

Pitchfork

Ornette Coleman

Celebrate Ornette



SONG X - 2017

8.1

by **Seth Colter Walls**
Contributor

This new archival set documents an all-star tribute to Ornette Coleman held in 2014—at which the saxophonist gave his last public performance—as well as recordings from his 2015 funeral.

Ornette Coleman was not scheduled to perform at the all-star concert held in his honor, back in the summer of 2014. That celebration, at Brooklyn's Prospect Park, was chiefly organized as a way for fans and associates to pay tribute to the saxophonist's legacy as an American composer and innovator. The lineup—including talents like Henry Threadgill and Ravi Coltrane—suggested Coleman's towering influence over multiple generations of jazz players. And the bill also promised elite musicians from other stylistic zones, such as Laurie Anderson and Patti Smith.

There aren't too many artists capable of drawing Flea and Branford Marsalis into the same orbit. Though it's easy to understand how Coleman's boisterous catalog does this. Once you strip away all the baggage associated with "free jazz" (never Coleman's preferred term), you're left with the joyful idiosyncrasy of that sound. Many of his melodies and solos channel traditional song styles, while his arrangements and

harmonies are frequently unexpected—and inspired. Coleman’s interest in collaboration, whether with Jerry Garcia or the Master Musicians of Jajouka, also sets a high standard for risk-taking that can appeal to artistic seekers working in any genre.

On the night of the 2014 Prospect Park gig, Coleman took his final risk on a public stage. He hadn’t performed for a crowd in several years; his last official recording was 2006’s Pulitzer prize-winning *Sound Grammar*. In the interim, journalists and fans passed on rumors regarding the genius’ failing health. So when the 84-year-old Coleman emerged from the wings of the Prospect Park bandshell, mid-concert, with his white alto saxophone in hand, it was a modest surprise even to his son and longtime drummer, Denardo.

After walking out carefully and taking a seat near the other saxophonists, Ornette simply listened for a bit. Soon after, he delivered 20 minutes of playing: a stretch that drew on two of his early compositions (“Ramblin” and “Turnaround”). Within a year, he would be dead. Heard now, on an archival release from Denardo Coleman’s new Song X imprint, it’s clear that Coleman’s technique in 2014 was more fragile than at any other point in his immortal career. His phrases flow more slowly. Sometimes Coleman reaches for a note with audible difficulty. While his reduced physical capabilities are obvious, the spiritual intensity communicated by his playing is equally apparent—and

all the more remarkable for the context. Every elderly body confronts decline. But some veteran spirits can discover new strategies for persisting, recognizable to the last.

There's a frailty in Coleman's tone, early on, during "Ramblin'." Despite the occasional tremor of timbre, there's no desire to hide from his limitations. And Coleman's way of following up a long-held, bluesy tone with a sprightly flourish of notes remains forceful, unmistakable. When Denardo's funk-influenced backing group comes in, a saxophone section also joins. (Their ranks include Threadgill and David Murray.) The extra players help thicken out the sound and lift Ornette up—with the icon eventually contributing some ecstatic, piercing notes that cut through the group texture. After finishing up with his playing for the night, the saxophonist hung around on stage for a portion of the rest of the gig. What he took in was a jammy, consistently potent tribute to his catalog, and his spirit of creativity.

It's thrilling to hear Threadgill's alto sound—one conscious of Ornette's style, but not overly indebted to it—during a performance of "Blues Connotation." (And Flea holds his own, on bass!) A powerhouse ensemble that includes Branford Marsalis, the Master Musicians of Jajouka, and Bruce Hornsby gathers for a fiery take of "Song X." On "Peace," Ravi Coltrane's soprano sax leaps create an excitable feel alongside the spiky blues

playing of guitarist James Blood Ulmer. And Geri Allen, the pianist with perhaps the best track record of collaborating with Coleman and his mysterious “harmolodic” theory, turns in imaginative supporting lines throughout a performance of “The Sphinx.” The less-canonical tributes also work. Guitarist Nels Cline handles the melody of “Sadness” while Thurston Moore lays down a din of expressionistic noise in the background. Laurie Anderson’s group—which includes avant-saxophonist John Zorn and bassist Bill Laswell—creates a lyrical squall that feels fully appropriate (in part, because it often references Coleman’s famous composition “Lonely Woman”). Patti Smith plays a pair of tunes from her then-recent album *Banga*; the way she switches between vocals and stray blasts of clarinet comes across as a tribute to Coleman’s own multi-instrumental practice.

By the time the concert closes—with a cathartic, all-hands-on-deck rendition of “Lonely Woman”—it seems as though few aspects of the artist’s vast playbook have been ignored. What’s particularly touching is the knowledge that everyone thought to pull this gig together in time for Ornette to experience their love for his work.

Performances from Coleman’s public funeral are also included in this new archival set. The mood of that 2015 concert is necessarily more somber than that of the the Prospect Park show, but the results are similarly

intriguing, and no less star-studded. Pharoah Sanders' brief tenor sax solo carries an affecting tenderness. The last living member of free jazz's inaugural class drops by to pay his respects, as well: Cecil Taylor's eight-minute tribute encompasses poetry (to the confusion of some in the audience), stark-but-stately piano motifs, and one swirl of atonal density at its midpoint. It's a stunner.

As a multimedia package, *Celebrate Ornette* provides fans a wide range of perspectives on both shows. Its three CDs give a complete account of the Prospect Park blowout and the performances from the Riverside Church funeral. The Prospect Park discs stray from a chronological presentation, in order to create a more ideal flow for home listening. (And yes, Ornette's own appearances are queued up first.) A pair of DVDs also gives you visual representation of each event—though some performances from Prospect Park are omitted, in favor of some backstage commentary from key participants. The DVD of the Riverside service also includes all eulogies and remembrances, which the audio disc breezes past. This lavish, pricey artifact isn't an ideal first port of entry to Coleman's art. But the way the set explores the cumulative impact of his work makes it a deeply rewarding experience for devoted admirers.