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Monument Eternal: The Music Of Alice Coltrane (Music/Culture)



Synopsis

Alice Coltrane was a composer, improviser, guru, and widow of John Coltrane. Over the course of her musical life, she synthesized a wide range of musical genres including gospel, rhythm-and-blues, bebop, free jazz, Indian devotional song, and Western art music. Her childhood experiences playing for African-American congregations in Detroit, the ecstatic and avant-garde improvisations she performed on the bandstand with her husband John Coltrane, and her religious pilgrimages to India reveal themselves on more than twenty albums of original music for the Impulse and Warner Brothers labels. In the late 1970s Alice Coltrane became a swami, directing an alternative spiritual community in Southern California. Exploring her transformation from Alice McLeod, Detroit church pianist and bebopper, to guru Swami Turiya Sangitananda, Monument Eternal illuminates her music and, in turn, reveals the exceptional fluidity of American religious practices in the second half of the twentieth century. Most of all, this book celebrates the hybrid music of an exceptional, boundary-crossing African-American artist.

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Customer Reviews

"Writing about Alice Coltrane matters because her music and life bears on major ethnological questions of today concerning hybridity, globalization, and the late-capitalist music culture." —Peter Monaghan, *Chronicle of Higher Education* "a compelling portrait of an extraordinary woman" —a fascinating and important study. —Pamela

“With an artistic vision that spanned the most archaic spirituals to the farthest-flung reaches of the cosmos, Alice Coltrane was much more than merely the wife of her legendary saxophonist husband. She was one of the most brilliant improvising artists that the 1960s produced, but her eclectic creativity was frequently derided, dismissed, or misunderstood. In this fascinating book, Franya Berkman makes the persuasive case that Alice Coltrane’s music reflects a lifelong engagement with the divine element that often transcended the narrow implications of the word “jazz,” and is most accurately understood in terms of her ongoing spiritual evolution. Richly contextualized, insightfully theorized, and musically rigorous, this work should contribute to a profound reappraisal of Alice Coltrane’s legacy and contribution, of the often-neglected achievements of improvised music in the 1960s and 1970s, and of potent alter-narratives of African-American spirituality.” (Michael E. Veal, professor of ethnomusicology, Yale University)

“Monument Eternal is a fascinating reading of the life and work of Alice Coltrane. This book will be of great value to jazz studies, women’s studies, African American studies, and religious studies, as well as to everyday readers who will be fascinated by this portrait of an innovative artist who discovered new ways of connecting musical and spiritual practices.” (George Lewis, Case Professor of American Music, Columbia University)

Great book and introduction to this amazing musician’s life and music. Not a complete biography but contains many biographical details. Definitely written in an academic treatise style, with a sociological and musicological slant, but also contains warmth, a clear love for its subject, and attention to detail which makes it a joy to read.

This book certainly has merit - as an academic survey, it takes Alice Coltrane as a musical subject with a seriousness that few other books have yet taken. The chapter, especially, surveying Coltrane’s career prior to her association with and marriage to John Coltrane is to my knowledge unprecedented, and for that reason especially valuable to the Alice Coltrane completist. The musical analyses of some of her solos are especially valuable. My biggest complaint is that it sometimes walks an uneasy line between an academic and a critical tone. The author spends a good bit of time on certain albums (Universal Consciousness especially) and basically dismisses World Galaxy and Lord of Lords. Only a passing mention is made to her last studio album, Translinear Light, even though it is quite significant in her discography for including new versions of compositions recorded

earlier (and in much different versions) on albums like Ptah the El Daoud, Transfiguration and Universal Consciousness. The author's reason for doing so seems to be that she simply favors them less, which seems lazy in a book that aims to examine Coltrane's body of work in great detail. The editing is also sloppy - numerous typographical errors abound that seem like mistakes of a spell-checking program, and there are several awkward turns of phrase that could've benefited from a closer editorial eye. I understand that the work began as the author's Doctorate dissertation but I wish the same editorial vigor would've been applied to this published version. Nonetheless, for what it is, Monument Eternal provides some crucial information, and more importantly dares to view Alice Coltrane as independent from the legacy of her husband, which is a feat itself.

Roger Hatfield and I live on different planets (but I can tell him that the word he wanted in his review was "than," not "then"); here are my 5 stars to counter his damning 1. This is my comment posted to a glowing review published in the Chronicle of Higher Education (11/14/10): Thank you for this substantive attention to a subject and work that merits it. I happen to be somewhat familiar with the book, but the idea that John Coltrane's most signature brilliance was stoked and energized by his relationship with Alice was new to me until I read it here, and one worth pondering long and hard. Gender issues have become an important aspect of this kind of music scholarship, but couples who are that deeply bonded in the music along with their marriage or erotic bond are rare (Lil Hardin with Louis Armstrong comes to mind, also a connection that contributed much to his development as an artist). I remember the impression it made on me to see John and Alice perform in San Francisco in their prime together - his soprano sax tilted into the open lid of her grand piano, so the two were facing each other as they played for an extended period of improv. Quite the facial/body-language conversation to observe... palpably different in quality than if the pianist had been McCoy Tyner, assuming they would have positioned themselves that way at all. Franya Berkman attracted those scholars you mention to her dissertation committee because she has a mind and instinct for what is important and interesting in under-reported subjects to match theirs. May this be the first of more such work the academy should have gotten to sooner. Mike Heffley
Author of *The Music of Anthony Braxton: (Contributions to the Study of Music and Dance)* (Greenwood, 1996) *Northern Sun, Southern Moon: Europe's Reinvention of Jazz* (Yale University Press, 2005)

amazing artist and beautiful soul

I was so eager to read the book! It was almost like a romantic evening. My wife built a fire, and I put on some of my own "spiritual music". I eagerly read through the preface entitled "In Search of Divine Music". That's what I came here for! Oh Boy! Let me save myself some time. As I read the first chapter I found myself disagreeing with the author's conclusions in paragraph after paragraph. With a subject so nuanced, Ms. Berkman works from the eight Crayon box. Alice is such a transcendent figure; to see her legacy interpreted in pedestrian terms as "feminist" and "racial connotations" is so beneath her. Ms Berkman almost gets it, sometimes, mostly not. I probably am not qualified to review this book. I have come to hate it in the first chapter. The author, an academic, has completely missed the point. I won't read any more, I can't. It makes me angry. I really wish that Alice's words were more the feature, rather than the author's opinions. History will judge the contribution of Alice, and John, and Alice and John. At least I have some more pictures of Alice. You are better off buying some of Alice's music. It will tell you everything you need to know, if you listen. RH

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