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Trace It Back

30 March 2023

Ornette Coleman

Ornette Coleman was born on March 9th, 1930 in Fort Worth Texas. From his childhood, Coleman was drawn to improvisation on the saxophone. Coleman taught himself to play the saxophone when he was a teenager and he even got dismissed from his high school band for improvising too much. Coleman was eager to leave town as soon as he could, when he was able, he got a job with Silas Green from New Orleans Traveling Show in 1949. However, after a show in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, he was assaulted and his tenor saxophone was destroyed. Having no tenor saxophone he switched to alto sax which would remain his primary instrument. He played again in New Orleans when he joined the band of PeeWee Creighton and traveled the country with them. But stopped in Los Angeles and began working other jobs while following his musical career. While in his stay in California, like-minded musicians such as Ed Blackwell, Bobby Bradford, Don Cherry, Charlie Haden, Billy Higgins, and Charles Moffett began to form a friendship.

Coleman's debut album something else had Cherry Higgins Walter Norris and Dawn Payne playing on it and briefly played with The Pianist Paul Blay in New York City. Coleman's first big moment was the release of his 1959 album *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. With Ornette on alto, Don Cherry on cornet, Charlie Hayden on bass, and Billy Higgins on drums. The album would come to shock the jazz world. Some have even said this event was the Genesis of avant-garde Jazz. Some newspaper articles of the time would contrast him As “great or a

goofer". Weighing the bold step into the unknown that Coleman took. He was quite controversial for the times, as what he was doing was new and innovative. But even at that time, people knew that had been playing a plastic saxophone which he bought in Los Angeles in 1954. He was unable to afford a metal saxophone. Although he didn't like the sound of the plastic sax when he first got it, but it became a symbol of his sound and influenced how he plays until his death.

Coleman's next big moment was in 1960 with the release of *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*, which featured Don Cherry and Freddie Hubbard on trumpet, Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet, Haden and LaFaro on bass, and both Higgins and Blackwell on drums. With a double quartet, the possibilities for free jazz were expanded upon. And Eric Dolphy and Coleman were pioneers of the movement. Coleman intended "free jazz" to be just a record title. However, his growing reputation propelled him to the forefront of jazz innovation, and free jazz was soon regarded as a new genre, despite Coleman's dissatisfaction with the term. One of the reasons he might have objected to the phrase is that his music incorporates composition. His melodic composition, while skeletal, is reminiscent of Charlie Parker's tunes written over basic harmonies. The music is more similar to the bebop that came before it than is frequently assumed. With the success of both records, Coleman was signed to Blue Note Records. Coleman's first album with the blue note label was *At The Golden Circle Stockholm* which included a song titled *The Empty Foxhole* which had Coleman's 10-year-old son, Denardo Coleman playing drums. His son would become his primary drummer in the late 1970s. Coleman was established as a Pioneer for avant-garde and improvisational music he started exploring other instruments to do such exploration with string instruments and brass instruments. In the 1970s and '80s, Coleman started a musical philosophy named harmolodics which as Coleman

defines it the use of the physical and mental of one's logic made into an expression of sound to bring about the musical sensation of unison executed by a single person or with a group. This includes Harmony, Melody, tempo, Rhythm, time, and phrases which all have equal positions in the results that come from the placing and spacing of ideas. Harmalotic seeks to free musical compositions from A tonal Center and allow freedom from traditional European Notions of tension and release. Meaning that all aspects of Sound and Music are equal. As Ornette puts it is the freedom to express what you know rather than conforming to a pre-existing system. Colman created his musical language. Removing the caste system from the sound.

In the 1980s Coleman would join popular groups such as the Grateful Dead and Pat Metheny for a short time. he made many albums at this time and experimented with funk with electric guitars in his band and had improvisations that were similar to his first works. In the 1990s he began to play with piano players regularly for the first time. And was so much at the forefront that the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy held a three-day “Portrait Of The Artist” featuring the Coleman quartet. Coleman would go on to practice his craft and be a prominent figure in the Jazz Community until his death in 2015 of cardiac arrest at the age of 85 in New York City. His funeral was a 3-hour event with performances and speeches by several of his collaborators and contemporaries.

Coleman's musical legacy cannot be overstated. He transformed jazz music by pushing the boundaries of what was possible and encouraging many musicians to follow in his footsteps. His avant-garde approach to improvisation and rejection of standard harmonic frameworks cleared the door for future generations of jazz performers to experiment and explore new musical horizons. Coleman's influence extended beyond jazz. His influence can be heard in the work of many musicians ranging from rock & roll to hip-hop. His dedication to his horn and social

justice and his push for change inspired many other musicians to use their talents to make a positive difference in the world. In addition to his influence on the world of music, Coleman paved the way for future generations of black musicians by breaking down barriers and establishing precedents for African American performers. His legacy will continue to impact and mold the world of music for many musicians and music lovers around the globe. He continues to serve as an inspiration to many musicians today.