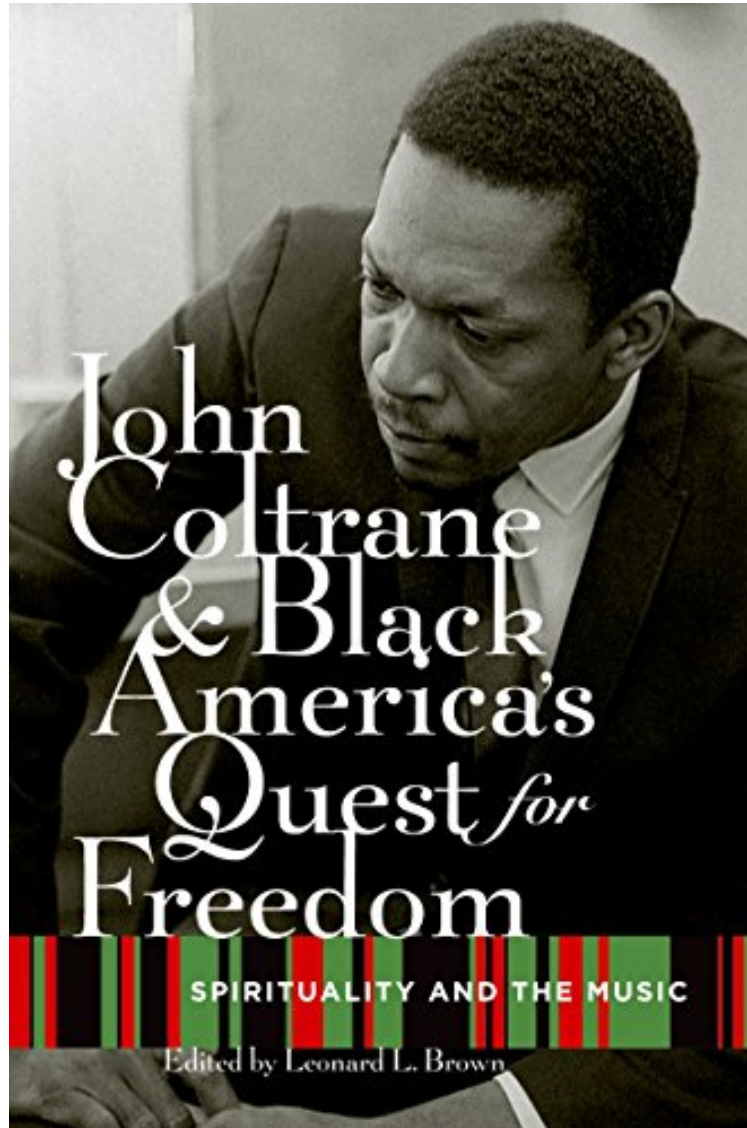


[Download] John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and the Music

John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and the Music

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From Oxford University Press : John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and the Music before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and the Music:

35 of 36 people found the following review helpful. Black Musician, Universal Musician By Steven McGill This is the seventh book I've read on John Coltrane, and in many ways it is the best. While it is not as thorough in covering Coltrane's life and career as Lewis Porter's biography, this book doesn't purport to be a biography. Instead, it is a series

of essays and interviews that gives the reader a larger understanding of the social, cultural, and spiritual impact of Coltrane's music. It helped me to understand Coltrane's sound in the broader context of the traditions of African-American music, dating back to slavery times. Because really, if you listen to Coltrane's music without any awareness of the cultural context from which it sprang, you can easily find yourself lost in a whirlwind of sound that makes absolutely no sense. What I like most about this book is that it directly addresses some of the attacks that critics in Coltrane's day made on his music. In one of the essays, written by Leonard Brown (the editor of the collection), the author reprints a letter that Coltrane wrote in 1962 to Downbeat editor Don DeMichael. Brown does an excellent job of breaking down the points that Coltrane made in the letter, and of making it clear how resolute Coltrane was in moving forward with his vision, critics be damned. In that sense, I found this book to be a refreshing change in outlook after previously reading Ben Ratliff's book, *Coltrane: The Story of a Sound*. In his book, Ratliff gave much credence to the negative critics who vilified Coltrane for his musical explorations, going so far as to term his music "anti-jazz." Ratliff seemed to think that because authoritative critics made such comments, then such comments have inherent credibility. Brown, on the other hand, clearly shows how such critics very much lacked credibility. They couldn't understand what Coltrane was doing, it didn't fit their definition of what jazz "should" be, so instead of asking intelligent questions, respecting this creative artist's never-ending quest to reach higher levels of mastery, they vehemently attacked him. Brown shows just how erroneous these attacks were, and he does so articulately and analytically, not with a lot of emotional rah-rah for Coltrane. I do believe that the title is a bit misleading. The title seems to imply that a great emphasis will be placed on the political contexts of Coltrane's music, since the height of his popularity did occur during the turbulent 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement was in full swing, and Black Nationalism was also prominent. But the quest for freedom that this book is talking about has more to do with the musician's freedom to express himself fully, without constraints and limitations being placed on him due to commercial reasons, political reasons, social reasons, or economic reasons. For Coltrane, that freedom took the form of a spiritual journey through music that broke down all barriers of traditional religious thought. Coltrane was not Christian, was not Buddhist, was not Hindu, was not Islamic, was not Sufi. He was all of those and more. As stated on page 170, "Coltrane accomplished what most have not been bold enough to endeavor - to allow spirituality to be present, front and center in his music, as its own separate entity from any system of religion. Coltrane knew and proved that spirituality mattered in black music." For some, the emphasis on "black" music and "black" America's quest for freedom can be a turn-off. I'm black, but I know that if I weren't, I might avoid this book on the premise that this book must not be for me. The title sounds limiting, obviously, because Coltrane was so much more than just a "black" musician. Coltrane's music was universal, and it remains so. Yet this book is necessary, because it reminds us that, despite the fact that his music is ultimately universal, despite the fact that it transcends race and ethnicity and all else that divides us, it is, in fact, black music. Coltrane was, in fact, very aware of, and very disturbed by, racial intolerance, racial prejudice, racial injustice. Coltrane did grow up in the black church. Coltrane was, in fact, influenced largely by black musicians. Coltrane did, in fact, play almost exclusively with other black musicians. Reading this book, I find myself reminded of the fact that we don't reach universal concepts by bypassing or ignoring our cultural background, but by embracing it and embodying it. Another highlight of the book for me came early, on page seven, where Brown lists the qualities that an aspiring musician had to have in order to gain acceptance into the "community" of musicians back when Coltrane was a young teenager just beginning to learn his way. There are fourteen items on the list, and reading the list gave me a deeper appreciation for how unique jazz music is, and how difficult it must be to be a jazz musician. One of the items on the list is "creativity in solos," which doesn't sound like all that big of a deal, but it is. As a non-musician, I can only imagine how demanding it must be to go on stage night after night and always say something new, knowing you can't merely repeat yourself, knowing you can't rely on what you've done in the past, even if the past was last night. Brown makes it clear that such a tradition was already in place when Coltrane arrived on the scene, and that he took it further, arguably to its extremes. At no point in the book is Coltrane idealized as a God, which did occur in a couple of the biographies that I've read previously. Instead, it is clear early on that spirituality has always been at the core of black music, that Coltrane wasn't a random prophet, but someone who became a voice for his people, and ultimately for all of humanity, as a result of uncompromisingly following the traditions of his people, and then expanding that vision. I gave the book only four stars because there is some filler. A rather lengthy essay on Coltrane's wife Alice appears about mid-way through. And nothing against Alice and her music, but I bought this book to read about John Coltrane, so an entire essay devoted to Alice didn't seem like it belonged. Also, three interviews appear at the end - one with Yusef Lateef, one with Billy Taylor, and one with Olly Wilson. The interviews are directly transcribed; I would've preferred the interviews serving as the basis of another essay. As interviews, they're rather dry, too conversational, and don't provide much insight into Coltrane's genius. Still, an excellent book. Go get it.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars
By Trail Junkie
a wonderful look at Coltrane and the social environment in which he navigated.
4 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Synthesis of art and Cultural goals
By michael farris
10 To revisit the messages behind the creation of this cosmic music is useful because old generations need to vocalize those goals, and new generations need to see the connectedness of Passion, politics, and art. Often they are only introduced piecemeal to all three.

Edited by prominent musician and scholar Leonard Brown, *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and the Music* is a timely exploration of Coltrane's sound and its spiritual qualities that are rooted in Black American music-culture and aspirations for freedom. A wide-ranging collection of essays and interviews featuring many of the most eminent figures in Black American music and jazz studies and performance --Tommy Lee Lott, Anthony Brown, Herman Gray, Emmett G. Price III, Tammy Kernodle, Salim Washington, Eric Jackson, TJ Anderson, Yusef Lateef, Billy Taylor, Olly Wilson, George Russell, and a never before published interview with Elvin Jones -- the book examines the full spectrum of Coltrane's legacy. Each work approaches this theme from a different angle, in both historical and contemporary contexts, focusing on how Coltrane became a quintessential example of the universal and enduring qualities of Black American culture.