

8 – Prayers Lifted on a Saxophone

“I do feel like I’m in a prayerful mode when I’m playing, asking the Creator for food.”

— Charles Lloyd, *Horizons Touched*, p. 154

“I am praying through my fingers when I play — and when I get the good ‘soul’ sound, and I try to touch people’s spirits.”

— Mary Lou Williams, liner notes to *Nite Life*

An Unexpected Blessing

When I was a teenager, one of our neighbors turned to look at me when his friend mentioned that I played jazz piano. “Have you heard John Coltrane’s album, *A Love Supreme*?” Roy asked. “That music is beautiful. It’s powerful. It changed my life.”

“Yeah, Coltrane is something special,” I mumbled, even though, at the time, I didn’t know much about the saxophonist. Nor did I have any of his recordings. Coltrane had died in 1967 when I was a kid. But I made a note of the album title. After I mowed a few more lawns for pocket money, I went to the record store and found a copy of *A Love Supreme*.

It was the kind of recording that made my parents insist that I wear headphones. The music was brittle, not beautiful. There was sadness and fury, there was passion and surging energy, there was pain and lack of resolution. Something was at work in that music that I — the seventeen-year-old first-born son of an IBM executive who lived in a nice house on a hill — didn’t understand. The power was undeniable, like the saxophonist took a scalpel and went right for my heart. Too much to take in.

I listened to the music a couple of times, if only to honor Roy’s recommendation, but soon I set it aside.

A few months later, my father was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. Our family’s life was turned upside down. Anxiety filled our home. We didn’t know if my father would survive.

For some inexplicable reason, I reached for *A Love Supreme* and listened again. This time I heard pure honesty, raw emotion, deep devotion to God, and the possibility of grace.

Clearly, the music found me and did its work, helping heal something in my heart. And as my father met with a truly miraculous cure, I began to wonder about something more. Could jazz be a form of prayer? Not merely a soundtrack for prayer, but prayer itself? Ten years after Coltrane’s death, his ministry continued to me, in me, teaching prayer in a different form, with raw emotion, surging energy, and unresolved notes.

The Sounds of Selah

In traditions such as the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity, scripture verses are intoned to simple chants. At an ecumenical gathering I attended, an Orthodox priest invited me to do a “reading” of scripture for evening vespers in his sanctuary. Before I began, he added, “And we sing the scriptures here.” I found it curious that the only musical instrument welcomed in that sanctuary was the human voice.

From the biblical scrolls of First and Second Chronicles, we know that instrumentalists were trained to lead the prayers of the people with cymbals, harps, and lyres.¹ Their musical accompaniment was deemed a “ministry.”² Words spoken or sung required more than voices and words. In fact, on the day when the Jerusalem temple was dedicated, the Divine Presence was welcomed, not by speeches and sermons, but by the sound of one hundred and twenty trumpeters. According to the account,

...when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever,” the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.³

Instrumental music can bear this power. A well-tuned invocation is an invitation for the Holy to be revealed. Instrumentalists can amplify the Mystery that is not always obvious, one reason all the brass quartets are busy on Easter.

And yet, over the centuries, preachers and churches have skirmished with musicians, declaring the superiority of words over melodies. The battle can even be seen in the printing of the Psalms, where only words remain from the musical prayers but no tunes, save for references to melodies long forgotten.⁴ Granted, ancient Israel had no way to notate the music. But even if they had, I doubt the ancient scribes would have included them.

As a kid in Sunday School, I noticed a word in the margin of my Bible: *selah*. Our teachers told us not to read it aloud. They considered it an unnecessary word, an indecipherable smudge from an earlier edition. So, whenever we saw *selah* printed in the psalms, we skipped it.

While the Hebrew word *selah* has never been adequately translated, scholars now concede that it offered ancient direction for the instrumentalists. *Selah* is a clue that something more than the spoken word was happening as psalms were prayed. *Selah* was the music that existed off the page, which was as important to the Jewish prayers as the texts.

By itself, *selah* has remained a marginal word. Instrumental music has rarely been valued by the church and temple as much as holy script.

In most worship services, folks gather to chat as the organist plays the prelude. The offering plates are passed to the sound of more instrumental music, often cut short when an impatient usher flicks a secret switch to ignite a bulb on the organ and notify the organist that the “essential” task is complete. Sadly, the instrumental postlude at the end of the service frequently devolves into, “Go in peace, get out of my way!”

I have a high view of instrumental music as a potential spiritual gift for the listener and the musician alike. The *selah* work of a jazz quartet can utter things in the presence of God that mere words fail to say. A saxophone can lament on behalf of the helpless. A piano may offer intercessions for the needy. A string bass can affirm the firm foundation of faith. Drums and cymbals may call pilgrims to break into joy.

1 1 Chronicles 25:1, 6 NRSV.

2 2 Chronicles 7:6 NRSV.

3 2 Chronicles 5:13–14 NRSV.

4 For instance, see the scripture introductions to Psalm 56 (“To the leader: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebrinth”) or Psalm 80 (“To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant”). These refer to ancient tunes, now lost.

Poet Ron Seitz has spoken about how, as a young man, he befriended writer and theologian Thomas Merton, who was then in his later years. Seitz tells of the night he went with Merton to a jazz club in Louisville. As the group began to play, Merton leaned over to whisper, “They’re going to start talking to each other now. Listen.” Then he moved closer to the bandstand to get a better look. Later, returning with his eyes wide, he said to Seitz, “Now that’s praying. That’s some kind of prayer! The new liturgy. Really, I’m not kidding.”⁵

Speaking of Prayer

What is prayer but the conversation of the soul addressed to God? Whether spoken aloud or silently or in a chorus of voices or in private, prayer is the respiration of the spiritual life. Like any conversation, it is two-sided, even if God’s voice is spoken at a frequency we cannot hear. In that apparent silence, we are tempted to do all the talking. But spiritual directors encourage us to hush, to dwell in receptive silence. There is Holy Wisdom to receive.

Prayer is honest communication. Prayer aspires to tell the simple truth about what’s going on within us and beyond us. It opens us to whatever God might do about our situation, prompts us to participate, and invites us to vulnerability and intimacy.

Prayer is the expression of a relationship. In prayer, we open our souls to the Presence greater than ourselves. We say thanks. We request help. We listen. As Charles Lloyd writes in the epigraph that begins this chapter, the prayers he offers consist of “asking the Creator for food.” And the asking is done on the saxophone.

The Psalms of Israel help clarify and direct our prayer. A collection of one hundred and fifty prayers in the center of the Bible, the Psalms cry and sing, beg and celebrate, interrogate and affirm. They voice our grief and wait for its healing. They declare surprising grace when it is discovered. They name the disconnections we experience and point toward holy restitution. They howl and dance and do everything in between. When we don’t know what to say, the Psalms provide a vocabulary. And the “liner notes” suggest instrumentation. *Selah*.

When prayer becomes too selfish, the Psalms expand our spirits. When prayer hits a brick wall, the Psalms point beyond it. These poetic prayers provide focus and direction for the words we haven’t yet found. They honestly voice our pain and point to God’s justice. They release us, in the poetic phrase of jazz historian Albert Murray, to “the exorcism of despair.”⁶

And the psalms also return me to John Coltrane and *A Love Supreme* in all its power and raw emotion.

Jazz, Conceived in Prayer and Praise

According to the mythology surrounding Coltrane’s most famous recording, the composition was conceived in an extended time of reflection and meditation. One biographer describes how John sat cross-legged in a silk robe, meditating silently, seeking communion with the Almighty, when he was suddenly flooded with melodies from heaven.⁷ How this happened,

5 As reported by Thomas T. Spencer, “Something ‘Hot and Abstract’: Thomas Merton, Mary Lou Williams and the Spirituality of Jazz,” *The Merton Seasonal: A Quarterly Review*, Fall 2018, vol. 43:3, p. 4.

6 Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) vii.

7 J.C. Thomas, *Chasin’ the Trane: The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1975) pp. 183–4.

exactly, the biographer did not describe, and Coltrane, in his modesty, would not disclose something so personal. What we do know is how Alice Coltrane, John's widow, later described this compositional experience to saxophonist Branford Marsalis:

He went into isolation. We didn't see him; the children didn't know what was going on. I would take food up for him, but no one saw him for several days. So we said OK, we won't bother him, ask him any questions, or send notes or anything. About — I would imagine — a few days to a week, he came downstairs like Moses coming down from the mountain. And he said, "For the first time in my life, for the next album, I have all of the music. This is the first time that has ever happened to me."⁸

John's typical pattern was to create music on the fly, to go into the recording studio with little preparation, and then to trust the moment. However, *A Love Supreme* was preconceived, even as it was finished in the studio. And to this day, *A Love Supreme* remains one of the most studied and discussed compositions in all of jazz.⁹

Later discovered by his family, the manuscript of Coltrane's original compositional "map" was given to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.¹⁰ The guide reveals a suite in four movements, each in a different minor key, mapped out so that each member of Coltrane's quartet will have a prominent solo. The primary melodic motif is a four-note phrase, first played as a vamp by the bass and later chanted. "A love supreme" is the foundation of the whole piece, a proclamation that God's love is beneath our feet, above our heads, surrounding us on every side.

To reinforce the point, Coltrane concludes his solo on the first movement by playing the motif on his horn ("a love supreme"), then continues to play the phrase in every key. The prominent Coltrane scholar Lewis Porter notes how unusual this is:

He's telling us that God is everywhere — in every register, in every key — and he's showing us that you have to discover religious belief. You can't just hit someone on the head by chanting right at the outset — the listener has to experience the process and then the listener is ready to hear the chant.¹¹

After this first movement, titled "Acknowledgement," a bass solo leads us into the next movement, "Resolution." John's band had been working on that melody in club gigs,¹² but for

8 Alice Coltrane to Branford Marsalis, interview in *Coltrane's A Love Supreme Live in Amsterdam*, Marsalis Music, DVD. Time: 6:20–7:10.

9 In addition to countless articles, see Jamie Howison, *God's Mind in That Music: Theological Explorations through the Music of John Coltrane* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012, pp. 135–151; Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1998) pp. 231–249; and the masterwork by Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album* (New York: Viking, 2002).

10 View the composition online at <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAH.AC.0903>

11 Lewis Porter, op. cit, p. 242.

12 According to Porter's later research, saxophonist Frank Tiberi recorded Coltrane playing "Resolution" at Pep's, a Philadelphia club, on 18 September 1964, three months before Coltrane recorded the suite. See Lewis Porter, "A Deep Dive into John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme,'" on WBGO-FM, 20 July 2020,

the recording, it has been slightly reworked and put in a different key. The title echoes the testimony that he wrote for the album's liner, the only time Coltrane wrote such a piece. The text begins with a description of spiritual awakening.¹³ He then goes on to confess,

As time and events moved on, a period of irresolution did prevail. I entered into a phase which was contradictory to the pledge and away from the esteemed path; but thankfully, now and again through the unerring and merciful hand of God, I do perceive and have been duly re-informed of His OMNIPOTENCE, and of our need for, and dependence on Him.¹⁴

What listeners perceive in the recording and from Coltrane's notes is that he did not presume that his faith journey was finished. Awakening required a re-awakening, a "resolution" to begin anew. So when we meet the third movement, "Pursuance," a fast, explosive blues based on the "A Love Supreme" motif, we hear what some consider a musical narration of his journey of sanctification. Others, with the fury of the piece, surmise that the artist is trying to outrun the temptations of the world. But all hear Coltrane climbing uphill with all the energy he can muster as he signals that the spiritual life requires energy, resilience, and perseverance to the end.

And at the end of the suite, we hear the appropriately titled "Psalm." The pianist strikes an ominous C minor chord and lets it shimmer for the next seven minutes. Above thundering tom toms and a droning bass, Coltrane offers a long, melismatic melody unlike anything he had recorded to date. It rises and falls like a chant.

For years, the melody of "Psalm" was a mystery, only guided by John's cryptic description that it was "a musical narration of the theme." But biographer Lewis Porter reveals the confounding mystery's answer. Along with the rare liner notes that Coltrane composed for the album package, Coltrane included a long, free verse poem entitled "A Love Supreme." It sounded like a meditation from the Bible's Psalms, rising and falling as breath, thanking God for grace, mercy, and peace. John names God as the Source ("all made in one") and Destination ("they all go back to God"), regularly punctuating with the refrain, "Thank you, God." One day, as Dr. Porter listened to the fourth movement, he realized Coltrane was playing his "Psalm" on the tenor saxophone. His improvised melody, played this way only once, is a recitative of his poem of praise.¹⁵

Other jazz scholars later confirmed what Trane had done. It appeared to be unprecedented. But, in reality, Coltrane had done this before.

Lamenting on the Horn

In November 1961, John Coltrane took his quartet for a week of live recordings at the Village Vanguard, a noted club in Greenwich Village. He titled one melody "Spiritual."

<https://www.wbgo.org/music/2020-07-17/a-deep-dive-into-john-coltranes-a-love-supreme-by-his-biographer-lewis-porter-pt-1#stream/0>

13 See above, Chapter 3.

14 *A Love Supreme*, liner notes. Op cit.

15 Coltrane's fans post videos regularly on YouTube to combine his words with his improvised melody. As of this writing, here is one version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmbWRZfOgwc>

At first, “Spiritual” was considered a Coltrane composition. But later, it was revealed to be a tune John found in a book of African American spirituals collected by James Weldon Johnson. The source was the “older” version of the hymn “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” In Coltrane’s imagination, the old hymn was transformed into a passionate cry lasting nearly fourteen minutes. A prayer in a minor key. In the liner notes, Coltrane wrote that he wanted to “get the original emotional essence of the spiritual.”¹⁶

Two years later, Coltrane recorded an original composition titled “Alabama,” adding it to a live set recorded at the Birdland club in New York. He did not tell his bandmates about the new tune when they recorded it on November 18, 1963. Nor did he reveal the title when he gave them the sparsest of directions. Pianist McCoy Tyner began the performance the same way he would for the final movement of “A Love Supreme” a year later — with an ominous C minor chord. Over that chord, John played a long melody unlike anything else he had ever composed. After a pause, the quartet began to improvise in steady time before returning to the melody.

When the title was finally revealed, the meaning of the composition began to come into focus. Two months prior to the recording date, at 10:22 a.m. on Sunday, September 15, white supremacist Robert Chambliss detonated nineteen sticks of dynamite planted at Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Four young girls, ages eleven to fourteen, were killed as they were walking upstairs from their Sunday School class to worship in the sanctuary. They had just concluded a lesson on the topic, “The Love That Forgives.”¹⁷ After he was arrested, Chambliss, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, was not convicted for the murders, only charged for the possession of dynamite.

The country was shaken by this act of domestic terrorism and the exoneration of the criminal act. The implicit threat from the KKK was that for those who were Black, there was no safety, not even in their own churches. The morning’s Sunday School lesson was pushed toward incredulity. And although Coltrane never spoke publicly about the tragedy, one of his colleagues reported he was incensed. Not one to take a public stand on issues, John privately called the incident “reprehensible,” particularly angry that it had happened in a house of God.¹⁸ The saxophonist kept his feelings to himself, maintaining his busy performance schedule and traveling widely. That is, until he recorded “Alabama.”

The unusual melody floats like a chant. Clearly, it was composed, for the melody of the studio recording for the Birdland album is virtually identical to the version Coltrane and his quartet performed on a television show in San Francisco three weeks later.

Years later, McCoy Tyner said the tune was based on a speech by Martin Luther King Jr. And more recently, scholars have suggested that the melody originated in phrases from Dr. King’s funeral eulogy for Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair — the four young women murdered in the Birmingham blast. Phrases from Dr. King’s speech can be clearly discerned in Coltrane’s melody:

So they did not die in vain.
God still has a way of wringing good out from evil.
The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a
redemptive force for this city.

16 John Coltrane, *“Live” at the Village Vanguard*, Impulse A-10.

17 As reported by J.C. Thomas, op. cit. p. 167.

18 Jamie Howison, op. cit. p. 123.

We must not despair. We must not become bitter.¹⁹

Coltrane continues to pray through his horn. In his melody as well as his solo, his own intercessions arise for this broken world, for those who lost their children, for those wounded by the blast, and for those torn asunder by hatred and violence.

“Alabama” is a musical psalm of lament, voicing sorrow while shaking a fist toward heaven and demanding justice. It’s little wonder that in recent years, in the days after George Floyd’s murder beneath the knee of a white police officer, the jazz community revisited “Alabama” — as American society continues to confront the scars of systemic racism. In 2020, Ismail Muhammed wrote,

When I listen to Coltrane playing over Tyner’s piano, I hear smoke rising up from a smoldering crater, mingling with the voices of the dead. He asks us to peer down into the hole, to toss ourselves over into this absence...

“Alabama” gives this unceasing immersion in grief a form. It’s there in the song’s disconcerting stops and starts, its disarticulated notes, its willingness to abandon virtuosity in favor of a style of playing that is repetitive, diffuse, tentative, and dissonant...

Sometimes, you’d rather scream and storm than have to explain anything at all.²⁰

In another article, Colin Fleming wrote of the power that he experienced in listening to “Alabama” anew:

It will wreck you. ... [I]t’s the sound of actual justice, a reminder to get to the other aspects of anger, to work one’s way to the parts that can lead to reform. A reminder of who we have it in us to be, and whom we might help. Which may well be the fundamental point of everything.²¹

Music as Prayer

When music finds us — or when the Holy finds us through music — it can speak for us. “I am praying through my fingers when I play,” Mary Lou Williams said. “And when I get the

19 Martin Luther King Jr., “Eulogy for the Martyred Children,” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James Melvin Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) pp. 221–223. Lewis Porter has explored the connection between Coltrane’s “Alabama” and Dr. King’s eulogy in “‘They Did Not Die in Vain’: on ‘Alabama,’ John Coltrane Carefully Wrought Anguish into Grace,” broadcast on WBGO-FM, 18 November 2020.

20 Ismail Muhammad, “On John Coltrane’s ‘Alabama,’” *The Paris Review*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/06/17/on-john-coltranes-alabama/>

21 Colin Fleming, “Of George Floyd and John Coltrane: Listening to ‘Alabama’ in the days following a nation-shaking killing,” *JazzTimes*, 2 June 2020, <https://jazztimes.com/features/columns/of-george-floyd-and-john-coltrane/>

good ‘soul’ sound, and I try to touch people’s spirits.” The honest and spiritually sensitive musician declares what others wish they could say if only they had the words — or notes. This is the power of “A Love Supreme,” which prays out the spiritual life and announces we are surrounded by the supreme love of God.

The music can also speak to us, addressing brokenness, injustice, and hurt. And when it does, the musician becomes the prophet. By praying in the tonalities of lament, the musician names the disconnections between how it is and what it could be. Anger is voiced in the expectation that it will be addressed and remediated. Those with ears to hear are validated and empowered. Those who remain invested in the forces that demean and destroy are served notice that God is coming to make things right.

A passionate saxophone offers so much more than the soundtrack to a carefree life. Those with ears to hear can perceive a call to vision, a commitment to justice, and an invitation to all that is honest and true. John Coltrane understood this. After offering *A Love Supreme* as a gift of prayer, he noted,

Once you become aware of this force for unity in life, you can’t forget it. It becomes part of everything you do. My goal in meditating on this through music however remains... to uplift people as much as I can. To inspire them to realize more and more their capacities for living meaningful lives.²²

22 Quoted by Nat Hentoff, in his liner notes for Coltrane’s album, *Meditations*. From *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews*, edited by Chris DeVito (Chicago: Chicago Review Books, 2010) 263.

Improvisation: Late-Night Thoughts on Listening to Coltrane's *Ascension*

Coltrane beckons Trinity
with a triplet.
The prayer meeting is called to order
as seven horns confer
on the invocation.
Soon the band speaks
in tongues,
a brassy sassy sanctified cacophony.

As Coltrane steps forward to scream,
a voice floats in from the next room,
*Turn that s*** down!*
I will not oblige.
Privileged folk like me
have turned it down
far too long
while saxophonists need to
pray.

Who am I to mute another man's pain?
Let him speak,
let him cry,
let his broken words ascend
to where he can be heard and answered.

And should I listen in,
something in me can also be addressed.
Prayers don't merely ascend.
Sometimes prayers spin sideways.