

# Free jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman dead at 85

By Hiram Lee  
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Jazz musician Ornette Coleman died June 11 at the age of 85. The influential and often controversial saxophonist was among the most significant participants in the free jazz movement, which he pioneered.

Coleman's recording career spanned half a century, but his best work was recorded in the space of a few years at the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s. *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), *Change of the Century* (1960) and *This is Our Music* (1961), in particular, stand out as his greatest achievements. They are challenging and imaginative works which seemed to break all the rules of jazz at the time of their release.

Coleman's classic quartet, featuring trumpeter Don Cherry, bassist Charlie Haden, and either Billy Higgins or Ed Blackwell on drums, was a talented ensemble of musicians. The picture of them on the cover of *This is Our Music* says it all; they were the quintessential postwar jazz group—sharply dressed, intelligent, cool and a little odd.

Coleman's approach to music is difficult to describe. In the words of composer Gunther Schuller, with whom Coleman studied composition, Coleman's music existed "in a world uncluttered by conventional bar lines, conventional chord changes, and conventional ways of blowing or fingering a saxophone."

An Ornette Coleman performance had no real harmonic structure planned out in advance. Once the opening theme was stated, the musicians were relatively free to improvise on it however they saw fit. Sudden and frequent shifts in the tonal center of the music were common. While Coleman's music usually retained the swing beat common to most jazz at the time, there were no hard rules about the meter or tempo, giving the performances a loose and open rhythmic quality.

Over this relatively free foundation, Coleman the soloist would "speak" in long, flowing sentences or make brief, clipped interjections. Angry bursts of notes gave way to more thoughtful, carefully "worded" passages.

His use of microtones, the "notes between the notes" as they are sometimes described, left many with the

impression that he was simply playing out of tune. He used a plastic saxophone, which also gave his sound an especially dry, sometimes abrasive quality.

But for all of his formal experimentation, there was a real sensitivity at the heart of Coleman's best work. While his music could be fun and lighthearted, as on the festive "Una Muy Bonita" from *Change of the Century*, Coleman also tapped into other moods in the postwar United States. He was obsessed with achieving the qualities of the human voice on his instrument, and the voice he sought to mimic was that of someone who was restless, dissatisfied, trying to break free from something.

In jazz critic Howard Mandel's book *Miles Ornette Cecil: Jazz Beyond Jazz*, Coleman describes the inspiration for his song "Lonely Woman," the high point of *The Shape of Jazz to Come*.

While taking a break from his job as a stock boy in a Los Angeles department store in the 1950s, Coleman one day noticed a picture of a woman hanging in a gallery. "In the background there was everything you could imagine that was wealthy," said Coleman, "all in her background—but she was so sad. And I said, 'Oh my goodness. I understand this feeling. I have not experienced this wealth, but I understand the feeling.' I went home and wrote 'Lonely Woman'...I related the condition to myself, wrote this song, and ever since it has grown and grown and grown."

Born March 9, 1930 in Fort Worth, Texas, Ornette Coleman knew something about real life. He came from a working class family. His father was a construction worker who died when Ornette was seven years old. His mother was a clerk in a funeral home.

When his mother gave him his first saxophone at the age of 14, the family had no money to pay for music lessons. Coleman taught himself how to play from books, with considerable difficulty and confusion. Some of the misconceptions he had about his instrument and basic music theory are said to have inspired his unorthodox approach to music later on.

By the time he was 17, Coleman was performing

around Forth Worth in R&B groups trying to bring in extra money for his family. He would eventually tour the South as part of a traveling tent show, playing music at carnivals. He later found work as an elevator operator while struggling to make it as a jazz musician in Los Angeles.

Coleman was “road tested,” putting in years playing music for the dance floor and getting knocked around by life. However “free” his jazz later became, his best work tended to keep its feet on the ground. It remained entertaining even as it could be challenging and frustrating. One can tap one’s foot to the music of his classic quartet and there are wonderful melodies that one can recall and hum. The blues is never very far away, and the influence of bebop is always there.

That would soon change, however. At the end of 1960, Coleman recorded the album that finally gave his style of music a name—*Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*. If his earlier work had been controversial, this album was scandalous. The music it contained was the aural equivalent of the abstract Jackson Pollock painting that adorned the album’s cover.

The recording consists of a single improvisational performance lasting nearly 40 minutes. It features two quartets performing simultaneously, though only rarely “together.” In addition to Coleman’s regular collaborators, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, bass clarinetist Eric Dolphy, and bassist Scott LaFaro joined the session.

Amid the blasts of squawking horns and double barrel drum rolls, sudden fanfares emerge and musicians step forward to solo before the cacophony swallows them up again. There are interesting moments, and the parade atmosphere, which Coleman had already begun to create on his better, earlier quartet albums, is there as well.

But in the end, the “freedom” given to the musicians by Coleman did not guarantee that they always had something interesting to say. Too much of the performance is self-indulgent, tedious and just unpleasant to listen to. It signaled a turning point in Coleman’s work, and it was not a turn for the better.

For all his talent and innovation, there was something terribly misguided in Coleman’s views on music. The idea that Western forms of music and “conventional” harmony should be rejected on the “democratic” grounds that they limit or impose themselves on natural human feeling was off the mark. In essence, he had given up poetry in favor of speaking in tongues.

It is not entirely surprising that Coleman found he had much in common with postmodernist philosopher Jacques

Derrida when the two met in Paris for a discussion in 1997. At one point in the conversation, Coleman commented: “The idea is that two or three people can have a conversation with sounds, without trying to dominate it or lead it. What I mean is that you have to be...intelligent, I suppose that’s the word. In improvised music I think the musicians are trying to reassemble an emotional or intellectual puzzle, in any case a puzzle in which the instruments give the tone.”

Coleman’s drive toward “pure” expression reached an extreme when he began recording with his ten-year-old son Denardo on drums for the album *The Empty Foxhole* (1966). Coleman himself played trumpet and violin on the album, each in an instinctive, unstudied way. The results are much as one would expect.

Unfortunately, Coleman’s primitivist music eventually degenerated into a kind of primal scream. There are moments on *Ornette at 12* (1968), *Science Fiction* (1971), *Crisis* (1972) and other recordings from the same period that are simply unlistenable. *Skies Of America* (1972), a collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra, is largely a mess, but does contain a few terrifying and beautiful moments.

By the late 1970s, Coleman would rein things in. He returned to the dance floor, so to speak, for a number of albums exploring funk music. Songs tended to be overly long and repetitive. Today many of them seem badly dated. One can find worthwhile moments here and there in his later work, but nothing that matches that series of albums from the early 1960s.

Ornette Coleman was an original voice. He added new possibilities of expression to jazz. The restless, searching quality in his best playing remains appealing. One can only regret that he spent so long searching down the wrong paths.

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