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Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
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September 25, 2008 - Issue 292

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Remembering John Coltrane
By Anyabwile Love
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

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By now many of you are aware of my deeply rooted interest in the life, music and metaphysics of musician John William Coltrane. On the dawn of his 82nd birthday (9/23) I figured it would be an appropriate time to share some things I have discovered in my research about this incredible master composer and musician. I know so many of us appreciate his music; it is constantly discussed. However, what is seldom discussed is Coltrane's life and beliefs, and how they informed the production and outputs of this spirit- moving music that uplifts, inspires and motivates us. Coltrane's music, much like the proverbs and folklore of the Akan, tells the collective wisdom and experiences of a people. Coltrane, within his music, intended to retain the African aesthetic of art with a purpose. His purpose, as he stated, was to be a "force for real good," in other words, to use his gift from the Creator to help others. What follows is a look at how John Coltrane, within his music production, retains the African culture of proverbs and folklore.

Proverbs represent the accumulated wisdom and experiences of past generations, and they constitute an authentic mirror of the mind and philosophy of a people. Generally, proverbs are primarily told through spoken word. Within the Akan culture, however, proverbs are expressed in the language of the horn and the drum. The music of John Coltrane is filled with proverbial expressions of the Akan people. In particular, two of

his songs, [Alabama](#) (1963) and [A Love Supreme](#) (1964) demonstrate not only this continuance of the African cultural narrative of proverbs, but also the *collective wisdom and experiences* of a people. Coltrane's 1963 recording [Alabama](#) details the collective experience of a people while his 1964 recording [A Love Supreme](#) features his spiritual connection to previous generations.

One of the major impetuses that influenced the rise of the Movement was the murder of the four young black girls, aged between 11 and 14, on the Sunday morning of September 15, 1963. A dozen sticks of dynamite were planted by white racists in the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. At 10.45 am, the bomb went off, killing the four young girls. Coltrane wrote [Alabama](#) in response to the bombing. He patterned his saxophone playing on Martin Luther King's funeral speech. Midway through the song, mirroring the point where King transforms his mourning into a statement of renewed determination for the struggle against racism, Elvin Jones's drumming rises from a whisper to a pounding rage. Coltrane's crescendo signifies the rising of the civil rights movement from a few Southern voices in outrage to a collective of voices throughout the U.S.

Coltrane's recording of [A Love Supreme](#) highlights the spiritual connections and continuance of the collective wisdom of previous generations. What Coltrane did in [A Love Supreme](#) is similar to the Akan's use of proverbs to express the collective wisdom and experiences of a people. For Coltrane, the goal of a musician is to understand the forces behind Akan proverbs. "I would like to bring to people something like happiness. I would like to discover a method so that if I want it to rain, it will start right away to rain." Coltrane attributes his own "spiritual awakening" to the understanding of Akan proverbs:

"During the year of 1957, I experienced by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lend me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make other happy through music. I feel this has to been granted through His grace. ALL PRAISE TO GOD."

When we consider the intellectual and cultural importance of proverbs, we understand the significance of John Coltrane's music. His music continues the legacy of transmitting collective wisdom and experiences of a people. A well-informed person will understand the meaning and translation of the proverbs found in the music of John Coltrane.

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Anyabwile Love, is a life-long Philadelphia resident. He is currently a Graduate student at Temple University in the African American Studies Department. His primary areas of research include: African cultural retentions throughout the Diaspora, African aesthetics, ethnomusicology, jazz musician John Coltrane, Akan proverbs, and the Ki-Kongo cosmograph cosmology. Anyabwile is the father of ten-year-old Maia Love. Currently he is the Director of Harcum College's Upward Bound program. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Love.

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