

ALL PATHS LEAD TO GOD:
A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS FAITH
IN THE LIVES OF YUSEF LATEEF, SONNY ROLLINS & JOHN COLTRANE

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Abstract

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*All Paths Lead To God: A Brief Account Of Spiritual And Religious Faith
In The Lives Of Yusef Lateef, Sonny Rollins & John Coltrane*

Dissertation directed by Dr. John Gunther

Many universally recognized jazz masters have been drawn toward spirituality and/or religion. Some have fused various sonic elements of religious musics with jazz, while others have been known to musically adapt intellectual or emotional themes found in sacred texts. There are also those who have not only realized an inseparable bond between their music and their faith, but who have found lifelong purpose and fulfillment through spiritual and/or religious discipline. Yusef Lateef, Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane not only devoted themselves to the pursuit of musical mastery but also to the pursuit of self-realization. This paper discusses the unique paths each took to get there as well as their similar desire to connect with a deeper part of themselves.

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FORWARD

While jazz is home to quite a lineage of musicians who have publicly declared their interest and investment in a ‘spiritual path’, one could ask how vital that information is to our understanding and appreciation of the music and those who play it. In the academic arena, (where for the most part the learning of ‘jazz’ has resided for the past four decades) the recordings of the masters already yield more than enough usable content to be applied by aspiring professionals.¹ Ergo, the study or discussion of a John Coltrane, a Sonny Rollins, or a Yusef Lateef, and their contributions, in a classroom setting will most likely not emphasize the less tangible aspects of their personhood, despite their relevance to their professional accomplishments.

Regardless of how much attention is focused on the non-musical pursuits of the jazz artists we admire, these aspects are intrinsic to who they are as people and thus have a direct effect on their music. Even when chroniclers devote time to the discussion of these musicians’ more personal matters, the conversation tends to be limited to events related to addictive-substance abuse, eccentricities and behavioral quirks. Influencing our perception of a musician’s overall character, discussing only these superficial aspects is inadequate if we do not probe the underlying causes and motivations behind them. Tomie Hahn says it best:

When the sensory modes are compartmentalized in the academic arena, we lose the perspective of the humanity; of the whole expressive sensory being. The senses are discreet; there is a great deal of sensory overlap...so why do we compartmentalize them in academia? Understandably there are practical and formal reasons...but it’s a great responsibility to reconstruct the humanity after deconstructing it.²

¹ In addition, speaking on spirituality or religion, amongst other ‘controversial’ subjects, especially within current-day academia, can be most touchy, and is often avoided, even sometimes seen as inappropriate or taboo altogether.

² Tomie Hahn is an ethnomusicologist, dancer, shakuhachi player and author | PieterdeRooijHolland, "Cultural Musicology - Its Possibilities, Limits and Challenges," YouTube, February 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDB0ixy8WjE&t=1884s&index=2&list=PLp5cCR6DTsXxgBd_BoNIFF3UKp_ojPHQW5. | Another instance of this point being exercised comes from the great Ravi Shankar, who is actually quite relevant to our discussion, both personally, and culturally: “Too much stress is placed on technical studies and forms, with the result that most of the students who graduate from music schools and colleges today take the means

Hahn's argument toward the importance of a more holistically oriented approach to applied ethnomusicology is in line with my own belief that the ethereal aspects of art and the people who make it are as much a part of what makes human expression so compelling as are its more surface-level components. By looking into the seemingly intangible phenomena and by finding ways to extract perceivable information, a familiar process of personal application can be employed – similar to the one involved when a jazz musician extracts musical data from a solo and makes it their own.

to be on the end and miss the spirit and soul of our ragas; it takes many years of profound study of one's own inner self and the ragas to be able to play Indian music with the immense emotional and spiritual effect that the music calls for." | Ravi Shankar, *My Music My Life*, (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1968), 15.

SECTION I: JAZZ AND IT'S SPIRITUAL ROOTS

The experience of being connected to the universe or to God is a traditional element of mysticism regardless of the cultural context. These experiences among Arabic shamans, poets in antiquity and contemporary jazz musicians have always been characteristic of mystical enlightenment. - Elina Hytönen-Ng³

Wynton Marsalis describes jazz as a music that exists “between ‘heaven and earth’; between the church and the night club; if you take one of them away, it loses its meaning.”⁴ Sonny Rollins goes even further to say that “jazz transcends life and death as we know it on this planet,” and that “jazz is something which is more universal; eternal.”⁵ While some of us may have heard these or similar words spoken by masters of this music, how can we relate to such claims? What are our personal connections with the religious or spiritual concepts being referred to here? Is it possible that the pursuit of musical mastery can lead a performer toward aspects of consciousness or reality that extend beyond the physical? If so, how deep does the rabbit-hole go?

Jazz as a genre, can be described as a musical bi-product of extraordinary historical and cultural circumstances: as an art-form that took nearly three centuries to develop, and that encompasses musical, cultural, spiritual, and religious traditions of peoples hundreds of thousands of years its senior. It is a vehicle of expression forged through the blood, sweat, and tears of unfathomable hardship and suffering, while simultaneously being tempered by a hope and perseverance so bold and uncompromising, it triumphed in its place. It would seem that a phenomenon born out of such vast, seemingly legendary, almost mystical origins, would surely lead a person who participates in it, toward states of awareness equally if not more profound in

³ Elina Hytönen-Ng, *Experiencing “Flow” in Jazz Performance* (London & NY: Routledge, 2016), 155.

⁴ Uwe Steinmetz, “A (Very Brief) History of Jazz and Church,” Bluechurch, 2016, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.bluechurch.ch/research/history/a-history-of-jazz-and-church>.

⁵ Jazz Video Guy, “Sonny Rollins: What Jazz Is, and What Being a Jazz Musician Means To Me,” YouTube, July 5, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKQcagDsa20>.

nature. While it would seem safe to assume this would be the case, the reality of the situation isn't so cut-and-dried.

In general, the culture of jazz musicians and jazz audiences, is *not* associated (within mainstream public consciousness at least) with a spiritually oriented lifestyle. After all, it seems rather counterintuitive to think that a music “so often developed under the most impure of conditions: smoky clubs, alcohol, drugs, and the inescapable burden of racial prejudice,”⁶ could help to lead an individual to a purer, healthier, more conscious life. Consider the late-night hours at which jazz musicians often congregate, into the wee small hours of the morning, sacrificing both luxuries and basic comforts most other people enjoy, all for a paycheck that leaves something to be desired. Even the definition of the word jazz connotes a lower-echelon lifestyle. “If you look it up, you’ll see that its synonyms include ‘nonsense,’ ‘blather,’ ‘claptrap’ and other definitions that reduce the music to poppycock and skullduggery,” says Yusef Lateef.⁷ Even the internationally acclaimed philosopher Osho has said that “compared to classical music, jazz music is in the lowest category, because rather than creating a spirituality in you, it simply activates your sexuality.”⁸

The above traits were and are a part of the music that we have devoted our lives to the study of whether we’d like to admit it or not. Jelly Roll Morton, who claimed to have invented jazz, came up working in the brothels of Storyville, New Orleans at the age of 14, and Charlie

⁶ Sean Murphy, “Trane of No-Thought: How Meditation Inspired Jazz Great John Coltrane,” *Lion’s Roar | Buddhist Wisdom For Our Time*, November 9, 2007, <https://www.lionsroar.com/trane-of-no-thought-how-meditation-inspired-jazz-great-john-coltrane/>.

⁷ Marc Myers, “Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 2),” *JazzWax*, February 7, 2008, <http://www.jazzwax.com/2008/02/yusel-lateef-pa.html>. | Since Lateef is featured heavily in Section III, Part I, please see that section for his introduction and credentials.

⁸ Osho, “Chapter 9: A God Is A Despot,” *Osho Online Library*, accessed January 4, 2018, <http://www.osho.com/iosho/library/read-book/online-library-existence-music-jazz-e7118aec-593?p=4933d1e8ff61e44b45cfb2d4dafed0c0>. | “Osho has been described by the Sunday Times in London as one of the ‘1000 Makers of the 20th Century’ and by Sunday Mid-Day (India) as one of ten people – along with Gandhi, Nehru and Buddha – who have changed the destiny of India.” | “About Osho,” *Osho*, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://www.osho.com/read/osho/about-osho>.

Parker, one of the most, if not *the* most revered and worshipped jazz musician in all of the artform's history, made some of jazz's most iconic recordings while high on heroin, all before dying at the young age of 34. Even such icons as Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, were not immune to the pressures and temptations of the jazz underworld. It is even said that jazz remained the novel form of entertainment it was marketed to be all the way up Coltrane's rise to solo-artist acclaim. "Before Coltrane, jazz had largely been regarded as a sensual, even risqué form of expression," says Sean Murphy, "linked as much to libation as to liberation."⁹

Where then *do* we find the opportunity to discuss jazz's more liberated associations?—associations that seem to have helped certain musicians find new trajectories for their lives, void of the destructive, addictive behaviors that others have fallen prey to. What is it about spiritual matters, dare I say religion – even God – that gives us pause? In his book *Spirits Rejoice!: Jazz and American Religion*, Jason Bivins discusses whether there was an "actual resistance to the term 'religion' or did it simply fail to get on people's radar because [he'd] used the word? It turned out it was the latter, because while a lot of folks didn't know how to define religion...it turned out they were very interested in kind of dwelling in that inability. And in the inability to finalize terms—which ultimately means the inability to finalize identity: this was something that musicians ended up celebrating."¹⁰

Perhaps it is this very celebration of non-identity that produced the pervasive "spiritual but not religious" identity, claimed by many nowadays. Yet, while spirituality and religion have their differences, the two actually have more to do with each other than one might think. Teacher of theology, religious studies, philosophy, and psychology for over two decades, Jose Bulao points out quite a few similarities between people who consider themselves religious and those

⁹ Sean Murphy, "Trane of No-Thought: How Meditation Inspired Jazz Great John Coltrane."

¹⁰ Andrew Aghapour, "Sing the Glory of the Smoke: The Spiritual History of Jazz," Religion Dispatches, July 10, 2015, <http://religiondispatches.org/sing-the-glory-of-the-smoke-the-spiritual-history-of-jazz/>.

who consider themselves spiritual: both believe in a higher power of some kind, both desire to have a relationship with this higher power, both have rituals and practices, and both have respect for the sacred other-worldly.¹¹ Dr. Amy R. Krentzman defines a large component of spirituality to be “a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves,”¹² and according to Oxford theologian and philosopher Richard Swinburne, “the purposes of the practice of a religion are to achieve the goals of salvation for oneself and others, and (if there is a God) to render due worship and obedience to God.”¹³

These definitional building blocks of both religious and other spiritual pursuits are at the core of Coltrane’s, Rollins’ and Lateef’s desire to move further away from self-indulgent activities, including those that feed the ego’s desire for acceptance and validation, and more towards service of a higher order. These men are iconic examples of jazz musicians who did not limit their understandings of what jazz is, or of what being a jazz musician should be, based on what it was for others. Yusef Lateef furthers his comments on how limiting the very word ‘jazz’ is to him personally: “I find that the word ‘jazz’ is a meaningless term that too narrowly defines the music I play, and it adds a connotation that’s disrespectful to the art and those who perform it,” he says. “If you eat a wonderful meal, you don’t refer to the food as ‘trash’, do you?”¹⁴ Even

¹¹ Jose Bulao, “Health, staying in contact with the spirit,” EzineArticles, accessed July 3, 2018, http://EzineArticles.com/expert/Jose_Bulao/400488. | Charles Cork Lucas, “Five Similarities Between Religion and Spirituality,” *Brockway Wesleyan Church*, August 8, 2017, <http://brockwaychurch.com/five-similarities-between-religion-and-spirituality/>.

¹² “Amy R. Krentzman, MSW, PhD,” Taking Charge of your Health & Wellbeing | University of Minnesota, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/our-experts/amy-r-krentzman-msw-phd>. | Amy R. Krentzman, MSW, PhD, “What is Spirituality?,” Taking Charge of your Health & Wellbeing | University of Minnesota accessed June 7, 2018, <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/what-spirituality>.

¹³ “Richard Swinburne – short intellectual biography,” Faculty of Philosophy | Oxford Philosophy,” University of Oxford, accessed June 7, 2018, <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~orie0087/>. | Richard Swinburne, “The Purpose of Religion,” Oxford Scholarship Online, accessed July 2, 2018, <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199283927.001.0001/acprof-9780199283927-chapter-5>.

¹⁴ Marc Myers, “Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 2). | Throughout this paper, the word ‘jazz’ will be mentioned many times. If the reader identifies with the suggestion of ‘jazz artist’ or ‘jazz musician’ then they already understand that the word ‘jazz’ does not and cannot ever truly describe the essence of music that we play, or the essence of who we

Osho, who previously commented negatively on what jazz music inspires in a person, subsequently states that “you *can* [italics mine] make your jazz music free from the lower gravitation of sexuality; you can make it connected with your higher centers of being, and then it will not be an obstacle on the path to enlightenment.”¹⁵ I would say that this very approach accurately describes the type of relationship the three tenor-men being discussed throughout this paper, had with music.

are as creative artists. Ergo, my usage of the word jazz in the context of describing a type of musician—i.e. a ‘jazz’ artist or musician, is representative not only of artists who devote themselves to the study, practice and performance of one or multiple ‘styles’ of music that they themselves may accept as jazz, but also, can be representative of an artist who considers themselves to be an improvising and/or creative musician, as simply, a musician, or even as a person who happens to play music or play an instrument, sometimes. Occasionally, I use the word ‘jazz’ not to describe a musical or even artistic idiom, style, or genre. Instead, I use it to describe the essence of what is behind the curtain—away from what society, critics and pop-culture may confine ‘jazz’ music to be. Adversely, at other times, I will in fact refer to the term ‘jazz’ as it exists within recognized societal and communal constructs, but it should be obvious to the reader when that is the case. Lastly, I’d like to reader to entertain the idea of ‘jazz’ as a reminder of the lifelong pursuit of self-discovery a true devotee of the artform can never escape from. It is meant to describe the current, ever-evolving, and awesome potential that exists within the discipline and intricacies of finding, refining, polishing and re-imagining one’s one voice on their instrument. As an extension of that, I also offer the reader to consider ‘jazz’ as a mirror of the endless search for truth that all human beings undergo in their lifetime. ‘Jazz’, as it may be expressed within music, I, and others, believe, can serve as a tool to be wielded in order to speak of these truths—to convey messages of human and non-human origin, and to interact with and understand them on a “spiritual” level. Throughout the text, you will encounter additional definitions of ‘jazz’ through the words of its practitioners both present and past which will help to further supplement the essence of these perspectives. The reason for the semantics in regard to how a jazz musician is recognized, is because of the varying degree of definitions of what ‘jazz’ is. It is of greater value to me, for the purposes of this discussion, that the musicians being spoken about are acknowledged within their *own* spheres of artistic and professional influence, more so than within the commercialized and/or sensationalized entertainment-based environments they may be marketed within. In fact, the later circle is not really of much relevance here, other than to serve as perhaps added support to the importance and relevance of certain artists being addressed. There are also instances of certain musicians being completely against the term ‘jazz’, or even the title ‘creative musician/artist’, at least as a means of describing *themselves*. Some choose to be considered a musician, *period*, and some, would prefer to not even be labeled at all, in any way. Some say they play Black music, or Black-American music, whether or not they identify as Black or Black-American. The variety of identities and non-identities as they exist within or outside of the umbrella term ‘jazz’ are boundless, and I will be the first to admit that any attempt to codify them or the artists whose music is connected to this term, willingly or unwillingly, either self-proclaimed or non-self-proclaimed, is not only unnecessary, but frankly impossible. While the intent of this work can undoubtedly be realized and appreciated without even acknowledging the above semantics, I find it living proof that this music is filled with an indefinability, and concurrently a seemingly infinite expanse *for* definability as well—a duality which may indeed permeate our discussion of other, non-musical matters.

¹⁵ “Osho on Jazz,” satrakshitta, accessed January 4, 2018, http://www.satrakshita.com/osho_on_jazz.htm.

SECTION II: THE MUSICIANS & THEIR FAITHS

PART I: YUSEF LATEEF/ISLAM

When Yusef Lateef speaks, you know immediately that you're listening to a highly spiritual person.-Marc Myers¹⁶

As early as the late 1940s, we start seeing conversions to the Muslim faith by African-American jazz musicians. The group known as The Jazz Messengers is perhaps the most famous of this early cohort, and as Art Blakey noted about his band members, “most of the guys were Muslims” who had converted around the time of the formation of the group. Blakey himself took the name Abdullah Ibn Buhaina and was often referred to as ‘Bu’ by his musical colleagues.¹⁷ Of the eight original members of the Messengers who recorded the organizations first tracks in December of 1947 (the same year that Blakey “traveled to Africa to learn about Islam and his African ancestry”¹⁸), six were Muslim. Among them, trumpeter Kenny Dorham (Abdul Hamid), trombonist Howard Bowe (Haleen Rasheed), and pianist Walter Bishop (Ibrahim Ibn Ismail).¹⁹ In conjunction with the social and political implications of being a “black-Muslim,” many openly expressed their appreciation of Islam through their music.²⁰

¹⁶ Marc Myers is a regular writer for *The Wall Street Journal* and is author of *Anatomy of a Song* (Grove) and *Why Jazz Happened*. He also has conducted hundreds of jazz musician interviews which are currently featured on JazzWax.com. | Marc Myers, “Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 2).”

¹⁷ Steve Schwartz and Michael Fitzgerald, “Chronology of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers,” May 1996-July 6, 2008, <https://jazzdiscography.com/Artists/Blakey/chron.htm>. | “Steve Schwartz and Michael Fitzgerald, “Chronology of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers.”

¹⁸ Dawoud Kringle, “Jazz and Islam – A Retrospective Series (P.3/A),” DooBeeDooBeeDoo NY, September 10, 2016, <https://www.doobeedoobeedoo.info/2016/10/13/jazz-and-islam-a-retrospective-series-p-3a/>.

¹⁹ The list doesn’t stop there. Throughout the transition to bebop, the emergence of hardbop, and beyond, hosts of jazz musicians that we all know and love embraced Islam as their spiritual path. The following lists many other recognized jazz musicians who at some point in their lives converted to Islam, both past and present: Kenny Clarke (Liaquat Ali Salaam), Grant Green (Muslim name unknown), Gigi Gryce (Basheer Qusim), Billy Higgins (Abdul Karim) Ahmad Jamal, Idris Muhammad, Idrees Sulieman (Muslim name unknown), McCoy Tyner (Salaimon Saud), ... even more recently, musicians like Nasheet Waits (Muslim name unknown), Larry Young (Muslim name unknown), Muhal Richard Abrams, Rashied Ali, Jackie McLean (Omar Hamed Abdul Kariem) | Fred Patterson, “The Jazz Messengers,” The Archive of Contemporary Music, April 12, 2011, <http://arcmusic.org/features/the-jazz-messengers/>.

²⁰ The term “Black Muslims,” was coined by African-American scholar and author, Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, in 1956. Lincoln’s 1961 book “The Black Muslims in America,” reflects on the state of African-American race-relations in

Alice Coltrane, who converted to Hinduism in 1972, recorded *Universal Consciousness* for Impulse! one year prior—an album which features selections titled after various gods and goddesses, with origins ranging from Indian to Egyptian. Among the pieces was one of Middle Eastern background, “Oh Allah”, a collaboration with Ornette Coleman. Pharaoh Sanders also featured a song with a similarly themed title, “Hum Allah Hum Allah Hum Allah”, on his 1969 album, *Jewels of Thought* (also on Impulse!). Poet Amiri Baraka’s (a.k.a. LeRoi Jones) record label called Jihad Records, which produced albums beginning in 1965 that featured the likes of Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, Sunny Murray, Henry Grimes, and Sun Ra among others.²¹

What is the reason for such a trend that spans over decades and that continues on into the present? Of course, it is known that in the late 1940s, black musicians were accepting Islam for reasons other than spiritual devotion. In his autobiography *To Be or Not to Bop*, Dizzy Gillespie mentions that “as a Muslim, [black musicians] would no longer be considered black by certain authorities.”²² And when ‘Black Muslims’ were being called out on their converting for political reasons, they claimed it was in fact, the “‘natural religion of black people’ and [that it] provide[d] the means for full ‘spiritual, mental and physical liberation’ from an oppressive

the U.S. and its relevance to Islam. As fate would have it, Lincoln actually spoke with black-rights activist and outspoken public voice of the Black Muslim faith, Malcolm X, a few days before Malcom X was gunned down in a Harlem hotel. Apparently the two were close friends. “The Sunday following their phone call, while lecturing on racial reconciliation, Malcolm X was assassinated.” Ervin Dyer, “Dr. C. Eric Lincoln/black Muslims In America,” Black Community Discussion Forum, October 31, 1998, <https://destee.com/threads/dr-c-eric-lincoln-black-muslims-in-america.32923/>.

²¹ The word Jihad, which unfortunately has become associated with tyrannical acts of violence, has origin and ‘greater’ meaning far removed from such corrupted extremism. The Arabic word literally means ‘effort’, expressed in ‘Muslim thought’ as ‘struggle on behalf of God and Islam.’ Additionally, what is known as the ‘greater Jihad’ exemplifies ‘the spiritual struggle within oneself against sin.’ | “Jihad | Definition of Jihad in English by Oxford Dictionaries,” Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/jihad>. | Dawoud Kringle, “Jazz and Islam – A Retrospective Series (P.2),” DooBeeDooBeeDoo NY, September 10, 2016, <https://www.doobeedoobeedoo.info/2016/09/22/jazz-and-islam-a-retrospective-series-p-2/>. | “Nothing Is v2.0: Jihad Records,” *Nothing Is v2.0*, November 24, 2008, <http://ajbenjamin2beta.blogspot.com/2008/11/jihad-records.html>.

²² By authorities, Patterson is referring most likely to police, and other law-enforcement officials who took full advantage of the commonality for discrimination against African-Americans during this time period. | Fred Patterson, “The Jazz Messengers.”

system designed to subjugate them.”²³ Finally, besides serving as a means of relief from racial prejudice, according to John Coltrane biographer C.O. Simpkins, Coltrane believed that Islam “was a force which directly opposed the deterioration of the mind and body through either spiritual or physical deterrents”, the latter referring to the heavy hard drug and alcohol use that plagued the lives of countless jazz musicians, including Coltrane himself.²⁴

Islam also offered black jazz musicians living in post-World War II America a release from the conditionings, pressures and expectations that came with that territory. “Islam is stripped down; simple; minimal ritual; minimal restriction,” says jazz guitarist and world-religion scholar, Nicholas Went. “A focus *only* on God alone and the infinitude of the endless ocean of Love, Beauty and Power.”²⁵ But is Islam only suited or meant for jazz musicians of African descent from decades ago, or are its ideologies and fruits of study available to all, right now? The Quran in fact teaches that “There is no God but God”, which breathes a non-exclusivity and omnipresence—qualities that all jazz musicians of any background can find meaning in. Further cementing the idea that neither Islam nor jazz exists within a historical vacuum, Went states that Went states that “the jazz musician is an artist of the perpetual search for truth, as expressed through sound, and in a continual search for new ways to express the human spirit,” an idea that transcends time. Yusef Lateef refers to the Quran in a similar vein, when he states that “valid presenters [of jazz music] use their technique... [to] speak with their

²³ Richard Reddie, “Why Are Black People Turning to Islam?,” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/oct/05/black-muslims-islam>.

²⁴ Coltrane, Blakey, Lateef and many others observed the Ahmadi sect of Islam, which strictly prohibits the use of drugs and alcohol. (More on the Ahmadi/Ahmadiyya sect later) | “Chapter 6: Islamic Viewpoint on Contemporary Issues.” *Al Islam*, accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.alislam.org/library/book/pathway-to-paradise/islamic-viewpoint-on-contemporary-issues/>.

²⁵ Nicholas Went is a personal friend of mine, who happens to have been immersed in the study of world religions and spirituality for over a decade. Any Nicholas Went quotations, as well as all Nicholas Went informational references were extracted from two separate written interviews conducted in August of 2018.

heart. It has been said that the heart is the seat of the intellect[,] and in the Holy Quran we read:

‘Aye! It is in the remembrance of God that hearts can find comfort....’²⁶

Went further the point that it's the search for something more that “will open [one's] spirit to [a] greater reality, and [a] greater beauty.” In fact, he claims that:

All abstract and mysterious inklings and artistic impulses originate from the junction between the known and the unknown; the junction between soul and spirit. When he/she (a musician) improvises, a mind too stiff and fixated upon the morsels of practice cannot function and produce that spontaneous, eternal quality.²⁷

To surrender to this 'back channel', as he calls it, one “that resides behind the energy centers within the human body” is to reside in the channel that “binds spirit and soul and is the place of trust and letting go.” He continues, “if one is only focused on their immediate self, they fill their cup with that which instantly becomes a fossil in the spiritual record, divorced from the flow; that flow is what *creates* jazz.”²⁸

The Quran, and the teachings and philosophies of Islam have the potential to guide a jazz musician toward spaces of concentration that they may not only already be familiar with, but perhaps even toward understandings that could supplement and expand those spaces. “The jazz

²⁶ Yusef Lateef, “Yusef Lateef | Essays,” accessed August 29, 2018, <https://yuseflateef.com/literature/essays/>. | It may be interesting for the reader to note that the word ‘jazz’, or perhaps the *sound* of the word ‘jazz’ I should say, while making its initial appearance in U.S. print in 1913, seems to have actually been first written down over a millennium earlier. “Some scholars have traced the roots of the word to ancient Africa and Arabia,” one example being contained within the ‘theoretical works on music’ of Ishaq Al-Mawsili (742–804), in which the term ‘jaza’a’ is found to describe “the proportionate division of melody or rhythm.” ‘Jaza’a’ is also found in the holy Quran, a text also written in Arabic, with one of its definitions being ‘to take part in’, or ‘to be part of’, and to express individuality in that thing.[#] Another spelling, ‘Jaz’, is defined as “a verb used by ancient Sufis of Arabia and Africa describing the search for hidden meaning.” Additionally, the Arabic word, ‘I’jaz’, is defined as “a term describing the miraculous nature of the Quran.” ‘I’jaz’ and ‘al-Quran’ are often used in the same phrase, ‘I’jaz al-Quran’, which when rendered to English by professional translator and teacher of the translation, Dr. Ali Al-Halawani, the result yielded is “inimitability of the Quran.” Also, interestingly, in *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, the word ‘jaza’a’ is also said to mean things like ‘to reward’, to ‘repay’ to ‘give satisfaction to’, even ‘to punish’. These definitions more closely could be said to actually relate to the whore houses of New Orleans, more so than anything musical. (See Islamic, and Arabic related sources in bibliography for references)

²⁷ The first sentence of this quote is very reminiscent of the Wynton Marsalis quote in the introduction.

²⁸ And flow, for that matter, is not confined to its fruition by way of Islamic faith-based perspective. In her book, *Experiencing 'Flow' in Jazz Performance*, Elina Hytönen-Ng discusses how “flow is how contemporary societies have been able to accommodate altered states of consciousness without jeopardizing the individual’s rationality or mental health,” and adds that “in Western countries(,) flow offers a socially acceptable way to connect with the unconscious and spiritual realm.” | Hytönen-Ng, Elina. *Experiencing “Flow” in Jazz Performance*, 155.

musician's obsession with the inherently mystical lends itself to the Sufi's quest to seek ultimate reality," says Went. Having studied Sufism as well, the guitarist reflects that in the "offspring" of Islam, "we search for a reflection of The Divine Names in all that we experience, see and feel.²⁹ God wishes to express its creativity through human beings, to make people feel something that did not even exist before it came out of the instrument of the jazz musician." To this end, I would like to now introduce you, or re-introduce you from the point-of-view of his spiritual faith, to an individual who has not only contributed to the jazz community strongly and uniquely, but who has found the faith of Islam as a centerpiece of high importance in his life.³⁰

Originally named William Evans, multi-instrumentalist extraordinaire, Yusef Lateef accepted Islam at 28 years old, and became a part of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, a collective whose mission in part is to spread the Prophet's understandings and teachings in hopes of "end[ing] religious wars, condemn[ing] bloodshed and reinstitut[ing] morality, justice and peace."³¹ While Ahmadiyya is a religion just like any other, complete with the usual list of sacred beliefs, prophets and texts, its philosophies are quite accessible, and can be thought upon and applied without acceptance of the more prescriptive specifics accepted by orthodox or conservative Muslims (things like the encouragement of self-purification, steadfastness, finding

²⁹ Former Professor of Indo-Muslim Culture at Harvard University, Annemarie Schimmel, defines Sufism as a "mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and of God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world." | Annemarie Schimmel, "Sufism | Islam," britannica.com, accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism>. | "Annemarie Schimmel | Britannica.Com." Accessed August 23, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/contributor/Annemarie-Schimmel/2619>.

³⁰ John Coltrane also was exposed to and incorporated the teachings of Islam into his life, as you will note later on, however he did not engage in it, in such a long-standing consistency that Yusef did.

³¹ Qasim Rashid, "Dr. Yusef Lateef, American Muslim Icon & Grammy Award-Winning Musician Dies at 93 | Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA mourns passing of Dr. Yusef Lateef," Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, December 24, 2013, <https://www.ahmadiyya.us/documents/media/press-releases/1069-release-20131225-yusufateef/file>. | It is said that Lateef accepted Islam during one of Art Blakey's regular 'Muslim meetings', which he held in his home. | Dawoud Kringle, "Jazz and Islam – A Retrospective Series (P.3/A)".

one's true purpose, and in keeping “company with the righteous,” and in observing “their perfect example”³²)

The teachings of Ahmadiyya state that the “religion of a man is the way of life he adopts for himself,” which may come as a breath of fresh air for some who may perceive religion as something more constraining—as perhaps it did for Lateef. The text continues, by explaining that “even the person who does not believe in the existence of God has to adopt a way of life and that way is his religion,” and goes on to say that “what one should ponder over is whether the way he has adopted is the one that gives him sincere steadfastness, eternal joy and unending



contentment.”³³ Those last three traits may appear unrealistic, unattainable, extremist, or fantastical, but I believe the overall message to be extracted points to humility: to take responsibility for one’s life, and to assess one's choices from a space which draws from a bigger perspective.³⁴ It would be difficult to avoid having renewed perspective on one’s actions and purpose while considering them in conjunction with the philosophies and teachings of a text like the Quran. Lateef is no exception.

³² Karimullah Zirvi, and National Secretary Education, “Welcome To Ahmadiyyat, The True Islam,” accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.alislam.org/books/ahmadiyyat/WelcomesBook2ndEd.pdf>.

³³ Karimullah Zirvi, and National Secretary Education, “Welcome To Ahmadiyyat, The True Islam.” | As we will see shortly, these philosophies are very reminiscent of Buddhist teachings.

³⁴ Again, coming back to John Coltrane, these outlooks are what John Coltrane began to experience shortly after his drug withdrawal period. | This exact perception will be soon echoed by Sonny Rollins, in his chapter.

Not only do the teachings of Ahmadiyya draw from universal truths and non-religious perspectives, the religion itself acknowledges the presence and validity of *all* other religions and their respective deities and prophets. In fact, Hadrat Khalifatul Masih IV, who is the fourth successor of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the individual whose teachings Ahmadiyya is based, gave this response to an individual who identified as Christian asking what the purpose of life was according to the Islamic faith:

The purpose of life should be the same in all Divinely revealed faiths. It has to be so because in the faiths that have originated from God, the purpose cannot differ - that is impossible. This is exactly what the Holy Quran has mentioned. It states that all religions, whatever they were, wherever they originated, in whatever age, they all taught the same basic fundamentals that the purpose of life is to return to God—consciously, not through death—by paying homage to God, and by worshipping Him with all sincerity.³⁵

Lateef, as a lifelong student and devotee of Islam and its teachings, remembers quite clearly this initial passage, even at age 88, and how profoundly it affected his music. “In 1948 I embraced Islam through the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community movement—which [was] guided by a Khalifa, a spiritual leader,” says Lateef in a 2008 interview with Mark Myers. “After my conversion, I found myself striving for a spiritual development, and I still am. My music, like my religion, is supposed to take you from this life and into the next. I believe this and try to express that belief in my music.”³⁶ The similarity between this Lateef-penned artist-statement and one of

³⁵ Karimullah Zirvi, and National Secretary Education, “Welcome To Ahmadiyyat, The True Islam.”

³⁶ Marc Myers, “Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 2). | This point is reminiscent of how Ravi Shankar views his musical practice: “Our tradition teaches us that sound is God (Nada Brahma). That is, musical sound and the musical experience are steps to the realization of the self. We view music as a kind of spiritual discipline that raises one’s inner being to divine peacefulness and bliss. We are taught that one of the fundamental goals a Hindu work stored in his lifetime is a knowledge of the true meaning of the universe-it’s unchanging eternal essence-and this is realized first by a complete knowledge of one’s self and one’s own nature. The highest aim of our music is to reveal the essence of the universe it reflects, and the *nagas* are among the means by which this essence can be apprehended. Thus, through music one can reach God.” | Ravi Shankar, *My Music My Life*, 17. | ”Besides the many European wind instruments he played, Lateef also dabbled in a wide variety of Eastern instruments, including but not limited to ‘shantai, shofar, argol, and sarewa, as well as Taiwanese koto,’ and ‘er-hu.’ | Dawoud Kringle, “Music vs Visual Arts: ‘Toward the Unknown’ – Yusef Lateef’s Autophysiopsychic Art Work Visits New York,” DooBeeDooBeeDoo NY, November 18, 2014, <http://www.doobeedoobeedoo.info/2014/11/18/music-vs-visual-arts-toward-the-unknown-yusef-lateefs-autophysiopsychic-art-work-visits-new-york/>.

John Coltrane's is clear: "My music is the spiritual expression of what I am—my faith, my knowledge, my being," said Coltrane. "When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to do something really good for people, to help humanity free itself from its hangups...I want to speak to their souls."³⁷

Lateef sees the music he plays in a way in which there is no separation between its physical and non-physical components, and has even coined his own terms for such an approach: "autophysiopsyche", meaning "music from the physical, mental and spiritual."³⁸ Speaking further on 'spiritualism in music', Lateef directly refers to Coltrane, and compares their philosophies and views on the matter: "John was a very humble person and continuously searching for himself," Lateef says. "I think he looked at me like I looked at him. We were on the same journey."³⁹ Besides Coltrane, Lateef also finds a place for the likes of Lester Young and Charlie Parker in the conversation as well. When he was asked if "being spiritual [can] help a musician develop a more distinct voice," he responded,

I think so.... To be yourself, you have to stop trying to imitate your mentors and the people you look up to. There was a time when tenor saxophonists would hold their I instruments out in the air like Lester Young. But you can never become Lester Young. The best you can become is yourself. Once you realize this, you start a journey to find yourself. It's a difficult, spiritual journey. The best sounds in music have a spiritual content.⁴⁰ What I play can't be heard anywhere else because that's me. That's what the great masters like Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins and Bird were saying. Be like you.⁴¹

³⁷ The intention being expressed in this quote is very similar to one by John Coltrane: "My music is the spiritual expression of what I am—my faith, my knowledge, my being...When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to do something really good for people, to help humanity free itself from its hangups...I want to speak to their souls." | R. A. Benson, *Quantum Genius: Awaken Your Sleeping Genius* (North Carolina: Lulu.com, 2018), 223.

³⁸ Marc Myers, "Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 2)."

³⁹ Marc Myers, "Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 3)," JazzWax, February 7, 2008, <http://www.jazzwax.com/2008/03/yusel-lateef-pa.html>.

⁴⁰ This particular idea is reminiscent of one spoken by North-Indian musician, Pandit Pran Nath, who influenced several Western creative musicians, including Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Don Cherry, Lee Konitz and John McLaughlin: "*Without spiritual help, music don't give effect. Music will be music, but some special effect making. Spiritual help need to the musician.*" | Hani Riad. "In Between The Notes: A Portrait of Pandit Pran Nath," YouTube, accessed July 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYtHhS_Re8Y

⁴¹ Marc Myers, "Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 3)."

Though Lateef embraced the discipline he employed seriously, and observed, studied and practiced a very specific spiritual/religious tradition, he was still able to express a humility and relatability when speaking on his “spiritual side.” When asked how he maintained it, Yusef spoke humbly:

I try to be a good person...I try to be good to my children, my wife, my neighbor and the man in the street. I try to do good deeds. When I was on the road in the 1970s, my band used to play for orphans for free. I tried to help orphans because they're special people. It's not easy to let go of pretension. But it's a choice you have to make. If someone wanted to imitate someone else, I wouldn't down them. But I wouldn't teach that. I try to help students find themselves.⁴²

He speaks of Young again to comment on the more humane side of his spiritual philosophy:

Everyone who knew him [Young] said how nice and good he was. Perhaps that is one of the qualities of a spiritual person—kind and giving and loving. I believe that. To be spiritual, you have to have sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden and with your neighbor and people thousands of miles away.⁴³

After the 70's, Lateef would continue to conjoin the music he played with a deeper value that he felt was within it and connected to it, even if other jazz musicians were not necessarily as interested in doing the same. From 1980 on, Dr. Lateef “performed only in establishments that did not serve alcohol,” and he didn't just “[come] to believe music shouldn't be presented in alcohol-and-smoke cellars” for personal reasons.⁴⁴ In a 1991 interview with *Boston Globe* he stated that “too much blood, sweat and tears [had] been spilled creating this music to play it where people are smoking, drinking and talking.” Lateef actually recalls that two weeks before John Coltrane passed away, Coltrane was over at his apartment in New Jersey discussing his plans to open a musical establishment free of addictive substances—a place where even kids

⁴² Such a simple yet profound goal, one which a human being can attempt for the rest of their life, is echoed later by Sonny Rollins. | Marc Myers, “Interview: Yusef Lateef (Part 2).”

⁴³ Myers, *ibid*.

⁴⁴ Qasim Rashid, “Dr. Yusef Lateef, American Muslim Icon & Grammy Award-Winning Musician Dies at 93 | Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA mourns passing of Dr. Yusef Lateef”.

could go to play and hang out.⁴⁵ Of course, this desire to be addictive-substance-free is not specific to Islam or any one religion. While Coltrane observed Islam for a brief period, just before his death, his spiritual faith was in full bloom towards an “all religions” perspective, as he once put it. Perhaps, the fact that Coltrane, Lateef and Rollins for that matter all felt similarly about smoking and drinking at times when they were pursuing spiritual lifestyles points to a common central force at the core of their various spiritual faiths - one which may lead their adherents toward similar choices.

⁴⁵ Michael Blicher, “Yusef Lateef Documentary,” YouTube, March 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1v6Kf4dnbs.

PART II: SONNY ROLLINS/HINDUISM & BUDDHISM

It's always optimism, always optimistic, always learning, always. To me, God is wisdom; as we get our wisdom, then we become God. –Sonny Rollins⁴⁶

While Islam has its roots in the Middle East, at the other end of Alexander's ancient empire, India saw the birth of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism in various strains. Many jazz musicians have been drawn to the philosophies, cultures, practices, and ways of life inherent to these regions, perhaps for similar reasons. Renowned jazz flutist and devout Yogi, Paul Horn remarks that “being a jazz musician is a wild life. Psychologically it destroys you. If you're playing clubs 6 nights a week, you put a lot out there—whatever you feel comes out in your music. But after a while you're exhausted, you don't have anything left to give the audience.”⁴⁷ Maybe that's why musicians like Maynard Ferguson, Chris Botti, Horn, Rollins, and many others, who were/are constantly on the road, utilized the healing, calming, centering benefits of Yoga. As a jazz musician myself, living in New York City, trying to make a living, while pursuing my career as an artist, I know how easy it can be to forget “that worldly success is fleeting, and [that] true contentment comes from within.”⁴⁸ This is one of the core teachings found in the Bhagavad-Gita, an ancient Hindu scripture. But, perhaps in addition to serving the body and mind off of the bandstand, there may be some other effects, that jazz musicians specifically could benefit from, in performance situations.

Mia Olson, a certified Yoga Instructor specializing in the Kripalu style, is also a professor of woodwinds at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, and aside from running her

⁴⁶ Alex W. Rodriguez, “Interview with Sonny Rollins, Musical and Spiritual Autodidact,” *Ethnomusicology Review*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/interview-sonny-rollins-musical-and-spiritual-autodidact>.

⁴⁷ Catherine Maclay, “Inside Paul Horn | Charles Mingus, Clifford Brown, Lennie Tristano, Fred Katz, And More...,” *Yoga Journal* (May 2010): 18-22.

⁴⁸ Alexa Pellegrini, “Comparing and Contrasting Eastern and Western Values,” *Freely Magazine*, November 30, 2017, <https://freelymagazine.com/2017/11/30/1963/>.

private studio, she has been teaching two “Yoga For Musicians” courses, which music students can take for credit as part of their degree programs.^{49,50} In her book, *Musician’s Yoga: A Guide to Practice, Performance, and Inspiration*, she discusses many approaches, practices, and benefits of Yoga specifically as they apply to performers of musical arts. She points to greater levels of communication within an ensemble as a result of the improved focus, concentration, and heightened awareness that comes from Yoga practice. She also praises the physical component of Yoga, as it prompts heightened physical awareness, as well as practice of balance, centeredness, and flexibility. Olson even feels that Yoga can help dissipate performance anxiety, due to its stay in-the-moment, stay-with-the-breath nature, the antithesis of running thoughts and fears about what might or already has happened.⁵¹

Yoga has even made its way into the music itself. New Orleans is home to what’s called ‘Jazz Yoga’, and in the French Market district, ‘Free Yoga and Meditation Accompanied by Live Jazz Piano Music is offered regularly’.⁵² Jazz Yoga New Orleans, which regularly hosts jazz music assisted Yoga classes, has collaborated with Journey into Yoga, a New Orleans based Yoga School, and has presented Sound and Vibration: A Yoga and Meditation Retreat,⁵³ the three-day excursion “based on the premise that sound vibrations influence how we experience and communicate with the world around us.”⁵⁴ Even an established and popular Yoga publication, *Yoga Journal*, has been on the bandwagon for some time. Derk Richardson’s review

⁴⁹ “Mia Olson | Berklee College of Music,” Berklee, accessed January 1, 2018, <https://www.berklee.edu/people/mia-olson>.

⁵⁰ “Berklee Riffs: Yoga for Musicians | Berklee College of Music,” Berklee, accessed January 1, 2018, <https://www.berklee.edu/news/1997/berklee-riffs-yoga-for-musicians>.

⁵¹ Cherie Yurco, “Why Musicians Need Yoga,” *Making Music Magazine*, March 27, 2013, <https://makingmusicmag.com/why-musicians-need-yoga/>.

⁵² “Free Yoga And Meditation Accompanied By Live Jazz Piano Music,” French Market | Blog Archive, accessed January 7, 2018, <https://www.frenchmarket.org/event/yoga-and-meditation-accompanied-by-live-jazz-piano-music/2013-06-08/>.

⁵³ “Jazz Yoga New Orleans - Home,” Jazz Yoga New Orleans, accessed January 1, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/JazzYogaNewOrleans/>.

⁵⁴ “New Orleans Sound Vibration Retreat,” Journey Into Yoga: School of Yoga & Meditation, RYS, accessed January 1, 2018, <http://journeyintoyoga.com/new-orleans-sound-vibration-retreat/>.

of 2000 makes mention of pianist Fred Hersch, and notes that the pieces on his album, “Nourishing the Caregiver,” which was reviewed in the June 2000 issue, “can indeed be enjoyed less directly as soothing, unobtrusive and emotionally sustaining mood music: but rewards close listening as well.”⁵⁵ While it's clear jazz and Yoga can share space together, how did it, as well as other Eastern Dharmas, even reach the West and begin to touch the lives of so many jazz artists? As stated by Jennifer Rycenga:

The religious traditions of Asia discussed herein...have reached North America in three principal ways. Countercultural contact came first, enabled by translations of major Asian religious texts. Second, increased contact between Asian nations and the United States and Canada occurred via cultural and intellectual exchanges as well as through commerce and war, starting from the mid-nineteenth century. While such contact fueled orientalism around Asian religions, ongoing human contact exposed these ideas to Americans outside of intellectual or aesthetic coteries (soldiers, businesspeople, jazz musicians).⁵⁶

Cambridge graduate and doctor of American Studies from East Anglia, Richard Palmer, has served as a jazz journalist since the late 1970s, and has collaborated with Oscar Peterson as editor and consultant for the pianist's autobiography. In his book, *Sonny Rollins: The Cutting Edge*, Palmer speaks of the state of jazz affairs in the 1960s (specifically 1961-67), and how “by [that] time, a significant number of jazz artists had become deeply interested in the spiritual and musical values of the East, and increasingly sought to reflect them in their art.”⁵⁷ This would make sense given that it was in fact during the 1960s that the larger-scale sensation of Yoga began to truly blossom in the West.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Derk Richardson, “CD Reviews | Mixed Media,” *Yoga Journal* (July 2000): 155.

⁵⁶ Jennifer Rycenga, Denise A. Seachrist, Elaine Keillor, “Three Views of Music and Religion,” *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol 3, (Garland Publishing Inc.: New York and London, 2001) 129.

⁵⁷ Richard Palmer, *Sonny Rollins: The Cutting Edge* (A&C Black: London, 2004) 92.

⁵⁸ As Charley Gerard, author of *Jazz in Black and White* states, “Although Paramahansa Yogananda, founder of the Self Realization Fellowship, had been teaching yoga in the United States since he arrived in 1920, yoga did not become popular in this country until the nineteen-sixties.” Given the level of attention the Yoga movement received and continues to receive, Yoga serves well as a greater representation of Western-adapted Eastern spiritual traditions. | Charles D. Gerard, “Pages of Fire: Spirit, Soul and New Religions,” accessed July 12, 2018, <http://users.cs.cf.ac.uk/Dave.Marshall/mclaughlin/misc/yoga.html>.

Musically speaking, there are of course many instances of recordings that were part of this massive gravitation toward Eastern aesthetic. Cal Tjader/Lalo Schiffrin collaborative album from 1963, “Several Shades of Jade,” and the Tony Scott record, “Music for Zen Meditation and Other Joys,” recorded the following year, with the assistance of Shiniche Yuize and Hozan Yamamoto, are a few examples.⁵⁹ “Live at Pep’s”, a 1964 record by Yusef Lateef serves as another example, as the tenor saxophonist also provided “entrancing flute and bamboo flute offerings, and also had impressive stints on oboe, shenai and argol.”⁶⁰ Slightly later, in 1968, legendary drummer Buddy Rich collaborated with master tabla player, Alla Rakha, and recorded “Rich à la Rakha” on the World Pacific record label⁶¹, which featured conductor Ravi Shankar, and flutist Paul Horn. Rollins, “like his good friend John Coltrane, [also] incorporated his experiments with Eastern spirituality into his jazz improvisations,”⁶² and in fact, has even recorded an original composition dedicated to the renowned Hindu Yogi, Patanjali.⁶³

Sonny’s more involved relationship with Eastern spirituality may not have begun until the 1960s, but like Coltrane, Lateef and many others, his personal history with spiritual matters began at a very early age. “I have always had a strong feeling from my childhood that there was a higher self within me—or conscience if you would,” recalls Sonny at age 86. “That has been strongly within me all my life. Anything that I do really comes from that place—it comes from a very deep, inner place. My music would reflect that as well.” This intuitive feeling “expressed [itself] in later years in [Sonny’s] interest in various religious practices,” which he says he

⁵⁹ Richard Palmer, *Sonny Rollins: The Cutting Edge*, 92.

⁶⁰ The shanai is a double reeded wind instrument with origins in North India. | The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Shehnai | Musical Instrument,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed July 14, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/art/shehnai>.

⁶¹ Pacific and World Pacific Records also released albums by Gil Evans, Booker Ervin, Kenny Dorham and Chet Baker, among other notables. Interestingly, multi-instrumentalist Terry Riley, who was massively influenced by Indian music, and spirituality, worked with Chet Baker, and created loops using recordings of the group.

⁶² Josh Jones, “Sonny Rollins Describes How 50 Years of Practicing Yoga Made Him a Better Musician,” *Open Culture*, June 30th, 2014, <http://www.openculture.com/2014/06/sonny-rollins-50-years-of-practicing-yoga.html>.

⁶³ NPR Staff, “Sonny Rollins: “You Can’t Think And Play At The Same Time.”

refined down to Yoga and Buddhism as the two that speak to [him].”⁶⁴ But how did he get there? Was there a defining moment that drew him into these specific disciplines?

It is common knowledge that the tenor-great took a hiatus from his musical performance endeavors in the summer of 1959, and “dropped abruptly and voluntarily into oblivion,” as a 1961 article in *The New Yorker* describes.⁶⁵ This first sabbatical, which ended late that year, inspired a desire for “spiritual understanding” and “direction,”⁶⁶ something that Sonny admits he did not have while immersed in the inebriated jazz musician lifestyle of the time. Like so many young jazz artists during the 50’s, “Rollins and Coltrane were unmatched in their worship of Parker, which led them nearly to self-destruction as they fell into some of the excesses of Parker’s personal life.”⁶⁷ “I thought at first that it helped me focus on music,” Rollins says, reflecting on his experience with the hard drug, “but then I realized it was a trick bag. Soon I didn’t even own a saxophone anymore. Guys I knew were crossing the street when they saw me coming. I was even stealing from my mother.”⁶⁸ From the age of 18, Rollins had played in bands led by the likes of Bud Powell, J.J. Johnson, Art Farmer, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, only to eventually be completely gig-less by his twenty-fifth birthday. He is a prime example of someone who had truly “gotten to know the pitfalls that musicians get into,” and of someone who “knew life from the lower side.”⁶⁹ He even himself admits that he “left a trail of

⁶⁴ Alex W. Rodriguez, “Interview with Sonny Rollins, Musical and Spiritual Autodidact.”

⁶⁵ Whitney Balliett, “Sabbatical,” *The New Yorker*, November 11, 1961, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1961/11/18/sabbatical-2>.

⁶⁶ Josh Jones, “Sonny Rollins Describes How 50 Years of Practicing Yoga Made Him a Better Musician.”

⁶⁷ Thomson Gale, “Sonny Rollins 1930,” encyclopedia.com, accessed January 4, 2019,

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/music-popular-and-jazz-biographies/sonny-rollins>.

⁶⁸ George W. Goodman, “Sonny Rollins at Sixty-eight - 99.07 (Part Two),” *The Atlantic Monthly* 284, No. 1 (July 1999): 82-88.

⁶⁹ Mary Bolster, “With a Song in His Heart,” *Yoga Journal*, August 28, 2007,

<https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/with-a-song-in-his-heart>. | This view of life is reminiscent of how John Coltrane perceived things as well, prior to his massive life-changing shift clean from addictive substances. More on that to come in the section on Coltrane.

destruction” behind him in New York,” in his “personal relationships, in stealing,” and in his “addict behavior.”⁷⁰

As former *New York Times* reporter, George Goodman recalls, “the bottom for Rollins was 1955,” when he was literally homeless, living in the Chicago subway, and sleeping in parked cars during the winter. Fortunately, the Windy City was a safe-haven of sorts for Rollins: he felt comfortable there, and more at-home than he did in New York.⁷¹ Because of that, he was able to muster up enough willpower to travel to Lexington, Kentucky and get himself checked in to the Public Service Hospital, a federally funded institution, that



as he put it “was a big departure from the usual way drug addicts were treated at that time.”⁷²

After spending four months there, getting clean, he returned to Chicago, worked as a janitor, and got back into practicing the saxophone again. Like Coltrane, Rollins’ solitary confrontation with his inner demons through drug withdrawal seems to have been the transformational catalyst toward renewed purpose for life and music alike, “as if they were both the ends and the means of a devotional calling.”⁷³

As “[he] had been interested in metaphysical organizations and things like Buddhism, Yoga and Sufism,” and was self-taught in those fields since the 50’s, Rollins had been ready and

⁷⁰ Neil Tesser, “How Sonny Defeated the Dragon,” *Chicago Reader*, August 28, 2008, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/how-sonny-defeated-the-dragon/Content?oid=849339>.

⁷¹ I say that Rollins felt comfortable in Chicago, because before he got clean, he was slumming around in Chicago, specifically in Bronzeville. “I loved Chicago, it was so earthy,” he said. “There were a lot of musicians, a lot of music going on—24-hour jam-session clubs, all this kind of thing. I found a home there.” Rollins’ remarks on the jazz scene in Chicago and its contrast with New York’s will add even more context: “To have a club be open 24 hours, where you could look in and see people playing, that was not sophisticated enough for New York. But I gravitated toward that. It was so homey—it was terrific.” | Neil Tesser, “How Sonny Defeated the Dragon.”

⁷² Neil Tesser, *Ibid.*

⁷³ Tesser, *Ibid.*

“primed to make [a] voyage” to India—the birthplace of Yoga, for some time. But his formal study of Yoga actually began before he actually visited the land. In 1963, during a concert tour in Japan, Rollins came into contact with the Oki Yoga group, “which combines yoga and Zen with some principles of martial arts.”⁷⁴ While in Asia he studied with Master Oki of the Yoga Institute of Japan, and five years later, after keeping in contact with Oki, he returned to Japan to study at the master’s school in Mishima, near Mt. Fuji.⁷⁵

Rollins’ desire “to get more into self-improvement and the greater purposes and meaning of life” continued, and that same year, he ended up traveling to India, where he studied various sacred Yogic texts with other eager Western students at an ashram under the direction of the renowned Swami, Chinmayananda.⁷⁶ Sonny recalls that during his time in India he remembers how “the atmosphere create[d] an attitude for meditation. There [was] a feeling of peace. Some of the students were jazz fans.”⁷⁷ This quote from 1968, upon recollection of his time studying Yoga in Japan, goes to show that jazz can exist in environments and within the experiences of people where a desire for a more conscious state prevails. Both Lateef and Coltrane were interested in the idea of showcasing the performance of jazz music in places which aligned with such an ideal.⁷⁸

Rollins speaks of Yoga, saxophone playing, and improvisation in the same breath. Specifically, the forms of Yoga that are “contemplative, introspective, [and] meditational,” such as Bhakti Yoga. He recalls that Chinmayananda told him that his “karma yoga [was] to play

⁷⁴ Mary Bolster, “With a Song in His Heart.”

⁷⁵ Palmer, Richard. *Sonny Rollins: The Cutting Edge*, 93.

⁷⁶ Rollins describes his experience at the ashram as follows: “When the swami came there were lectures. We studied the literature texts from the Vedanta. We studied the Upanishads and Yoga Sutras and all of these writings from antiquity. We weren’t doing hatha yoga so much—hatha yoga is the positions. We were mainly studying the texts, and when we didn’t have sessions, we’d endlessly discuss things among ourselves.” | Naresh Fernandes, “Saxophone Colossus Sonny Rollins in Powai,” Taj Mahal Foxtrot, June 14, 2014, <http://www.tajmahalfoxtrot.com/?p=3266>.

⁷⁷ Richard Palmer, *Sonny Rollins: The Cutting Edge*, 93.

⁷⁸ Coltrane actually told Lateef that he was intending to open an alcohol-free, smoke-free jazz club. |

music,” that he “would be bringing joy to people,” and was told “*that* [italics mine] was a proper way to live.” This very sentiment, as was one of Lateef’s earlier declarations, is very similar to one stated by Coltrane (to come in next section). As of 2014, Rollins still practices *asana* every day, including ‘Halasana (Plow Pose)’ and ‘Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose),’⁷⁹ and while Yoga has been central to his spiritual development, Sonny’s overall spiritual outlook is not specific to that discipline, or any one religious sect he’s studied in his lifetime.⁸⁰ “As for my spiritualism,” he says, “it’s more an amalgamation of my religious convictions⁸¹, including my belief in reincarnation. I am trying to clean up my karma so that I can come back with the blessings of the Great Spirit.”⁸² Rollins also sees the world from an angle that is reminiscent of a teaching found in the Quran:

The little world is within the big world, not the other way around. I find it very useful to look at my life in that way, that there’s a little picture and a big picture—and that’s it. Things happen in the little picture that are little picture stuff, which has nothing to do with the big picture. The big picture is where it’s at—that’s where I want to get to, see?⁸³

This perspective lends itself to his view on life and death, and the big picture regarding that flux, as well. “We’re just transitioning to someplace else,” he says, “[to] another body, another set of experiences we have to go through before we get to that deep understanding.” Rollins shares yet another similar perspective to Lateef and Coltrane in his duty to do good in life and contribute positively. He references the teachings of Christ, the Buddha and other religious figures to this important message, a concept which he refers to as fighting the good fight. “The good fight is where you do unto others, as I said, that good old Golden Rule,” Sonny says. “That’s the good fight. You fight that fight, which is difficult in this world as we

⁷⁹ NPR Staff, “Sonny Rollins: “You Can’t Think And Play At The Same Time.”

⁸⁰ This is yet another manifestation that is also shared by Coltrane and Lateef.

⁸¹ As you’ll see, this philosophy is very much in-line with what Coltrane was feeling in the early 60’s and beyond.

⁸² George W. Goodman, “Sonny Rollins at Sixty-eight - 99.07 (Part Two).”

⁸³ Alex W. Rodriguez, “Interview with Sonny Rollins, Musical and Spiritual Autodidact.”

know. But that's the fight: that's the right fight, that's the good fight. And that's what the fighting is about in this world." While Rollins is very much still a musician, and cares deeply for what music can offer people, what he really enjoys discussing are these sorts of things. "With my acquaintances and friends that I talk to, the conversation always seems to go in a spiritual area," Sonny admits. "This is all that I'm interested in talking about, really."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Rodriguez, *Ibid.*

PART III: JOHN COLTRANE/OMNISM

By 1958, he was practicing Yoga, eating healthy food, and reading Eastern philosophy. His explorations were public knowledge by 1962, when he said, ‘I believe in all religions.’
-Jennifer Rycenga⁸⁵

While John Coltrane is recognized as one of, if not *the* most spiritually driven of jazz musicians, he wasn’t the first or only artist of the genre to delve deep into the realm of spiritual and religious traditions—he is however, one of the more outspoken. While many musicians came into spirituality for the first time at some point in their adult lives, John had been in close proximity with both for his *entire* life,⁸⁶ and where some turned to religion for political reasons (as mentioned in the chapter on Islam/Lateef), following the trend/advice of others (fellow musicians, mentors, family, friends), or even by way of deep intellectual interest, Coltrane’s introduction was one necessitated by what he believed to be divine guidance.

In 1948, at age 22, Coltrane tried heroin for the first time, and like so many of the jazz musicians living in major cities during the transition from swing to bebop, he became hooked. “Within the jazz community virtually every young player who began playing in the late 1940s and 1950s felt a great deal of pressure to experiment with the drug,” says pastor Darian Gregory Burns.⁸⁷ “It was widely believed that Charlie Parker, who was Coltrane’s mentor, had become a better player because of his self-professed heroin use and, therefore, musicians believed their playing would improve as well.”⁸⁸

Whether or not Coltrane thought he sounded better while high or intoxicated, in actuality, his undisciplined behavior and even his musicianship proved otherwise often enough. “His

⁸⁵ Jennifer Rycenga, Denise A. Seachrist, Elaine Keillor, “Three Views of Music and Religion,” 132.

⁸⁶ This is due to the fact that John’s grandparents were ordained ministers at different churches in North Carolina, and he was attending

⁸⁷ Darian Gregory Burns, “A Love Supreme,” *An Uncommon Grace*, November 30, 2008, <https://anuncommongrace.wordpress.com/tag/john-coltrane/>.

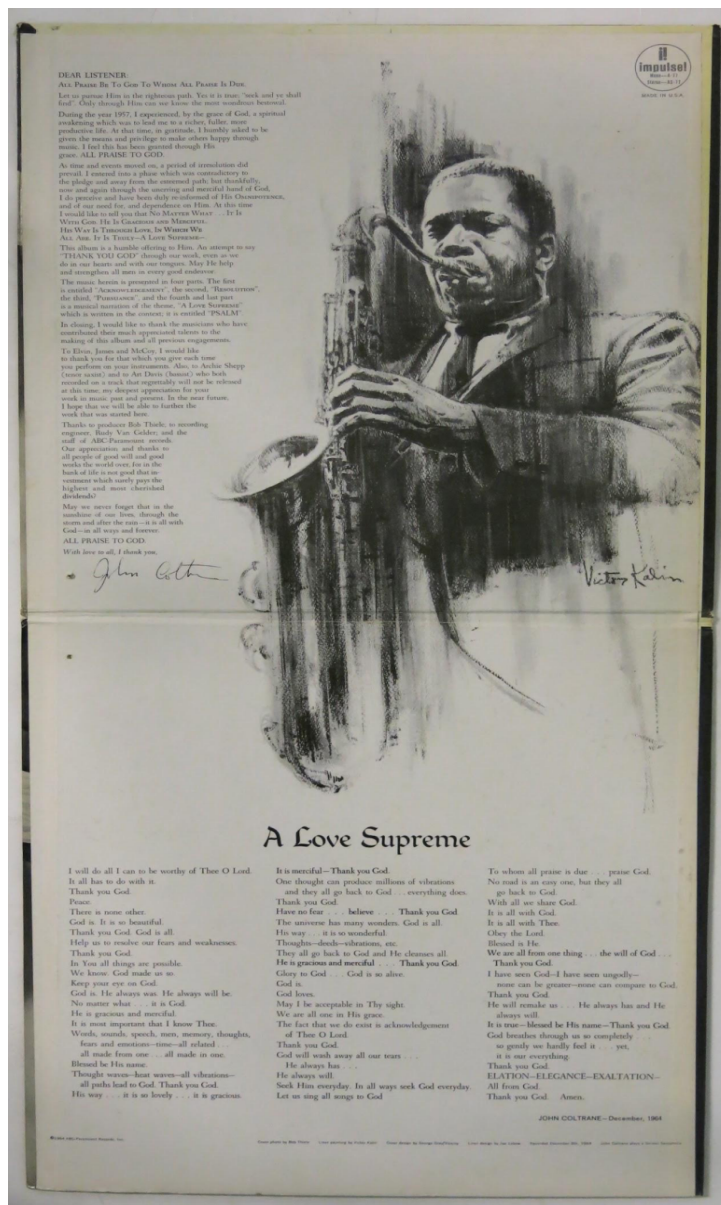
⁸⁸ Burns is a minister and Master of Divinity at Covenant Theological Seminary. | Darian Gregory Burns, “About,” *An Uncommon Grace*, February 29, 2008, <https://anuncommongrace.wordpress.com/about/>.

playing, when he showed up, was erratic,” remarks Burns.

He would appear at the last minute for gigs unshaven, un-bathed and in smelly, wrinkled and worn clothes. He achieved a reputation of falling asleep on stage. Miles Davis fired him, and Dizzy Gillespie complained bitterly about his unreliable performances but apparently refrained from firing Coltrane only because of their deep friendship and Gillespie’s respect for Coltrane’s talent when he wasn’t wasted on heroine.⁸⁹

It was in 1957, that Coltrane age 31, finally “realized that he had lost everything he had worked for as an aspiring professional,” says Peter Lavezzoli, author of *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*.⁹⁰ “But as devastating as the experience was at the time, it proved to be the bottom that Coltrane needed to reach before he would commit to change.”⁹¹

As difficult a time as it was for him, John knew he had to get clean, immediately. Fortunately, he was not alone in the process: he had the support of his mother and the woman he married, fellow North Carolinian, Naima Grubbs.



Original vinyl-record liner notes to *A Love Supreme*. Recorded December 9th, 1964, and released January 1965.

⁸⁹ Darian Gregory Burns, “A Love Supreme.”

⁹⁰ Lavezzoli’s *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West* received the Association of Recorded Sound’s award for Best Historical Research in 2007. Peter Lavezzoli, “About Peter,” Peter Lavezzoli: Soulful Drumming in Service to the Music, accessed November 30, 2018, <http://www.peterlavezzoli.com/bio.htm>.

⁹¹ Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, (London: A&C Black, 2006) 273.

She was a practicing Muslim, having converted to Islam years prior, and I believe was brought into John's life before it was too late, to serve as a light source, one that he desperately needed, to help guide him toward his own transition out of suffering. It was through this relationship that John began to be reminded of the presence of God—a presence that he once knew, but had forgotten through addictive-substance indulgence for nearly a decade.⁹² This faint but emerging source of strength bolstered the necessary courage he needed for his cleansing, which took place in the secluded bedroom of his mother's Philadelphia home. Here we would take “nothing but water for two weeks.” Where other musicians who also conquered drug addiction, and “demonstrated that such a task was possible through intention,” Coltrane believed that this power came from a divine source.”⁹³

In the liner notes of *A Love Supreme*, which was recorded seven years later, Coltrane reflects on that experience: “I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music.”⁹⁴ In the one year's time that Coltrane took to kick his addictions fully, this prayer would become a vow, a non-negotiable mission statement, and one that only grew and manifested itself more strongly as the years went on. “With renewed purpose, [he] resumed his daily practice regimen with heightened intensity,”⁹⁵ says revered jazz historian and *New York Times* jazz-music critic, Ben Ratliff. He

⁹² John Coltrane's childhood was pervaded by religious faith, aptly nourished by both sides of the family. In addition to John's parents having met through church affiliation, both of his grandparents (maternal and paternal) were religious men in their own right, serving at churches in different regions of North Carolina. His maternal grandfather, Reverend William Blair, was a preacher at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in High Point, and his paternal grandfather, Reverend William H. Coltrane, was an A.M.E. Zion minister in Hamlet. | Jonathan Kay, “Looking East: The Spiritual Nature of John Coltrane,” Monsoon-Music | Writings, accessed November 29, 2018, http://monsoon-music.com/Looking_East.html.

⁹³ Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, 273.

⁹⁴ John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*, Impulse!, A-9110 / AS-9110, 1965, Vinyl.

⁹⁵ Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, 273.

presented “a completely new version of himself with a new speed and sureness.”⁹⁶ Even the great Ravi Shankar observed his transformation: “When John Coltrane came to me [in December 1961], he looked different from his contemporaries: so clean, well-mannered and humble. He had apparently given up drugs and drink, become a vegetarian and taken to reading Ramakrishna’s books. For a jazz musician to go the other way, especially in those days, was a pleasant surprise.”⁹⁷

Not only was his body and mind renewed, but his spirit longed to be further reunited with source and universal knowledge. “Coltrane began studying the teachings of Hinduism and Islam, reading translations of the Quran, Ramakrishna, and Yogananda’s classic, *Autobiography of a Yogi*.⁹⁸ Most of all, Coltrane resolved to make music his spiritual practice. “My goal is to live the truly religious life and express it through my music,” he said. “My music is the spiritual expression of what I am - my faith, my knowledge, my being.”⁹⁹ Looking at the titles and track-titles from the albums he released from 1964 on, it is clear that his musical direction became heavily geared toward religious/spiritual themes and messages, many of them Eastern in origin. As Olly Wilson noted, “[a] salient aspect of Coltrane’s artistry was his conscious effort to invoke his personal spirituality as a fundamental component,” and that “many observers have noted this quality early in his career, [as] it became a central part of his life in the early ‘60’s as he began to consciously explore Hinduism, Buddhism and African culture in search of his personal spiritual

⁹⁶ Ben Ratliff, “CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK; The Miracle of Coltrane: Dead at 40, Still Vital at 75,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/07/movies/critic-s-notebook-the-miracle-of-coltrane-dead-at-40-still-vital-at-75.html>.

⁹⁷ Lavezzoli, 280.

⁹⁸ It is interesting to note that Coltrane found interest in both Islam and Hinduism, both of which were main facets of Lateef’s and Rollins’ spiritual studies.

⁹⁹ Lavezzoli, 273. | Again, here we have another prime example of the similar ‘higher’ purposes, if you will, that Lateef, Rollins and Coltrane all share for their music.

enlightenment.”¹⁰⁰

Some prime examples of this are: *A Love Supreme* (which includes a Coltrane-penned original psalm put to music), *Ascension* (which recalls the “departure of Christ from Earth into the presence of God”),¹⁰¹ *Meditations* featuring works movements such as “The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost” (the Holy Trinity), “Love” (the essential message of Christ), and “Consequences” (what those that don't follow the teachings of Christ face), *Kulu se Mama* featuring “Selflessness” (a Buddhist teaching); *Transition* (to enlightenment, or mortality to immortality - a Hindu concept), featuring tracks like “Dear Lord” and “Suite (Prayer and Meditation: Day, Peace and After, Prayer and Meditation: Evening, Affirmation, Prayer and Meditation: 4 A.M.), and of course, *Om* (a sacred symbol and verbal expression of creation, Hindi in origin).¹⁰²

Coltrane’s study of universal religious and spiritual teachings empowered him more and more as the years went on. He says directly on the back of his 1966 album, *Meditations*, “I believe in all religions.”¹⁰³ Of course, amidst the wide array of branches of his spiritual study, he retained his supreme love of and belief in Jesus Christ and fundamental Christian teachings. The founders of the Saint John Coltrane Church, even claimed that when “John Coltrane came onto the stage (at the Jazz Workshop in 1995), [they] could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit

¹⁰⁰ Leonard Brown, *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and the Music*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 186.

¹⁰¹ D.E. Holwerda, “Ascension,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979) 310.

¹⁰² Dr. Renu Mahtani M.D., *Power Pranayama: The Key to Body-Mind Management*, (Mumbai, India: Jaico Publishing House, 2010), https://books.google.com/books/about/Power_Pranayama_The_Key_to_Body_Mind_Man.html?id=ERDU6XwxA9IC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁰³ Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane, His Life and Music* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998) 259. | Interestingly, this exact phrase can be found in Philip J. Bailey’s 1889 poem, *Festus*, where he writes “I am an Omnist, and believe in all religions.” | Philip James Bailey, *Festus, a Poem*, Worthington: Worthington, 1889) 189.

moving with him.”¹⁰⁴ Their experience witnessing Coltrane’s playing both that year and a year later with his ‘Classic Quartet,’ affected them so much that they “experienced the effectual transference of the Holy Ghost through (his) sound.”¹⁰⁵

The Coltrane Church even originally went by the name: One Mind Temple Evolutionary Transitional Body of Christ.¹⁰⁶ But by the mid-70’s, after having granted leadership to Alice (John’s second wife), its keepers “began to think of John Coltrane’s message in the context of spiritual universalism and [began] to understand how [he] was trying to reach souls even outside of a western Christian context.”¹⁰⁷ Eventually, the founders actually let go of the idea that Coltrane provided only an “effectual transference of the Holy Ghost through sound,” and described it also as an emanation of “Blue Krishna, and [of] a Sufi mystic.”¹⁰⁸ As the church evolved, so did its philosophy, and its members “learned to appreciate the truths of all religious beliefs.”¹⁰⁹

While Coltrane’s love for God’s message were unbounded by strictly sectarian or geographic barriers, he seemed to have a special affinity for those that emerged from India.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ “History of Saint John of Coltrane Church,” Coltrane Church, accessed January 4, 2018, <http://www.coltranechurch.org/>.

¹⁰⁵ “Holy Ghost: Roles of the Holy Ghost,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed January 4, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/topics/holy-ghost?lang=eng>. | The Holy Ghost is the third member of the Holy Trinity as it is recognized in Western Christ-worship-based teachings. The Holy Ghost is said to be able to “guide [an individual] in their decisions and protect [them] from physical and spiritual danger.” | “Holy Ghost: Roles of the Holy Ghost,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. | “History of Saint John of Coltrane Church,” Coltrane Church.

¹⁰⁶ Coltrane Church, *ibid.* | Again, the teachings of Christ played a large part in the summation of Coltrane’s beliefs, due to the fact that he was immersed in it throughout his entire youth.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* | Blue Krishna or Krishna is a God from the religion of Hinduism, and a Sufi mystic refers to Sufism, which is an Islamic religious sect.

¹⁰⁹ Coltrane Church, *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ As Olly Wilson noted: “another salient aspect of Coltrane’s artistry was his conscious effort to invoke his personal spirituality as a fundamental component of his artistry. Many observers have noted this quality early in his career, and it became a central part of his life in the early ‘60’s as he began to consciously explore Hinduism, Buddhism and African culture in search of his personal spiritual enlightenment.” Perhaps “the first indication that [he] was beginning to absorb the melodic and timbral aspects of Indian music into his work” was his acclaimed reharmonized arrangement of “My Favorite Things” (1960), which was “one of the first pieces to suggest that modal jazz could tap into a vast system of non-Western modes, like Indian raga.” And it’s “not only the repetitive drone

“When he was not practicing his instrument, he was a voracious reader, and his library included *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the Bhagavad Gita” and of course *Autobiography of a Yogi*, “which recounts Yogananda’s search for universal truth, a journey that Coltrane had also undertaken.”¹¹¹

Two albums Coltrane recorded in 1965 deal directly with Indian spirituality: *Om* and *Ascension*. In reference to *Om*, Coltrane said it is “the first vibration--that sound, that spirit which set everything else into being. It is The Word from which all men and everything else comes, including all possible sounds that men can make vocally. It is the first syllable, the primal word, the word of Power. This description is saturated with Hindu philosophy concerning the mantric syllable, which is echoed in the Upanishadic verses that open the composition and invoke Vedic ritual.”¹¹² Another note on *Om*, and how it is connected to Indian aesthetics, references Coltrane’s quote regarding his choice to employ two basses on the album, when he said: “I want more of the sense of the expansion of time. I want the time to be more plastic.”¹¹³

like patterns of the bass [that we hear the Indian influence,] but also in [his own] tone on the soprano sax itself,” which has been compared to the sounds of the North Indian shehnai or the South Indian nadaswaram. Coltrane’s “distinctly Eastern sound” on the soprano even inspired non-jazz composers like La Monte Young and Terry Riley to take up the instrument. Coltrane furthered his exploration of North Indian music a year later with “India”, also written for soprano sax, two basses (to satisfy a drone effect), and tamboura. Coltrane “looked for ways to tap into the spiritual power of the music and its ability to induce a meditative mind state in the listener,” a philosophy which has been echoed by his contemporary and fellow Yogic scholar and practitioner, Sonny Rollins, who said that “Jazz improvisation is supposed to be the highest form of communication, and getting that to the people is our job as musicians.” John sometimes even would “cry through his horn,” which is the essence of *rasa* in Indian music. He was also known to have handwritten, studied and practiced scales from China and Japan, in addition to his own notation of Indian raga, as well as spent time listening extensively to recordings of Indian music (“India” was actually directly inspired by a specific chant from a specific field recording of Vedic chants called *Religious Music of India*.) | Lavezzoli, 280-281.

¹¹¹ Coltrane had been studying the Quran, the Bible Kabbalah, astrology, even the philosophical teachings of Plato and Aristotle while deep in his exploration of Indian spirituality and music. | Lavezzoli, 280-281.

¹¹² Jennifer Rycenga, Denise A. Seachrist, Elaine Keillor, “Snapshot: Three Views of Music and Religion,” 132.

¹¹³ While the following account does not fully dismiss the reason Coltrane gave for having two basses on the album, it is a known fact that Coltrane employed the same method of firing people from his groups as did Duke Ellington, who he first observed do it. This method involved inviting the musician he intended to replace the current player on that instrument with, to play a gig, and not tell either musician of the situation. As a result, both musicians would show up to the gig ready to play. In the case of the two bassists featured on “Om”, Jimmy Garrison was brought on to replace Donald Garrett, but as fate should have it, both musicians stayed and played at the same time.

Rycenga comments that, “the connection to meditative practices, including Yoga, which employ a non-teleological sense of time is evident here.”¹¹⁴

In describing his compositional evolution for the making of *Ascension*, Coltrane spoke of his internal search for new musical approaches, referring to the Platform Sutra of the Chan Buddhist monk and patriarch, Huineng:

There is never any end. There are always new sounds to imagine: new feelings to get at. And always, there is a need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that we can really see what we've discovered in its pure state. So that we can see more clearly what we are. In that way, we can give to those who listen the essence—the best of what we are. But to do that at each stage, we have to keep on cleaning the mirror.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, besides his Buddhist association, Huineng was also the Sixth Ancestor of Zen (which originated during the regime of the Tang Dynasty, China – 618-907AD).¹¹⁶ As such, this sutra directly references Zen Buddhism, in that “Zen doctrine, and popular Western-Zen philosophers like Alan Watts, frequently compare the practice of meditation to the act of ‘cleaning the mirror’ of the mind.”¹¹⁷ This philosophy goes hand-in-hand with what Coltrane

¹¹⁴ Rycenga, Seachrist, Keillor, *Ibid*, 132-133.

¹¹⁵ Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane And His Quest* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, Incorporated, 2009) 187.

¹¹⁶ Rusty Aceves, “A Look Back At John Coltrane’s *Ascension*,” *SF Jazz: On the Corner*, accessed January 4, 2018, <https://www.sfjazz.org/ontheCorner/look-back-john-coltranes-ascension>. | John M. Thompson, “Huineng (Hui-Neng) (638-713),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, accessed January 4, 2018, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/huineng/>.

¹¹⁷ Lavezzoli, 286. | By this point, Zen has been mentioned several times, and for good reason. Zen meditation may have more to do with jazz than one might expect. Freelance journalist, travel author and Zen meditation practitioner and teacher, Sean Murphy conducted interviews with some of the most influential figures in Western Zen of the 21st century, including Philip Kapleau, Robert Aitken, and Gary Snyder. Compiling his research, Murphy went on to write *One Bird, One Stone: 108 Contemporary Zen Stories*, and in the book, he actually compares the improvisational component of jazz music to what he calls ‘working samadhi,’ which is, as he puts it, “an immersion in moment-to-moment activity so complete that it becomes essentially a meditative state.” “To play truly great improvisational music, you have to lose yourself,” says Murphy, and that one must stop “thinking of good or bad, try[ing] to impress, try[ing] to anticipate the next moment, or giv[ing] [ones] self over to anything else but what’s happening now.” | Sean Murphy, “Trane of No-Thought: How Meditation Inspired Jazz Great John Coltrane.” | There are many ways of expressing what the state of Samadhi is like in words, and there are different levels of Samadhi that one can experience during meditation. A few definitions which can serve our purposes, are given by the great Paramahansa Yogananda. The first describes a state where “human consciousness becomes one with cosmic consciousness,” and the second as “a state of oneness; complete absorption.” In samadhi we perceive a state in which the ego of the person dissolves and there is no distinction between their person and the greater collective consciousness, universe, or God-consciousness any longer within that person's experience. | Paramhansa Yogananda, *Whispers from Eternity* (California: Self Realization Fellowship, 2008) 116. | The idea of ‘working

states as the goal and purpose of pursuing a spiritual path within music: to be able “to give to those who listen, the essence—the best of what we are”—a sentiment echoed by Lateef and Rollins in their own expressions of musical purpose.¹¹⁸

John’s desire to give the most refined essence of himself to his listeners was aided by the addition of a woman who “brought happiness and stability to [his] life, not only because they had children (which Coltrane was unable to have with Naima), but also because they shared many of the same spiritual beliefs, particularly a mutual interest in Indian philosophy.”¹¹⁹ Alice Mcleod, who John married after his divorce with Naima in 1966, even named their second son Ravi, after the great Ravi Shankar.¹²⁰ Alice’s role in her husband’s spiritual endeavors extended beyond those of Indian origin however, not to mention her eventual collaborative musical experiences with him. As Ellen Koskoff reports about Cecil Taylor’s observations of Coltrane, “it was a matter of music, it was never a matter of personality. Music was all he was concerned with.” What this means concretely, though, was the precedence of sound over music. According to Alice Coltrane, “[h]e always felt that sound was the first manifestation in creation before

samadhi’ and how a jazz musician may enter into a state of ‘complete absorption’, ‘oneness’ or a similar state while playing is not uncommon. Highly accomplished and Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, might call this phenomenon, ‘flow’: “a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. It is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.” Csikszentmihalyi’s flow concept relates to the idea of being at one with things or as psychology expert, Kendra Cherry, describes it: “complete immersion in an activity.” In addition to various martial art forms like Judo, Aikido, and Kendo employing concepts similar to flow, Yogic traditions also draw upon similar states, such as in the practice of Samyama. Theravada Buddhism refers to “access concentration”, which is a state of flow achieved through meditation and used to further strengthen concentration into the state of Jhana. | “Yoga Sutras 3.9-3.16: Witnessing Subtle Transitions with Samyama,” SwamiJ.com, accessed February 8, 2019, <http://www.swamij.com/yoga-sutras-30916.htm>. | Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen, *Practicing the Jhanas: Traditional Concentration Meditation as Presented by the Venerable Pa Auk Sayada W.* (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2009) 27. | M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990. | Similarly, athletes have also described a “performance state of effortlessness and no-thought called being in the ‘zone’ which unlocks their fullest potential and allows them to perform amazing feats with a sense of grace and ease.” | Chad Foreman, “The Art of Doing Nothing,” *The Way of Meditation*, September 14, 2015, <https://www.thewayofmeditation.com.au/blog/the-art-of-doing-nothing/>.

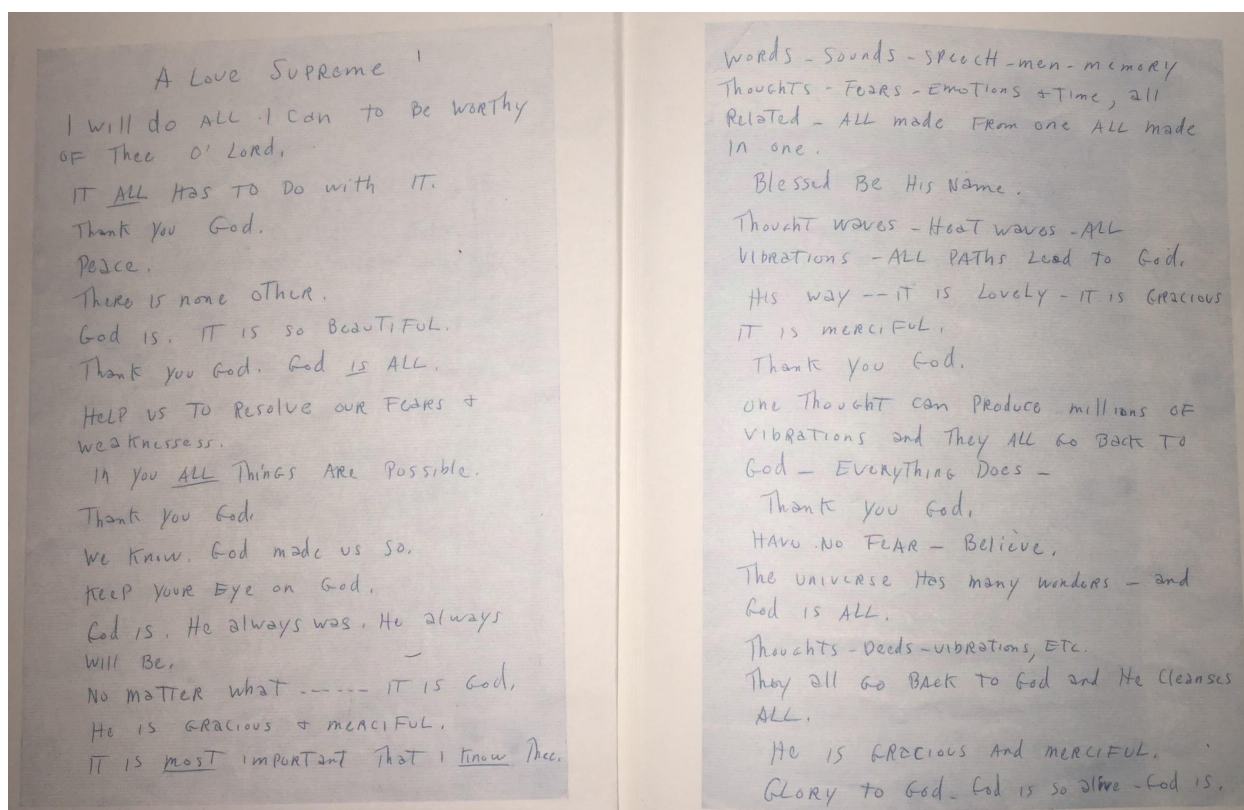
¹¹⁸ Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane And His Quest*, 268.

¹¹⁹ Jonathan Kay, “Looking East: The Spiritual Nature of John Coltrane.”

¹²⁰ Shankar was an internationally acclaimed Indian musician whom Coltrane had a long-time personal relationship with.

music.”¹²¹ Not only did Alice truly understand how John was evolving his perception and conception of his contribution to a greater purpose than himself through music, she was a part of it. Her words here allude to various Eastern musical aesthetic ideas, and not only was she a pianist and harpist “with whom [John] shared a practice of meditation” with, but together they also shared “a deep interest in *all things* [italics mine] spiritual.”¹²²

Alice was there when John finally came to realize the vision for one of his most important records, the record that preceded *Om*, *Ascension*, *Sun Ship*, and *First Meditations*, and that would set the stage for all of his post-1964 recording sessions as a leader. It was after several days of locked-away solitude in the upstairs bedroom of his and Alice’s home in Dix Hills, Long



¹²¹ Ellen Koskoff, “Increased Contact: John Coltrane and the Dissemination of Asian Thought in Jazz,” *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: The United States and Canada*, accessed March 26, 2019, <http://tinyurl.com/y6jtdv4b>.

¹²² Rycenga, Seachrist, Keillor, 133. | Sean Murphy, “Trane of No-Thought: How Meditation Inspired Jazz Great John Coltrane.”

Island, that Coltrane emerged, as Alice recalls, like "Moses coming down the Mount, a look of enlightenment in his eyes...a beautiful aura on his face," and the ray of newfound satisfaction, in that it was "the first time in [his] life [he] had the entire arrangement that [he] wanted."¹²³ Of course, the "entire arrangement" here is none other than *A Love Supreme*, which would become the second best-selling jazz album of all time, after Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, on which Coltrane also appears.

With *A Love Supreme*, and the albums to follow, Alice would see her husband and partner would go on to produce some of his most spiritually oriented recordings. However, the deeper meaning behind them wasn't always obvious to everyone. Even McCoy Tyner, Coltrane's pianist, and perhaps the longest running member of any of his ensembles, recalls: "when we first performed [it] we didn't know some things we were playing...we didn't know it was going to turn into a suite of spiritual testament."¹²⁴ Richard Palmer states that "while some think that his exploration of the goals and imperatives of world religions reached its peak in his highly abstract final recordings, [I am] not one of them." Palmer's reasoning is profound:

By this time Tyner and Jones had left the group (in the late 60's), and despite Coltrane's virtuosity, the music does not have the sublime density of the Quartet's work. And that density...[is] derived from a self-summation in the interests of the whole[—]a fundamental characteristic of Eastern spiritualism.¹²⁵

Even Ravi Shankar, while having expressed an admiration for Coltrane's music, found that his later work somehow lacked the type of purity that he had hoped for. After seeing John's group live at the Village Gate in New York City, less than two years prior to Coltrane's death, Shankar reported that although "the music was fantastic," and that he was "much impressed...one thing distressed [him]. There was a turbulence in the music that gave me a negative feeling at

¹²³ Warden Woodberry Jr., "When 'Trane Was In The House," *New York Daily News*, September 3rd, 2004, <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/nydn-features/trane-house-article-1.609143>.

¹²⁴ Warden Woodberry Jr., "When 'Trane Was In The House."

¹²⁵ Richard Palmer, *Sonny Rollins: The Cutting Edge*, 92-93.

times, but I could not put my finger on the trouble,” Shankar says. “Here is a creative person who had become a vegetarian, who was studying yoga and reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, yet in whose music I still heard much turmoil. I could not understand it.”¹²⁶

John Coltrane was a student of universal knowledge, who spent short of the last decade of his life seeking truth through religious and spiritual traditions in conjunction with unwavering devotion to musical exploration and practice. Shankar and Palmer may be correct in assessing John’s music in his later years as tumultuous or incoherent, however it also may be that Coltrane was not *trying* to conform specifically and exclusively to ideas set forth in Asian, Indian, or some other Eastern aesthetic, as much as they and other critics may have expected or assumed. By way of his studies of “mysticism, Hinduism, Sufism, the Kabbalah, Jiddu Krishnamurti, African history...Plato and Aristotle,”¹²⁷ as well as his faith in Christ, his spiritual understandings, realizations, and much of his religious testaments culminated in a belief and expression of God that transcended the divides of spiritual disciplines. I believe that John’s holistic view of existence, purpose, consciousness and humanity’s relation to them fueled a certain vision that he had for his musical message, one that I think he may left this earth still in search of.

¹²⁶ Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, 286.

¹²⁷ Kay, “Looking East: The Spiritual Nature of John Coltrane.”

CONCLUSION

For a jazz musician who does not have an interest in spirituality, this study may seem rather pointless. As I alluded to early on, a jazz player's musical and professional pursuits alone already yield an endless supply of things to do and work on. Furthermore, the music of greats who are influenced in some way by spirituality (such as the three spoken of in this study), is already informed by their spiritual dispositions. In theory couldn't one simply study the music alone and receive the same benefit as actually getting to understand what's behind it?

The information that we can extract from this study is not intended to be appreciated in lieu of Lateef, Rollins or Coltrane's artistic achievements, but as a supplement to the sounds themselves. In fact, it is suggested that the reader, having reached this point in the text, re-approach the recordings of these great artists with a fresh perspective. As I've expressed, Yusef, Sonny and John are only three jazz musicians of many who have engaged with religious or other spiritual pursuits. Therefore, this text can serve the reader immediately, in two ways at least. First, as an introduction to the simultaneous existence of music and spiritual pursuit as a single endeavor, and second, as a hands-on resource into how the spiritual component itself can be applied to one's own personal path as a jazz artist.

When considering the individuals whose backgrounds would lend well to a study on the value of spirituality and/or religiosity from the perspective of a jazz musician, the three saxophonists featured here instantly came to mind. While it is fairly common knowledge among even beginning scholars of jazz history that Rollins, Lateef and Coltrane each had some type of personal relationship with religion or spirituality, I had to consider whether studying how they each experienced these relationships individually and in tandem would yield worthwhile, usable data, and not just for those already versed in such exploits but also for those who were not. While

I did expect tangible findings to surface, how to present them in a relatable way was at the forefront of my concerns.

Jazz musicians are wired to imitate, meticulously analyze, and apply sonic information that appeals to them. Additionally, and arguably even more importantly, musicians learn how to speak the jazz language through conscious process of thought and unconscious osmosis. I wanted to make sure the information presented here would cater to both processes of assimilation, so that readers could benefit from my specific observations as well as any subjective inferences drawn from them. To conclude this study, I'd like to share to the best of my ability a summary of what I believe the main takeaways are, both the tangible and the speculative, as a means of outlining such findings in order to encourage the process of personal application.

First, though, I need to offer some general background information on my subject-musicians to establish a sharper context for understanding their personal, artistic, and spiritual journeys. All three, African American males, were born in the United States in the decade or two prior to World War Two (Lateef in 1920, Coltrane in 1926, and Rollins in 1930) and therefore grew up within their respective middle-class communities—Rollins in Harlem, Coltrane in rural North Carolina, and Lateef in Detroit, Michigan—during the Great Depression. None were from wealthy families, but neither were they financially destitute. All of course shared the consciousness of being marginalized by their race in white America. All three men were raised among practicing Catholics, although apparently Coltrane was the earliest to take his childhood faith to heart.¹²⁸

Only two of the three were at any point heavy substance users, but it would appear that drug-induced suffering was a major catalyst for both Rollins's and Coltrane's personal and

¹²⁸ The death of Coltrane's father when he was only thirteen years of age, along with his religious temperament may well have also served as a catalyst toward his incessant and compulsive drive to prove himself later on.

spiritual transformations. Coltrane had been substantially exposed to organized religion at an early age, whereas Lateef and Rollins experienced significant spiritual growth well beyond adolescence. Their different moments of maturation or epiphany are a testament to the fact that an inclination towards spirituality can lie dormant for years in individuals and need not follow a rigid timeline. As musicologist Tom Riis puts it, “the proximate cause of a personal spiritual transformation may be unobservable in the person’s outward or surface behavior.”¹²⁹

If we are allowing the terms “spiritual growth” and the umbrella term, “spirituality” to be used as a way of describing a certain type of phenomenon, and if we agree that Coltrane, Rollins, and Lateef share experience of this phenomenon, can we identify other tangible elements that come together to comprise it? Collectively, our three subjects’ engagement in the teachings of the Ahmadiyya sect of Islam, the Holy Quran, Hindu scripture like the Bhagavad-Gita, the practice of Yoga, Judeo-Christian faiths, and a slew of other Eastern spiritual practices and disciplines, has yielded overall resultant phenomena: the diminution and elimination of the desire to engage in addictive behavior, a conscious awareness of God (however defined) and a certain sense of selfless purpose that arises only when the shift from pursuit of material and sensory stimuli to the pursuit of service to others, God, a universal consciousness, or all of the above is made.

However, can everything to be learned from this study be packaged and experienced in such a black-and-white way? Must it include the existence of religious constructs, and must it take place within the mind alone? The idea that the highest spiritual aspirations can manifest beyond or above established sects, and that they need not be restricted to and expressed within a single faith community—and indeed, can be shared among all—is one of Coltrane’s core messages, and it is iterated by Rollins and Lateef as well. It is clear that they knew each knew of

¹²⁹ Tom Riis, private discussion, March 25, 2019.

the universal nature of spiritual power, and that their very acceptance of it contributed directly towards their spirituality. As observers, we cannot prove the existence of such phenomena based only on our intellectual understanding of someone else's subjective experience, nor would that amount to much for us on a personal level even if we could. Yet, the concrete results revealed in the creative lives of these and other artists suggests that spiritual motivation—what some would call personal revelation, mystical union or enlightenment—can have a profound transformative effect.

Yusef Lateef, Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane are considered jazz legends, are often placed on pedestals, and even worshiped as virtual musical deities. While I do not intend to take anything away from the mystical rapport we have all come to attach to these musicians, at their core they are only people who have each experienced the fruits of spiritual devotion, and who each happen to also be devotees of a music whose power is unbounded. For Coltrane, Rollins and Lateef, their music is not only reflective of this pairing of devotions, but I would go further to say that there exists within each of their lives an identity spawned by the union of musical and spiritual intention. As we further our studies of spirituality within the lives of these musicians, others like them, and within ourselves, I believe there is only growth and evolution to be had in the process. And after all, it is the process itself that drives all things.

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