elder Ones. In 2026, Black Bliss Krishnananda, an intergenerational improvisational ensemble, assembled musicians including Laraaji, Georgia Anne Muldrow, Melvin Gibbs, and Surya Botofasina to "celebrate the profound engagement of Black Americans with the ecstatic spiritual traditions of South Asia," an overtly transnational and transcultural manifestation.⁹⁷ Whatever the reason for this reengagement, the deeply healing and transformative energy of this music can gather, fortify, energize, and inspire us in these difficult times.

Notes

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- ¹ For personal reasons, I no longer consider myself a devotee of Sai Baba, though my family is still very active in the Sai Organization.
- ² Braudie Blais-Billie, "Alice Coltrane's Ashram Lost in California Wildfires," *Pitchfork*, November 18, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/news/alice-coltranes-ashram-lost-in-california-wildfires/>. Sadly, I never made it to the ashram, which burned in a wildfire in November 2018, around the same time I began researching Alice Coltrane and her spiritual practice in earnest.
- ³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 16, 15. Glissant also refers to this as a relational "dialectics of rerouting" (16).
- ⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34.
- ⁵ Richard Wright emphasizes the religious dimension of the Bandung Conference in *The Color Curtain* (1956). See Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*:

Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen! (Harper Perennial, 2008), 435–552.

- ⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, “Introduction: A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” in *Discourse on Colonialism*, by Aimé Césaire, trans. Joan Pinkham (Monthly Review Press, 2001), 9.
- ⁷ Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition* (University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 174.
- ⁸ Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (Rutgers University Press, 1994), 20.
- ⁹ James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 63.
- ¹⁰ Franya J. Berkman, “Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality,” *American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2010): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.0.0000>.
- ¹¹ Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: The Sufi Teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan* (Rev. ed., Shambhala, 1996), 110.
- ¹² Emmet G. Price III. “The Spiritual Ethos in Black Music and Its Quintessential Exemplar, John Coltrane,” in *John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and the Music*, ed. Leonard L. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2010), 158.
- ¹³ Robert S. Ellwood, ed., *Eastern Spirituality in America: Selected Writings* (Paulist Press, 1987), 45–47.
- ¹⁴ Ellwood, *Eastern Spirituality in America*, 45.
- ¹⁵ Frank Whaling, *Understanding Hinduism* (Dunedin Academic Press, 2009), 145.
- ¹⁶ Whaling, *Understanding Hinduism*, 146.
- ¹⁷ Paul Oliver, *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 35.
- ¹⁸ Berkman, “Appropriating Universality,” 46.
- ¹⁹ Ellwood, *Eastern Spirituality in America*, 21.
- ²⁰ Swami Vivekananda, *Swami Vivekananda: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Makarand R. Paranjape (Routledge, 2015), 15.
- ²¹ Ellwood, *Eastern Spirituality in America*, 36.
- ²² Vivekananda, *Swami Vivekananda*, 17.

- ²³ Whaling, *Understanding Hinduism*, 147.
- ²⁴ Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (8th ed., Self-Realization Fellowship, 1959), 122.
- ²⁵ Ellwood, *Eastern Spirituality in America*, 36–37.
- ²⁶ Paramahansa Yogananda, “Paramahansa Yogananda: The Science of Religion,” in *Eastern Spirituality in America: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert S. Ellwood (Paulist Press, 1987), 91.
- ²⁷ Yogananda, “Science of Religion,” 94.
- ²⁸ Berkman, “Appropriating Universality,” 44. Berkman quotes Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 232.
- ²⁹ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Truth and Actuality* (Harper and Row, 1978), 144–45.
- ³⁰ Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi* (Continuum, 2007), 280–81.
- ³¹ Lavezzoli, *Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, 268–69.
- ³² Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Hilda Rosner (1922, New Directions, 1957).
- ³³ See, e.g., Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: The Sufi Teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan*.
- ³⁴ Lavezzoli, *Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, 268–69.
- ³⁵ David W. Stowe, “Both American and Global: Jazz and World Religions in the United States,” *Religion Compass* 4, no. 5 (2010): 317–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00212.x>.
- ³⁶ Stowe, “Both American and Global,” 317.
- ³⁷ Ellwood, *Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 9.
- ³⁸ Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me*, 5.
- ³⁹ Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (1968): 39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377>.
- ⁴⁰ Neal, “Black Arts Movement,” 39.
- ⁴¹ Berkman, “Appropriating Universality,” 42.
- ⁴² Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Black Music: Essays* (Akashic Books, 2010), 218.
- ⁴³ Sorett draws heavily from Baraka’s writings on music and spirituality to characterize the Black Arts Movement as an example of “spiritual grammar,” or a Black American

discourse “wherein spirit itself was a heterodox formation that worked out its meanings in critical tension with, and in the shadows of, an especially prominent Protestant establishment.” Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 10.

- 44 Baraka, *Black Music*, 214–15.
- 45 Baraka, *Black Music*, 220.
- 46 Tammy L. Kernodle, “Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Alice Coltrane and the Redefining of the Jazz Avant-Garde,” in *John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom*, ed. Leonard L. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2010), 94–96.
- 47 Amiri Baraka, liner notes for Alice Coltrane, *A Monastic Trio*, recorded January 29 and June 6, 1968, Impulse! Records A-9156, 1968, vinyl LP.
- 48 Alice Coltrane, “Alice Coltrane,” interview by Angela Dews, *Essence*, December 1971, 62.
- 49 Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me*, 16.
- 50 Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me*, 16.
- 51 Ellwood, *Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 22.
- 52 Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me*, 6, 16.
- 53 See Martin Luther King Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Volume 4: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958*, vol. 4, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (University of California Press, 2000), 354–55.
- 54 Ellwood, *Eastern Spirituality in America*, 33.
- 55 Ellwood, *Eastern Spirituality in America*, 37–38.
- 56 Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The World Is Sound: Nada Brahma: Music and the Landscape of Consciousness*, trans. Helmut Bredigkeit (Destiny Books, 1991), 208.
- 57 Turiya Alice Coltrane and Devadip Carlos Santana, *Illuminations*, Columbia PC 32900, 1974, vinyl LP.
- 58 Berendt, *World Is Sound*, 207.
- 59 Berendt, *World Is Sound*, 160–161.
- 60 Hazrat Inayat Khan, quoted in Berendt, *The World Is Sound*, 161. For nearly identical versions of these statements, see Inayat Khan, *Mysticism of Sound and Music*, 17, 11.

- ⁶¹ Sonny Rollins, "Approaching Enlightenment," interview by Ted Panken, *Down Beat*, February 2001, 27.
- ⁶² Ellwood, *Eastern Spirituality in America*, 35–38.
- ⁶³ Alice Coltrane, *World Galaxy*, recorded November 15 and 16, 1971, Impulse! Records AS-9218, 1972, vinyl LP.
- ⁶⁴ Philip Mandelkorn, introduction to *To Know Your Self: The Essential Teachings of Swami Satchidananda*, by Swami Satchidananda, ed. Philip Mandelkorn (Integral Yoga Publications, 1988), ix.
- ⁶⁵ Franya J. Berkman, *Monument Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 97.
- ⁶⁶ Swami Satchidananda, quoted in Mandelkorn, introduction, x.
- ⁶⁷ Satchidananda, *To Know Your Self: The Essential Teachings of Swami Satchidananda*, ed. Philip Mandelkorn (Integral Yoga Publications, 1988), 242.
- ⁶⁸ Mandelkorn, introduction, xi.
- ⁶⁹ Swami Satchidananda, quoted in Douglas Martin, "Swami Satchidananda, Woodstock's Guru, Dies at 87," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/21/world/swami-satchidananda-woodstock-s-guru-dies-at-87.html>.
- ⁷⁰ Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 72, 76.
- ⁷¹ Satchidananda, *To Know Your Self*, 39.
- ⁷² Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 78.
- ⁷³ Alice Coltrane, liner notes for Alice Coltrane, *Journey in Satchidananda*, feat. Pharoah Sanders, recorded July 4 and November 8, 1970, Impulse! Records AS-9203, 1971, vinyl LP.
- ⁷⁴ Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 79.
- ⁷⁵ Satchidananda, *To Know Your Self*, 70.
- ⁷⁶ Satchidananda, *To Know Your Self*, 65.
- ⁷⁷ Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 94, 99.
- ⁷⁸ Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 94.
- ⁷⁹ Satchidananda, *To Know Your Self*, 10.
- ⁸⁰ Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 96.

- ⁸¹ Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda, *Turiya Speaks: Divine Discourses, Volume 1* (Avatar Book Institute, 1995), 53.
- ⁸² Reggie Workman, quoted in Laura Yogasundaram, producer, “Alice Coltrane: Her Sound and Spirit,” in *BBC3 Sunday Feature*, March 2, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017.
- ⁸³ Alice Coltrane, liner notes for Alice Coltrane, *Universal Consciousness*, recorded April 6, May 14, and June 19, 1971, Impulse! Records, 1971, vinyl LP.
- ⁸⁴ Alice Coltrane, “Alice Coltrane,” interview by Pauline Rivelli, *Jazz and Pop*, September 1968, 29.
- ⁸⁵ Alice Coltrane, *Monument Eternal* (The Vedantic Book Press, 1977), 33, 43.
- ⁸⁶ Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 76.
- ⁸⁷ Ashley Kahn, liner notes to Alice Coltrane, *The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda*, Luaka Bop LBOP-087, 2017, vinyl LP.
- ⁸⁸ Surya Botofasina, “Inside Alice Coltrane’s Sai Anantam Ashram,” interview by Andy Beta, *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*, October 23, 2017, <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/10/inside-alice-coltranes-sai-anantam-ashram>.
- ⁸⁹ Surya Botofasina, in discussion with the author, December 7, 2017.
- ⁹⁰ For more on bhajans in *Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana* and *Transcendence*, see Berkman, *Monument Eternal*, 94–110.
- ⁹¹ Alice Coltrane, *Transcendence*, Warner Bros. Records BS 3077, 1977, vinyl LP.
- ⁹² Surya Botofasina, quoted in Ashley Kahn, liner notes.
- ⁹³ Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri acknowledges that many Hindu astronomers claim that the current era is the Kali Yuga, but he argues that we are in the Dvapara Yuga. Yukteswar Giri, *Holy Science*, xix.
- ⁹⁴ Ashley Lee, “Alice Coltrane’s Ashram — and Her ‘Black Radical Imagination’ — Lives on at the Hammer Museum,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2025-02-14/alice-coltrane-hammer-museum-ashram-monument-eternal->; Hammer Museum, “Turiya Rising: Brandee Younger,” February 16, 2025 <https://hammer.ucla.edu/programs-events/2025/turiya-rising-brandee-younger>; Hammer Museum, “Turiya Rising: Deluge Presents: Nailah Hunter and Adee Roberson,” April 20, 2025, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/programs-events/2025/turiya-rising-deluge-presents-nailah-hunter-and-adee-roberson>.

- ⁹⁵ Carnegie Hall, “COSMIC MUSIC: The Celestial Songs of Alice Coltrane,” May 16, 2025, <https://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2025/05/16/COSMIC-MUSIC-The-Celestial-Songs-of-Alice-Coltrane-0800PM>.
- ⁹⁶ Saul Williams, Carlos Niño, and Surya Botofasina performed live in 2025 at Le Guess Who? For more, see Le Guess Who? “Saul Williams meets Carlos Niño & Friends featuring Surya Botofasina - Live at Le Guess Who? 2025,” 2025, <https://leguesswho.com/recordings/saul-williams-meets-carlos-nino-friends-featuring-surya-botofasina-live-at-le-guess-who-2025?id=1148>.
- ⁹⁷ The quotation is from the Instagram account of FourOneOne, an arts organization and performance space in Brooklyn (“More scenes from Black Bliss Krishnanda last month at ShapeShifter,” Instagram post, March 11, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DVwTjoMIF1j/>).

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