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‘Celebrate Ornette’: Live Performances, Timeless Influence

A boxed set documents two shows that celebrate the importance of Ornette Coleman’s music: his final live appearance at a concert in 2014 and a funeral service for the jazz legend from 2015.

By LARRY BLUMENFELD

The first sound you hear on “Celebrate Ornette” (Song X Records), a CD-and-DVD boxed set, comes from Ornette Coleman’s alto saxophone. All at once it conveys the frailty of old age; the sturdiness of enduring ideas; a childlike sense of play; and an elder’s wisdom. No one was certain Coleman would play at Brooklyn’s Prospect Park in June 2014 during a concert in his honor. Yet out he came, horn in hand, a few songs in. These live recordings begin with that moment.

Stating a cryptic blues, Coleman projects the same radiant beauty, vocal quality and radical freedom he did in the late 1950s, when he transformed jazz. Less than three minutes in, an ensemble of longtime associates assembled by his son, drummer Denardo Coleman, joins him, along with saxophonists Henry Threadgill and David Murray. “Ramblin’,” a Coleman classic, takes shape. In harmonic and rhythmic terms, the transition isn’t obvious. It’s as if we’ve entered through a side door, one only Ornette knew about.

Such is the magic and mystery of harmolodics, a musical philosophy as influential as it is esoteric, through which Coleman dispensed with, among other things, key signatures, and sent waves of influence well beyond jazz. The more than two-dozen musicians at Prospect Park included violinist/composer Laurie Anderson; Flea, the bassist from the Red Hot Chili Peppers; and two members of the Master Musicians of Jajouka, the Moroccan ensemble with which Coleman recorded in 1973.

Coleman was 84 years old at that Prospect Park concert. He hadn’t played in concert since 2011. By June 11, 2015, he was gone. “Celebrate Ornette” (available through the Ornette Coleman website) includes that complete 2014 event—Coleman’s final public performance—and a quite different set of star-studded performances, from a June 2015 funeral service at Manhattan’s Riverside

Church. The boxed set's CDs include more than three hours of music (a premium edition presents the music on 180-gram vinyl LPs too). Two DVDs document the Brooklyn concert, intercut with backstage interviews, and the full memorial service, which blended music with testimonials (full disclosure: These include my own reflections). A large-format 26-page booklet contains rare photographs and essays.

The essays inform and demystify. Denardo, who first played drums in his father's band in 1966 at age 10, and who produced this boxed set, describes the rigor —"the hours, days, weeks, months of rehearsal, those hundreds of tunes, parts and revisions"—behind what sounded utterly organic. Guitarist James Blood Ulmer explains that, for all its improvised glory, clearly stated melody is the key to Coleman's music. The Prospect Park recordings underscore how many singularly brilliant melodies Coleman left us, and the avenues of interpretation they invite. The blues at the core of many of these gets expressed in various ways, most directly and intensely by Messrs. Threadgill and Murray, especially on "Turnaround," and most abstractly through drones from a group that included Ms. Anderson, alto saxophonist John Zorn, bassist Bill Laswell. Geri Allen, one of the few pianists Coleman worked with, shines, as does Denardo, whose unconventional drum-kit approach gets accentuated in spots by tap dancer Savion Glover.

Coleman's "Peace" sounds loose-limbed and freewheeling in the Prospect Park version; at the memorial, with Ms. Allen and saxophonist Ravi Coltrane in duet, it is reverent and prayerful. The Riverside Church performances trace an emotional arc; solemn solo tributes by saxophonist Pharoah Sanders and pianist Cecil Taylor give way to a final celebratory four-guitar salute, via Coleman's "Dancing in Your Head."
The DVDs offer touching details. At Prospect Park, there's Coleman, seated onstage, smiling tenderly as Patti Smith recites a poem about him, and tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins explaining Coleman's impact on "music, politics and human relations." At Riverside Church, Yoko Ono leaves behind on the podium the white scarf she'd been knitting for Coleman when he died.

Beyond joyous expressions of enduring music and its context, this package functions like a family album—for the wide-ranging community animated by Coleman's presence, still quite alive and unbound by convention.

"It's not that Ornette thought out of the box," Denardo announced at the memorial, "he just didn't accept that there were any boxes."

With this boxed set, he's lovingly captured that spirit.

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