



A Free Jazz Stylist: Ornette Coleman

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is the Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

Learn more about ETHA by visiting the website at www.easttexashistorical.org.

(May 21, 2023) The fourth entry in the Texas music series

It has been said that jazz is the only truly uniquely American music innovation. Jazz originated in the African American communities in and around New Orleans in the late nineteenth century, with its origins in blues and ragtime sounds. It then spread up the Mississippi into places such as Memphis and St. Louis and eventually made its way to centers such as Chicago and New York. It is a form in which improvisation plays a major role. Jazz is rhythmic and has forward motion that musicians call “swing.” “Call-and-response” is also a chief component part (one instrument will play a part and another will then “answer”), but most of all jazz is a musical form that expresses emotion.

Jazz musicians find their own sound and style. Miles Davis, for example, sounded much different than Louis Armstrong, and Charlie Parker much different than anyone else ever. That is why one could listen to ten different jazz stylists play the same song and they would sound different each time. One of those who pioneered his own style and sound—he began as a devotee of Parker’s “bebop” form—was Texan Ornette Coleman. Coleman, in the 1950s and 1960s, would expand the options in jazz and in the process change the course of the genre. His unique styling, which would come to be called “free jazz,” made the jazz variety less dependent on the rules of harmony and rhythm, which in turn allowed it to break away from the traditional repertoires it relied upon. His new “invention” made him one of the true jazz innovators, one whose sound was instantly recognizable and unquestionably unique.

Randolph Denard Ornette Coleman was born March 9, 1930, in Fort Worth. He grew up in hardscrabble conditions in the segregated city, made even more difficult when his father died when he was just seven. He showed musical aptitude from a young age, playing various instruments in his church and for local events. By the time he matriculated at I.M. Terrell High School, he was already an accomplished tenor

saxophone player, even though he had no formal lessons and had begun to play by ear. Because of his beginning, Coleman did not understand that, because of transposition between the instruments, a C in the piano's "concert key" was actually an A on his saxophone. His music sounded fine to him, and when he learned the truth, it led him to a lifelong suspicion that the "rules" of harmony and musical notation were more obstacles for musicians than beneficial.

After he graduated high school, Coleman began to play both the alto and tenor sax in a number of different rhythm-and-blues bands around the state. While he played in those bands, in his spare time he had become fascinated with jazz, particularly Parker's "bebop" sound. He eventually joined a traveling band out of New Orleans, fronted by Silas Green, and then part of the backup instrument group for blind blues singer Clarence Samuel. In all those groups, Coleman could not help but experiment with his own kind of style; once, while with Samuel, a group in Baton Rouge beat him after a show because he had been "playing funny."

Coleman finally settled in Los Angeles in 1952 and it was there that he found the musical style in which he was searching. Coleman wanted to break out of the traditional chord patterns and progressions. He thought that such conventions restrained the musician and dulled creativity. So, he developed a very unorthodox approach to harmony. His new "style" led him to be rejected by almost every music house in the city and it also kept him from bookings in local clubs. Undeterred, Coleman went to work as an elevator operator during the day, and every night he studied harmony and, because he had pawned all the other instruments he owned, bought a cheap plastic alto saxophone that he played for tips in clubs that would allow him to take the stage. It was in those clubs that Coleman began to perfect his "harmonologic theory," which would become the basis of "free jazz." Jazz improvisation, from its inception, was based on fixed harmonic patterns, but Coleman's theory called for improvisers to abandon harmonic patterns—"chord changes" in the parlance—which would allow them to improvise more extensively and directly using personal expressive elements. That meant that the tonal centers of pieces played in this style changed at the improviser's will. That became the genesis of it being called "free jazz."

Rejected when he first began to spread his ideas, Coleman finally convinced someone to record him in 1958. He, trumpeter Don Cherry, drummer Billy Higgins, and bassist Charlie Haden recorded *Something Else!!!* It was only a modest commercial success, but enough for the quartet to make second and third albums, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* in 1959 and *Change of the Century* in 1960. Critics and fans raved over these recordings and proclaimed free jazz the wave of the future. Coleman moved to New York City in 1960 where he continued to experiment with his stylings. He recorded two more albums in 1960 and 1961, the last being the ground-breaking *Beauty Is a Rare Thing* in which he experimented with free meters and tempos, musical

forms that proved controversial at the time but would eventually become influential among young jazz artists in the last 1960s and the 1970s.

Coleman, in the 1970s, recorded albums incorporating strings and other symphonic sounds with his saxophone, including his most famous work, *Skies of America*, which he recorded in 1972 joined by the London Symphony Orchestra. He then formed a band he named “Prime Time” in 1973 and he incorporated sounds he had heard while touring Northern Africa. The result was another innovation that blended these Rif musicians from Morocco with rock rhythms and his harmonically free improvisations. Prime Time would tour and record well into the 1990s.

Coleman cut back on his touring in the 2000s, but he continued to receive accolades. He received the Japan Art Association’s Praemium Imperiale prize in 2001 and did a live recording in Italy in 2005 in which he used two acoustic double bass players. Finally, as a cap to his career, he received the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2007. He died at his home in New York City on June 11, 2015. His obituary in the *New York Times* called him “one of jazz’s most important—and controversial—innovators.” An apt epitaph.

#