

“Shape of Jazz to Come”--Ornette Coleman (1959)

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Essay by Stephen Rush (guest post)*



Album cover



Original label



Ornette Coleman

Ornette Coleman’s “Shape of Jazz to Come” was released in 1959, only months after another classic Jazz album, Miles Davis’ “Kind of Blue.” Coleman’s release created a new genre (Free Jazz), while Davis’ effort was more of a quintessential commercial album that could be viewed as mainstream versus Ornette’s “Free” approach. These terms are still applied today. In essence, Ornette’s release actually *redefined the genre* called jazz.

The very sound of the album defies the norm. There is no piano, Ornette plays a plastic saxophone, and Don Cherry plays a pocket trumpet. The tuning is natural, not tempered, meaning that the natural detuning of the saxophone is embraced, not compensated for, by Ornette --a move so daring that precious few in his footsteps have done it (Roscoe Mitchell for one). And yet this music finds a seat deep in the tradition of collective improvisation. Jazz descended from the streets of New Orleans, where “King” Oliver and Louis Armstrong participated in “backline” street music, mostly for funerals, weddings and Mardi Gras. This style of performance is apparent in every track on “Shape of Jazz to Come.” Ornette’s method of improvisation, later coined by him as *Harmolodic*, pushed for group participation in deference to the solo, an approach important to classic Bebop artists such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk.

Harmolodics is about the importance of the collective human spirit and points to African musical traditions (one could even say Tribal styles), meaning that each and every member of the group has a deeply significant and authentic contribution, as opposed to the more hierarchical European musical style (see the cello parts in Haydn String Quartets or the orchestra part to Chopin’s Concerto No.1).

The first piece on the album, “Lonely Woman,” was to become Coleman’s trademark composition. As a *Harmolodic* composition, the folk-like melody is in two distinct time signatures (plaintive melody over a wickedly fast swing groove at the hands of Billy Higgins). The key is clear (D minor) but the chromaticism of the bridge defies key in favor of mood. The improvisation is what became known as “out music,” but is deeply rooted in tonal references.

This is not “atonal music” in the strictest sense (music that works to defy tonality); it is polytonal. All keys are allowed, just as all of the musicians’ contributions are respected equally. The bass part (offered by Charlie Haden) is a drone; it is unlike any jazz work up to this point, and is possibly a precursor to the drone-like accompaniment used just a bit later in time by John Coltrane on “My Favorite Things.”

“Eventually,” the second track, is a fast bebop vehicle, but the phrasing is liberated from a 2- or 4-bar structure, and the tonality is free. A quick comparison to classic Charlie (“Bird”) Parker recordings shows that Coleman’s phraseology, tone, and energy is an extension of “Bird” rather than an abnegation of Bird’s style. The groove is classic bebop throughout, but the improvisation uses much faster subdivisions (32nd notes), creating a frenzied and virtuosic cloud of brilliance.

“Peace” is a lovely *Harmolodic* ballad. It begins with a slow swing groove in one key and moves to a ballad texture for a few bars in another key; self-defying yet coherent. The bowed bass improvisation by Charlie Haden is more akin to classical music sound than bowed bass solos by other jazz bassists such as Paul Chambers and Slam Stewart. Ornette and Don Cherry actually improvise together--more collective improvisation; this is groundbreaking for this time period.

“Focus on Sanity” starts with a bebop gesture then moves into free improvisation--shockingly enough with just bass and drums. What follows are sax and trumpet solos-- in two completely different grooves. The end result is a freewheeling, cheerful, and well-constructed free jazz symphony in four sections.

“Congeniality” actually works on the same principle as “Peace,” skipping around logically in the head from key to key and groove to groove. The compositional genius at play here is Coleman’s ability to create cohesion from contrast. The piece starts as a bebop piece, which only lasts a few measures before stopping to play a few chorale-like phrases, then moves back to bop. The solos, like those on “Eventually,” are bop-like, but folk-like, playful, virtuosic and free. The groove for the solos is still swing, but the approach is completely new in tone, vibe and effect.

“Chronology,” even in title, is an homage to the master, Charlie Parker. The short quip-like phrases are beautifully reminiscent of the master. The composition is a hard-driving, 8-bar bebop phrase, again in multiple key areas. The head is followed by free soloing in a bop groove, eschewing, as do all the solos on this record, the 4-bar phrasing and fixed harmonic scheme. Coleman’s tone at the beginning of this solo portends much of what became known as the “Free Jazz” saxophone sound--overblown (on purpose), “natural intonation,” angularity, and unpredictable phrasing.

In summary, “Shape of Jazz to Come” had a deep effect on a completely different vein of jazz musician from the Miles Davis and Art Blakey camps. It was the precursor to Coleman’s “Free Jazz” album (released only two years later), which cemented that term as a subgenre that had to be dealt with in opposition to other streams in the field. Out of this approach came others, including those of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACAM) (see

Malachi Favors and Art Ensemble of Chicago), and it encouraged younger musicians such as John Coltrane and Albert Ayler to stretch the limits of this music.

The political context of “Shape of Jazz to Come” is equally important, though. “Shape of Jazz to Come” is rooted in the Civil Rights Movement and is a commentary on the “Shape of *Things* to Come.” The titles of Coleman’s next albums also speak to the political upheaval of the time, well as the power and significance of Black American Music (“Change of the Century” [1960], and “This is Our Music” [1959]). It is particularly striking that the same year the genre-coining album “Free Jazz” was released, 1960, freedom fighters from the North went South to fight for the anti-segregation laws. Within mere months of the assassinations of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, Ornette released his album “Crisis” with a dramatic picture of the Bill of Rights in flames on its cover. ³ To understand Ornette Coleman’s music one must put it in the political context from which it emerged.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.