

## Hearing Voices in John Coltrane's "Alabama"

### Prelude

Birmingham, Alabama. Sept. 15, 1963. "A bomb severely damaged [the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church] today during Sunday school services, killing four Negro girls and setting off racial rioting and other violence in which two Negro boys were shot to death" (Stitton 1963). "One of the dead girls was decapitated. The coroner's office identified the dead as Denise McNair, 11; Carol Robertson, 14; Cynthia Wesley, 14, and Addie Mae Collins, 10. As the crowd came outside [and] watched the victims being carried out, one youth broke away and tried to touch one of the blanket-covered forms. 'This is my sister,' he cried. 'My God, she's dead.' Police took the hysterical boy away" (International 1963).

*McCoy Tyner lends the weight of his left hand to the lowest register of the piano – sounding a muted minor chord. His fingers excite the keys in irregular patterns and the piano builds a low wall of sound. Over this foundation, Coltrane's saxophone enters, panned gently left. The natural reverberation in the center channel gives the impression of spatial emplacement, as if Coltrane is in the room, speaking over your left shoulder. (0:00)*

"The four girls killed in the blast had just heard Mrs. Ella C. Demand, their teacher, complete the Sunday school lesson for the day. The subject was 'The Love That Forgives.' Church members said they found the girls huddled together beneath a pile of masonry debris" (Stitton 1963). "Dozens of survivors, their faces dripping blood from the glass that flew out of the church's stained glass windows, staggered around the building in a cloud of white dust raised by the explosion. The blast crushed two nearby cars like toys and blew out windows blocks away" (International 1963).

*Here Coltrane is gently melismatic, his approach scalar. Coltrane turns through close intervals, offering the impression of mournful or beleaguered speech. Asymmetrical rhythmic cadences leave breaths for emphasis, silences sounding as full stops. This opening recitative leaves one with the distinct feeling of bearing witness to eulogy, Coltrane's voice paying tribute to lost lives. (0:01)*

"The bombing was the 21<sup>st</sup> in Birmingham in eight years, and the first to kill. None of the bombings have been solved. ... Thousands of hysterical Negroes poured into the area around the church this morning and police fought for two hours, firing rifles into the air to control them. As darkness closed over the city hours later, shots crackled sporadically in the Negro sections. Stones smashed into cars driven by whites. ... Two Negro youths were killed in outbreaks of shooting several hours after the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church was bombed, and a third was wounded. (International 1963).

*As the opening section concludes, Coltrane plays two iterations of a phrase ending in falling thirds – before climbing up a fourth, where the melody is suspended momentarily in time.*

*Now, Tyner lifts his left hand from the lower keyboard, then his foot from the sustain pedal, and finally his right hand. The dampened strings leave room for a brief inhalation of breath. (1:11)*

## Introduction

This paper is a schizophonic<sup>1</sup> examination of John Coltrane’s “Alabama.” It explores notions of the voice, lament, dialogism, intervocality, and the power of remembrance. In weaving my way through the corridors of this sonic object and its cultural resonances, I will argue that Coltrane’s instrumental voice carries audible hallmarks of human lament in “Alabama.” This feature has resonated widely as Coltrane offers an acoustemological<sup>2</sup> way of hearing oneself as part of the black freedom movement. In this light I read Coltrane as an important constitutive figure in the movement.

Owing to the schizophonic nature of “Alabama” as a recorded artifact, additional layers of meaning were injected into the song over time, namely that its speech-like passages were inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s eulogy of the children slain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Street bombing. This process of storytelling and intervocal remembrance deepened the already dialogical character of the “Alabama.”

Throughout the paper, I will seek to keep the auricular on the page by interspersing descriptions of the sound itself – the playing, the sonorities, the musical expressions, the accidents that created subtle fissures in the recording. At times these will arrive as interjections, creating a contrast in voice; at other times they will be introduced to explicitly support an argument. The paper will also make use of spectral analysis as a way of visually engaging the audible meaning that inhabits “Alabama.”

---

<sup>1</sup> See page 11 for a discussion of schizophrasia as developed by Murray Schafer and Steven Feld.

<sup>2</sup> See page 12 for a discussion of acoustemology as developed by Steven Feld.

## Part I: Sounds of Lament in Coltrane's "Alabama"

### Imagining the Instrumental Voice

Many people have referenced Coltrane's playing in terms of voiced utterances – cries, screams, and shouts (Feld 2012a, 105, Griffin and Washington 2008). Critics and observers are drawn to the ways that Coltrane's instrumental voice mimetically references these utterances of the human voice. Indeed, the tenor saxophone exists very much in the range of a typical adult male voice. Coltrane was never loquacious in the verbal-linguistic sense. Often described by his collaborators as quiet, at times withdrawn (Griffin and Washington 2008, 49). However, when the mediating device of the saxophone entered Coltrane's mouth, the ideas poured out – rapid, highly expressive. Famously, when Coltrane asked Miles Davis how he could be more succinct in this playing, Davis offered Coltrane a glib response: "Take the horn out of your mouth. Take it out" (Griffin and Washington 2008, 209). For many of us, it is the human voice that best mediates the inner world and its outward expression. But for Coltrane the saxophone was his most cherished mediator, and so it is that in his musical expressions we best hear the resonant voice of John Coltrane.

In "The Linguistics of the Voice," Mladen Dolar parses the relationship between the voice and the signifier. He writes, "What singles out the voice as special among the vast ocean of sounds and noises, what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena, is its inner relationship with meaning" (Dolar 2006, 540). Dolar conceives of the voice as an "opening towards meaning," distinct from other sounds that don't carry inherent meaning beyond our ascriptions (ibid). The instrumental voice, then – as in the context of Coltrane's "Alabama," occupies a curious space between the voice Dolar links here with signification and the "vast ocean of [non-signifying] sounds and noises."

The instrumental voice is often intimately imbued with meaning from its first sounding. Musicians who generate the expressive energies that resonate from an instrument, through the air, and into our interpreting ears, often do so with great intention and care. Jazz offers a particularly rich site for exploring the connections between music, voice and signification, as a primary goal of the art form is the expression of one's interior world. In this way, the instrumental voice is much like the spoken voice. It is a mediator between what is inside and what is outside. It is an apparatus for producing sound vibrations that may be met with meaningful interpretation by a listener.

Though signifying language (in the written and verbal sense) has a superior ability to relay complex ideas and information, musical signification can speak to the ineffable realm of the heart in ways that are important and rich with meaning. In this sense, privileging the voice as the only site of signification privileges the mind over the heart. In the context of "Alabama", Coltrane's instrumental voice relates to Dolar's notion that "The voice is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning is the goal" (Dolar 2006, 541). This is to say that Coltrane sought to express meaning through his composition of "Alabama." He sought to bring his inner world into outer expression. In the liner note to *Live at Birdland* (the album on which "Alabama" appears), Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) muses,

I didn't realize until now what a beautiful word *Alabama* is. That is one function of art, to reveal beauty, common or uncommon, uncommonly. And that's what Trane does. Bob Thiele asked Trane if the title "had any significance to today's problems." I suppose he meant literally. Coltrane answered, "It represents, musically, something that I saw down there translated into music from inside me." Which is to say, "listen" (Baraka 1968, 78).

## Lament

*Bass and drums join piano in a descending harmony that retards gently, resolving in a definitive V-I cadence, offering a moment of closure. The strong cadence is repeated again for emphasis. Here, Coltrane's lone voice rings out lightly into the void, a high G. As the band comes swinging in here, Coltrane's voice drops a tritone – landing on a Db – an octave and a chromatic half-step above the tonic sounded by Garrison's bass on the first beat of the measure. Coltrane's sour note over the band's swinging time highlights a feeling of disconnect. Disconnect between mourning and the onward march of daily life. Disconnect between tenderness and anguish. (1:21)*

Many have taken Baraka's advice and listened closely to "Alabama" and, by and large, listeners have agreed on an interpretation. Here Coltrane's voice is in a mournful mode. Gone are the dense sheets of sound that characterized much of his playing from this era. His voice sounds to be processing grief. Baraka continues with his description of the song, "And what we're given is a slow delicate introspective sadness, almost hopelessness" (ibid). Others have commented on the mournful qualities of this song as well. Ghanaian musician, instrumentalist, and Coltrane devotee, Nii Noi Nortey, in a fascinating series of interviews with ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, discusses the ways in which he hears lament in Coltrane's "Alabama":

Here is a man playing a horn, playing a funeral dirge. ... As I explained to my people, this was a case where some four black girls were bombed in a church in 1963. Once they got the story the whole thing becomes even clearer. From then on, we could even hear voices in Coltrane's playing, we could even put Ghanaian words to his playing: "Oh, how sorry, man. How sad that all these little children have been bombed." It was a lamentation, and lamentation is universal, I think. And we could hear the lamentation in his playing (Feld 2012a, 103).

Nii Noi Nortey sums up what many commentators have ventured over the years about "Alabama": that this song is a mournful lament, a tribute to the slain children. How is it that so many listeners have arrived at the same conclusion? As Coltrane's stylized

expressions of human sadness were captured in a recorded artifact, space was created for a body of listeners to resonate in a practice of collective mourning.

In Greg Urban's case studies of lament practices in Amerindian Brazil, he describes lament (or what he calls "ritualized wailing") as functioning "along two simultaneous planes. (1) the plane of overt expression of emotion, in this case the feeling of sadness at separation or death and (2) the plane of covert expression of the desire for sociability" (Urban 1988, 385). In the case of Coltrane's "Alabama" these two categorizations are apt. On the one hand, Coltrane's voice conveys sadness as he invokes Urban's so-called "icons of crying" (ibid, 389). On the other, his public performance of lament invites others into a sociality of collective mourning. This collective affective experience is what led "Alabama" to gain significant cultural weight as a constitutive artifact of the black freedom movement.

### Icons of Crying

*The band starts off haltingly with Jimmy Garrison playing a series of dotted quarter note and anticipatory eighths, but by the middle of the third bar of this section, the band is off and walking – a gentle Cmi swing. The absence here of chord changes gives the feeling of motion without movement. Coltrane's voice becomes more animated during the first phrase, exploring a few intervallic leaps and a descending arpeggio. (1:45)*

*His second phrase, however, strikes a note of pain as Coltrane climbs up to a high C, his pitch a few cents flat, warbling, squeaking as he hoarsely finishes the phrase (overtone coming to the surface). The warbling tone recalls Greg Urban's falsetto vowels, the squeaks sounding as cry breaks in Coltrane's voice. (2:00)*

*Here Jones responds to Coltrane's cry not just with percussive embellishments, but with his own characteristic vocalization. He moans and mumbles in the right channel, adding to the sense of dialogue between the musicians. Jones' voice is highlighted here as the band keeps time, with Coltrane laying out a full 6 bars. One can almost make out a signifying utterance from Jones. Could it be "strong woman" or ... the voice is distant and obscured. (2:35)*

The cry break, falsetto vowels, the voiced inhalation, the creaky voice. These are the four icons of crying Greg Urban details in his study of lament practice (Urban 1988, 390). A

close listening of “Alabama” reveals that Coltrane, self-consciously or not, creates an atmosphere of mourning through the use of sounds related to these sounds of grief.

The song begins with a slow and spare section, sometimes described as a recitative (Porter 1998, 331). Just before the rhythm section enters in earnest for the first time, Coltrane’s lone voice calls out into space in a manner reminiscent of Urban’s description of both *falsetto vowels* and *the cry break*. Urban notes, the “‘falsetto’ vowel is typically accompanied by a slight creaking of the voice and falling intonation over a protracted articulation” (ibid, 390). Coltrane’s cry here references this sound – his tone audibly shifting as the note is held out.

The fundamental pitch becomes thinner as more overtones are heard to resonate – suggesting a breaking or creaking of the voice. When the band finally does enter, Coltrane drops a dissonant tritone, falling from a high G to a C-sharp. Figure 1 is a spectrogram generated from this moment in “Alabama.” It shows the high G being held out at roughly 392 Hz along the y-axis. The red lines on the spectrogram represent high energy, the green

lines, decreasing energy. Here, one can see the rich series of harmonics emanating from Coltrane’s horn; the overtones are mirrored as

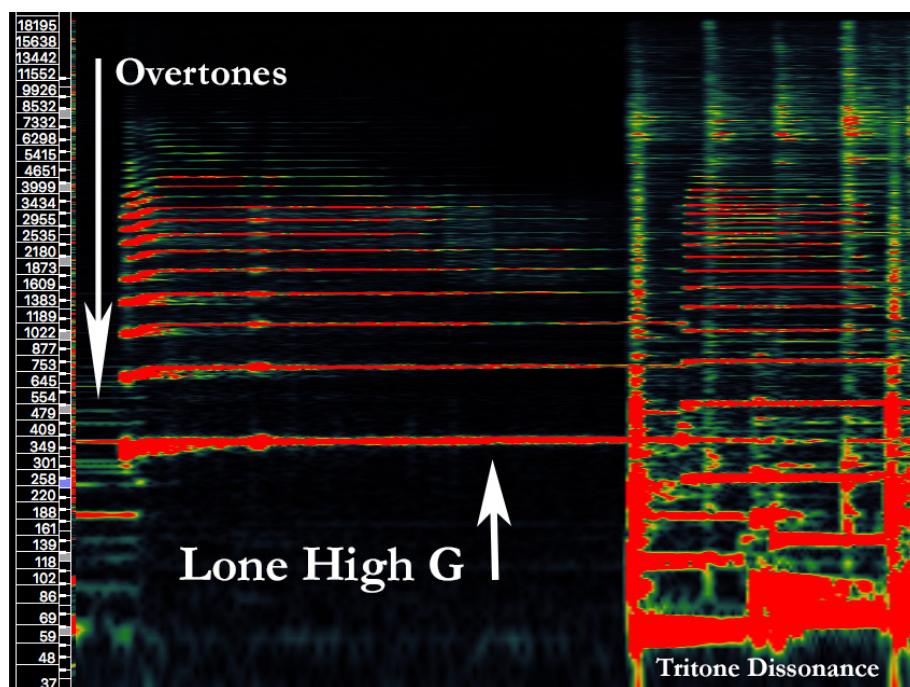


Figure 1

horizontal lines above the fundamental pitch. These begin to dissipate in the upper reaches of audibility, around 8,000 Hz. The rightmost third of the graph (along the x-axis) shows Coltrane's dissonant touchdown upon the tritone as the band rejoins him.

The most dramatic moment of "Alabama" comes in the closing measures as Coltrane's voice breaks into a visceral cry at 4:43. Here his voice appears to break, leaping up a major sixth, and landing on a highly dissonant E natural (in the context of Cmi). His tone in this moment is thin and resonant with vibrato and overtones. Urban writes, "From an articulatory point of view, the cry break involves a pulse of air initiated by a push from the diaphragm. Pressure from the pulse is built up behind the closed glottis, which is then released with the glottal chords vibrating to produce any of various non-distinct vowels. This vibration is often accompanied by friction noise, as the air is forced out of the mouth and/or nose" (ibid, 389-390). Coltrane's final cry here is reminiscent of both the cry break and

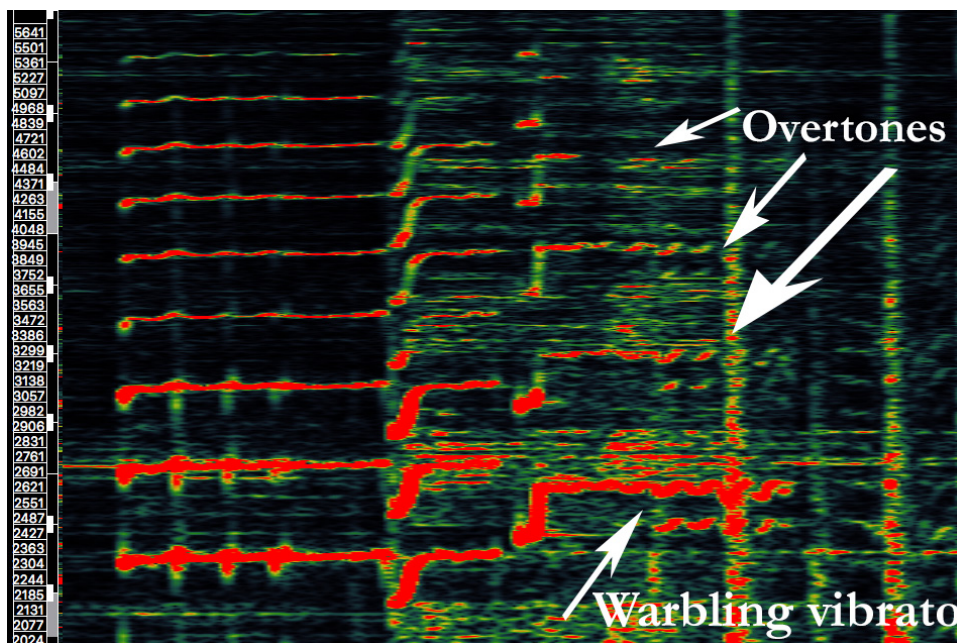


Figure 2

hear Coltrane's voice in the register of lament. Figure 2 illustrates this final cry. The ringing overtones and heavy vibrato are evident.

the falsetto vowels. It is this dramatic moment in the song that offers the clearest invitation for listeners to

Beginning at 4:29, the group enters the final section of the composition, which has the polyphonic character of group lament as described by Charles Briggs in his work on Warao ritual wailing in Venezuela (Briggs 1993). At the outset of this passage, Jimmy Garrison modulates up a half step from the tonic, sustaining a C sharp in the bass. This move provides a tense, oscillating dissonance alongside Tyner's low-register Cmi texture in the piano. In this oscillating thrum, one can imagine the creaky voice as described by Urban, which "involves the production of sounds with the glottal chords vibrating at a lower than normal rate" (ibid, 390). The accompanying image shows this group wail in process with the intense low-register dissonance on display at the bottom of the image.

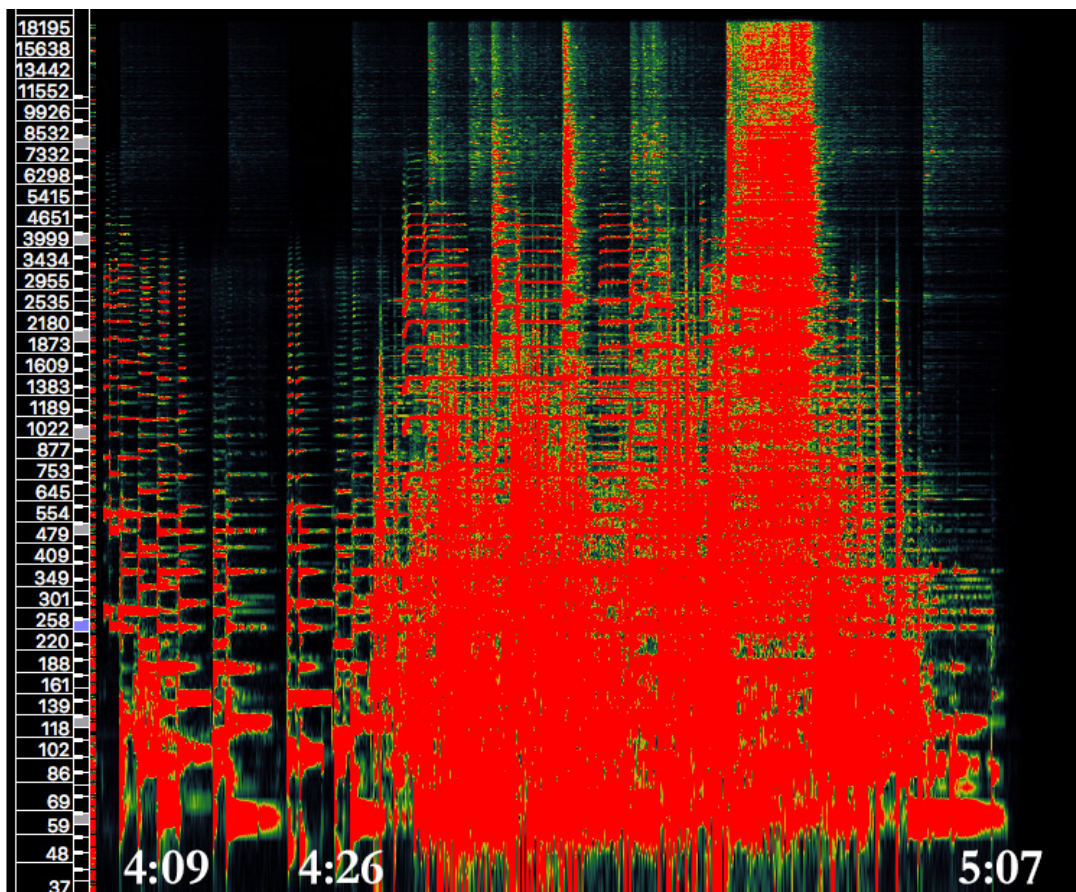


Figure 3

The ongoing vocalizations of Elvin Jones that bleed through the drum mics, and the frequent use of ensemble rests, suggest Urban's *voiced inhalations*. While Urban of course

conceptualized these icons of crying as dimensions of the human voice, it is interesting to note the manner in which Coltrane employs similar characteristics in order to build an affective quality that invokes, and invites, human sadness.

### Schizophonia and Acoustemological Belonging

*In awkward fashion the band abruptly stops. It's as if someone gestured with a waving hand to cancel the ensemble's forward propulsion; or as if a plug is pulled from the machine. Garrison ends on the b7, an unresolving Bb laid down just before the down beat. Jones's snare drum chimes in late, adding more uncomfortable non-resolution to the sequence. (2:39)*

*In the rich silence that follows, one can faintly make out, behind the quiet clatter of saxophone keys, the humming sound of playback in Coltrane's headphones. There is evidence of a tape-edit here in progress. This studio intervention into a purportedly 'live' space gives a feeling of dislodgement, an anxiety reminiscent of Murray Schafer's original conception of schizophonia<sup>3</sup>. (2:41)*

*This edit also evokes Barthes' "grain"<sup>4</sup>. Rather than hearing the grain of the voice in the vocal apparatus, as Barthes would have it, the grain of the recording is here evident: the mechanic apparatus momentarily revealed. This ghostly playback emanating, one supposes, from Trane's headphones, sounds a sinister resonance, suggesting David Toop's premise that recorded sound is "a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location is ambiguous and whose existence is transitory"(Toop 2010, xv).*

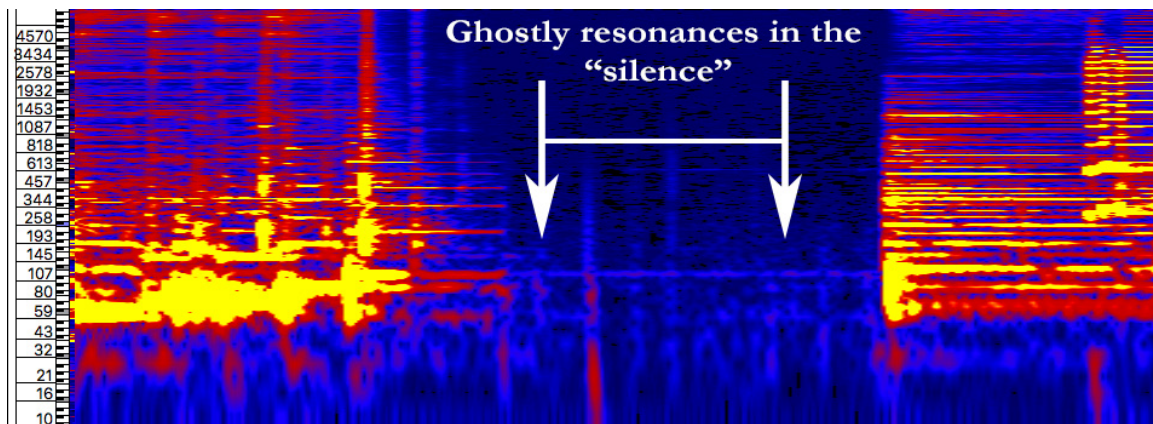


Figure 4

<sup>3</sup> See below for a description of schizophonia

<sup>4</sup> In "The Grain of the Voice," Roland Barthes describes the "grain," in part, as the presence of the body in vocal production. "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs"(Barthes 1977, 509). In this way recordings carry 'grain': when the processes of production are evident rather than fully masked. I would suggest that this is a primary reason many listeners are drawn to recordings made prior to the digital era: for their graininess, that ineffable but ever-appealing character.

Murray Schafer conceptualized *schizophonia* as the split between an original sound and its recorded transmission or reproduction. Schafer writes, “I coined the term in *The New Soundscape* to be a nervous word. Related to schizophrenia, I wanted to convey the same sense of aberration and drama” (Schafer 1977, 91). In his essay, “My Life in the Bush of Ghosts,” Steven Feld expands on this notion.

Unlike Schafer, I do not use the terms principally or simply to refer to the technological process of splitting that constitutes sound recording. Rather, I am concerned with the larger arena where sound recordings move into long- and short-term routes of circulation and patterns of consumption. At stake, then, in the splitting of sounds from sources is the possibility of new social life, and this is principally about the recontextualization and resignification of sounds (Feld 2012b, 41).

It is in this sense that “Alabama” has become a schizophrenic artifact of collective mourning. Indeed, it is a living artifact that takes on new meaning as it is circulated, encountered and heard in new ways. Immediately after its release, “Alabama” was met with a resonant sense of collective grief. Spurred on not only by the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Church bombing, but also by the deep historical legacy of violence directed towards black bodies in the U.S., Coltrane’s cry leapt from the grooves of a record as it was interpreted into electrical signals, then amplified and articulated by speakers into sound waves. Once his utterance met the ears of listeners, it was received with an empathic response. So it was that Nii Noi Nortey asserts that even as far away as Ghana, “We could hear our struggles when Coltrane screamed” (Feld 2012a, 89).

The utterance emanating from Coltrane’s horn in the final moments of “Alabama” recalls Mladen Dolar’s reflexive theory of the scream.

The fist scream may be caused by pain, by the need for food, by frustration and anxiety, but the moment the other hears it ... the moment the other is provoked and interpellated by it ... it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into a speech addressed to the other, it assumes the first function of speech: to address the other and elicit and answer. The scream becomes an appeal to the other; it needs an interpretation and an answer, it

demands satisfaction (Dolar 2006, 549).

So, as Coltrane's scream rang out across the nation (and the world), it sounded a desire for shared sociality and held space for collective grieving.<sup>5</sup> This points to why Coltrane became so closely associated with the black freedom movement, even though he didn't describe his music as being directly reflective of it. Coltrane's schizophonic voice offered space for people to hear themselves as part of a communal sphere of mourning and consequently, resistance. In this way Coltrane played an important constitutive role by offering an acoustemological avenue for people to hear themselves in his cries of lament, and to resound alongside a collective body of resistance. Feld describes acoustemology as "an intimacy-making bridge" (Feld 2012a, 10), as "sound as a way of knowing" (ibid, 7). Through collectively experiencing the sense of grief that Coltrane stylized into "Alabama," people knew themselves as belonging to a movement. His music offers a bridge into belonging across space and time.

## Part II: Story, Dialogism, Intervocality and the Coltrane-King Hypothesis

*After this provocative 'silence,' we return to a repeat of the initial recitative section, this time accompanied by Tyner, Garrison and Jones (who all enter together following what must have been a count off). Coltrane interprets the melody similarly in this second pass as in the first, though some phrasing shifts slightly. Tyner's rolling accompaniment is sparer this time round, leaving room for Jones' malleted toms and Garrison's wandering, woody bass. (2:45)*

*This section is spacious, the band supporting Coltrane's voice by leaving room for it to resonate. But the passage is also intervocal. Garrison's bass speaks alongside Coltrane's horn. Jones concurs, with his rolling tom-toms and voiced murmurs. The pads of Tyner's fingers bring the piano to life. (3:20)*

---

<sup>5</sup> Again, recall Greg Urban's assertion that lament functions along "the plane of covert expression of the desire for sociability." (Urban 1988, 385).

## Story

The origin story of “Alabama” has been repeated many times: that the song was written in tribute to the four children killed in the white supremacist bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963. Though Coltrane never specifically acknowledged that this was, in fact, the impetus for the song, many Coltrane commentators have reiterated the claim in some form (Ratliff 2007, 85; Watrous 1998, 65; Brown 2010, 25; Griffin and Washington 2008, 250). Taking this line of thought one step further, it has been reported that Coltrane based the recitative-like section of the composition on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s eulogy of the slain children (Griffin and Washington 2008, 250; Watrous 1998, 65; Smith 2003, 86). Ben Ratliff writes, “It has been suggested that Coltrane based the long, mournful, through-composed line at the beginning and end of “Alabama” on a Martin Luther King text. And it does sound like a transcription of speech; many of the rhythmic phrases seem unnatural for Coltrane” (Ratliff 2007, 86). He concludes, however, that none of King’s speeches from that era, including the eulogy of September 18, “seem to provide the source” (ibid).

The celebrated Lewis Porter biography of John Coltrane entertains the theory but ultimately dismisses it (Porter 1998, 331). Porter and other scholars are justifiably reluctant to embrace this theory, lacking concrete evidence to support it. However, what’s most interesting is the persistence of the Coltrane-King hypothesis in wider reporting. British activist and socialist publisher, Martin Smith, strongly asserted the claim in his 2003 book, *John Coltrane: Jazz, racism, and resistance, extended version*:

[Coltrane] patterned his saxophone lines on the cadence of Martin Luther King’s funeral speech. Midway through the song, mirroring the point in the sermon 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. He wanted this crescendo to signify the rising civil rights movement. “Alabama”... perfectly expresses the mood and emotions of that time (Smith 2003, 86)

Smith likely based this claim on the 1983 article by Peter Watrous, which seems to have first introduced the hypothesis into print (Watrous 1998). Since then, activists, journalists, music critics and Coltrane idolaters have made additional claims to this end in print and online (Townsend 2010, Stevenson 2013, Gundersen 2013). The King-Coltrane hypothesis, as presented by Watrous, has led to a proliferation of the theory, though neither Watrous nor Smith substantiate this claim in any way. Perhaps the hypothesis appealed to them in the way it supports an argument for Coltrane as an important articulatory figure in the black freedom movement.

Despite the dearth of evidence to support the claim the Coltrane was directly inspired by King’s speech, the abundance of writing bringing testament to this claim is remarkable. This signals that reading Coltrane’s composition as inspired by King’s eulogy is a compelling story – whether or not it is factually true. Coltrane himself was reluctant to discuss meaning in his compositions (DeVito 2010, 142; Baraka 1968, 78), so we are left to wonder. And wonder we must!

Steven Feld writes about the power of story and storytelling in his memoir/ethnography, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra*:

Stories create analytic gestures by their need to recall and thereby ponder, wonder, and search out layers of intersubjective significance in events, acts, and scenes. Stitching stories together is also a sense-making activity, one that signals a clear analytic awareness of the fluidity and gaps in public and private discourses. To listen carefully to stories is to take local subjectivity seriously; to repeat them shifts focus to remembering, to how musical experience becomes meaningful by being vocally emplaced, to how, as Alfred Shutz [*sic*] put it long ago, in *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, remembering “lifts experience from ‘the irreversible stream of duration’” (Feld 2012a, 8).

Following Feld, then, the King-Coltrane hypothesis merits consideration, regardless of whether Coltrane actually sat down with a recording of King's eulogy and transcribed it; or whether he might have gingerly laid the words to the speech on the music stand as he stood in Rudy Van Gelder's studio on November 18, 1963; or whether the connection between the two is but a hopeful construction by those longing to deepen the discursive impact of Coltrane's voice in the black freedom struggle. In any case, the voice of King is now intimately bound up with the voice of Coltrane in "Alabama." It is through this story that I will explore the dialogical and intervocal character of Coltrane's recording of "Alabama," and its subsequent cultural reverberations.

### Dialogism

Listening to "Alabama," many hear the cadence of Coltrane's playing as a voice, or at least as a transcription of voice (e.g., Ratliff 2007, 86). In fact, Coltrane biographer Lewis Porter documents a precedent for Coltrane constructing recitative sections from text around the same time as the "Alabama" recording. Porter claims that the poem penned by Coltrane and published in the liner notes to *A Love Supreme* (1965) was the basis for the composition of "Psalm," the fourth movement in the suite. "Remember," writes Porter, "*A Love Supreme* is not only the title of the LP, but a poem by Coltrane that appears in the liner notes. A comparison of the poem with Coltrane's improvisation reveals that his saxophone solo is a wordless 'recitation,' if you will, of the words of the poem" (Porter 1998, 244). Indeed, "Psalm" shares many of the hallmarks of "Alabama." Both songs contain speech-like sections that unfold atop timeless textures from the band. In "Alabama" this gives the impression of eulogy. In the case of "Psalm," it invokes prayer. Both recitatives are played over textural accompaniment from the band. In "Alabama" the texture is dramatic,

mournful, somewhat anxious; in “A Love Supreme” it is shimmering, sparkling, oceanic. Additionally, Jimmy Garrison improvises a bass motif in “Alabama” at 3:15 that is strikingly similar to the bass line that would come to propel *A Love Supreme*. A final similarity is that both “Alabama” and “Psalm” are in the key of Cmi. All of this suggests that “Alabama” could have provided the framework for *A Love Supreme*, which Coltrane would go on to record a year later (a topic that ought to be expanded elsewhere).

Porter suggests that it is not just Coltrane’s instrumental voice, but also his signifying voice, which can be heard in *A Love Supreme*. If so, one can imagine that we are hearing multiple voices in “Alabama” as well. Whether intentional or not, as I’ve shown in the previous section, the voices of King and Coltrane are distinctly intertwined in “Alabama.” But not just in the public imagination. I will also argue that they are dialogically imbricated in their very materialization.

The literary theorist and semiotician, Mikhail Bakhtin, imagines every utterance to be linked in a chain of speech communication. Relating to his theory of dialogism, Bakhtin writes,

Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. These mutual reflections determine their character. Each utterance is filled with the echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word 'response' here in the broadest sense) (Bakhtin 2010, 91).

Though Bakhtin is considering communication in the sense of spoken language in this context, it is worthwhile to extrapolate his thinking on dialogism into the realm of musical language as well. Scholars have often conceptualized jazz as a discrete language (Berliner 2009). In the musical-linguistic sense then, we can imagine Coltrane’s utterance as reverberating in a few distinct *communal spheres*. In the sphere of jazz composition and

improvisation, Coltrane's decidedly unique voice does not stand entirely on its own. As Griffin and Washington discuss in their examination of the Coltrane-Davis collaborations of the 1950s, the creation of Coltrane's unique voice is indebted to artists who inspired and nurtured him along the way, including Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, and Davis himself, to name a few (Griffin and Washington 2008). That Trane's sound and style were formed in dialogue with the musicians around him is perhaps an obvious observation to make, but it points to the essentially dialogical process involved in cultivating an instrumental voice, particularly in a jazz context.

Additionally, a close listening to "Alabama" reveals a deeply dialogical document on the level of communication between Coltrane, Garrison, Tyner and Jones. The instrumentalists are listening closely to one another's utterances, attending to them in supportive and contrasting ways. This type of dialogue is a hallmark of jazz improvisation, a communicative style at its height in Coltrane's classic quartet recordings.

The *communal sphere* binding Coltrane and King is not strictly a musical one, however. They were linked during the early 1960's in the sphere of the black freedom movement. In *John Coltrane and Black American's Quest for Freedom*, Leonard L. Brown writes,

Coltrane was intensely interested in the struggles of black people. He read books about black culture and regularly paid attention to the ways in which the civil rights struggle had captured the imagination of the nation. While he resisted Frank Kofsky's heavy-handed attempt to depict the *raison d'être* of his music as an instrument of social reform according to the principles of revolutionary Black nationalism,<sup>6</sup> Coltrane was interested in the political developments of the day. ... [His] mysticism is often emphasized in such a way as to suggest that he was relatively unconcerned about worldly matters,

---

<sup>6</sup> In a rich interview, American Marxist historian and jazz writer Frank Kofsky pressed Coltrane to take a firmer stance on the ways in which he was inspired by the black freedom movement, and specifically Malcolm X. Coltrane was characteristically terse in his responses to Kofsky's questions, replying that he was of course impressed by Malcolm X after hearing him speak. However, Coltrane affirmed his faith that music's power is in its transcendent qualities, saying, "I think music, being an expression of the human heart, or of the human, of the *being* itself, *does* express just what is happening. ... It expresses the whole thing – the whole of human experience" (DeVito 2010, 282).

and the ecumenical spirit of his religious statements and views may have also led commentators to deemphasize the degree to which Coltrane was specifically imbricated in blackness, whether socially or politically, or culturally. But according to Syeeda,<sup>7</sup> their family discussed politics and social events at the dinner table far more often than they did religion (Brown 2010, 144).

Thus, it was in the dynamic political sphere of 1963 that the voices of King and Coltrane sounded, reverberated and intermingled. As major cultural figures, one can assume that each encountered the voice of the other. It is likely that Coltrane did in fact hear or read King's Birmingham eulogy. So, whether or not Coltrane's "Alabama" lifted melody and rhythm directly from King's eulogy, "Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere," as Bakhtin writes (Bakhtin 2010, 91). Their voices were reverberating in one another's. Sounding and resounding struggle, asserting boldness, asking provocative questions, pushing boundaries, inspiring others, contributing to the justice-leaning arc of progress – spiritual, political and cultural.

### **Intervocality**

In his remarkable five-hour audio documentary on the life and work of John Coltrane, "Tell Me How Long Trane's Been Gone," director/producer Steve Rowland and writer/co-producer Larry Abrams audibly intermingle the voices of Coltrane and King in an exploration of "Alabama" (Rowland 2010). Here Rowland, an avid radio producer, educator, musicologist and documentarian, segments the King eulogy and layers it atop the "Alabama" recording. The effect of this layering is provocative. Coltrane's elegiac voice sounds almost as a ghostly trail behind King's tender but assured prose. Their voices are in the same register, dancing around one another, weaving through silences and joining together in

---

<sup>7</sup> Syeeda is Coltrane's stepdaughter, for whom he wrote "Syeeda's Song Flute."

moments of synchronicity. While this schizophrenic construction is a rich one, it does little to settle the question of the King-Coltrane hypothesis.

Though many journalists take up and assert the hypothesis, rarely do they cite a source and never do they substantiate the claim in a meaningful manner. Following Watrous in 1983 and Smith twenty years later, these journalistic sources have repeated the hypothesis, often picking up on Smith's language directly, indicating that he is the unattributed source of their claim. For instance, Tommy Stevenson (associate editor for the *Tuscaloosa News* in Tuscaloosa, Alabama) writes, "As I began to read about 'Alabama' ... I found that Coltrane's dirge was actually shaped by the cadences of the eulogy Martin Luther King delivered in the church sanctuary three days after the bombing" (Stevenson 2013). Later in the piece, Stevenson cites Smith by name, before concluding by describing "Alabama" as "one of the most poignant statements of both mourning and resoluteness to be heard anywhere" (ibid).

What we see (or hear) in this case is Stevenson contending with Smith, contending with Coltrane, purportedly contending with King. This complex chain of significance relates to Steven Feld's notion of intervocality. As Feld writes, "Listening to histories of listening is my way to shift attention to acoustemology, to sound as a way of knowing such worlds, and particularly to the presence of intervocality, to intersubjective vocal copresence, to the everyday immediacy and power of stories" (Feld 2012a, 7). Here, in listening to these discursive histories of listening, we can observe the persistent resonance of the King-Coltrane hypothesis. The meaningful ways in which the voices of scholars such as Feld, activist-writers such as Smith, and musicians such as Nortey all impact this discursive sphere reveal an ever-deepening intervocality. Each of the voices that lays claim to Coltrane helps to remember him anew. As Alfred Schutz puts it, "It is remembering which lifts the experience

out of the irreversible stream of duration and thus modifies the awareness, making it remembrance” (Schutz 1967, 47).

So, an intervocal remembrance of Coltrane’s “Alabama” has to include the dialogical voice of King – offering signification to Coltrane’s recitative. In his eulogy, King remembers and represents the children whose lives were lost in the bombing, letting them speak to us, even in their death. Fittingly, in Carson and Shepard’s publication of the eulogy (excerpted below) the editors chose to include the voices of the congregated mourners as well, calling back to King as he delivers the eulogy:

These children – unoffending, innocent, and beautiful – were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity. And yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. And so this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician [Audience:] (Yeah) who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised with the undemocratic practices of southern Dixiecrats (Yeah) and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans. (Speak) They have something to say to every Negro (Yeah) who has passively accepted the evil system of segregation and who has stood on the sidelines in a mighty struggle for justice. They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream (Carson and Shepard 2001, 95-96).

The voices of King and Coltrane both bear an unmistakable resonance in our time, as their voices intermingle with one another and with the voices of activists, jazz musicians, and scholars – here in the U.S. and along all the routes that have sustained these echoes from the past as discourses of the present.

### Coda: Coltrane and the Black Freedom Movement

*As the recitative concludes here with the two V-I resolutions, tension builds in the space of three stretched quarter-note pulses. Tyner's left hand agitates the piano's low register. Jones strikes his sizzling ride cymbal before directing his mallets at the tom-toms, rolling across the higher and lower drums before landing with a metallic crash on the downbeat of the measure. Dramatically, Garrison conjoins Jones here with a half-step modulation up to a C sharp in the bass, creating a clashing contrast to Tyner's rumbling Cmi chord and Trane's G natural two octaves and a tritone above. (4:08)*

*Here Jones's drums intensify, and roll in like thunder. They are resolute. Determined. Outward facing and proud. Jones's voice is again audible as moans and grunts, his voice gesturing with the music. (4:26)*

*Above the clashing thrum of Garrison and Tyner, Coltrane leaps up to an unexpected E natural, a striking major tenth in the context of Cmi. His cry resounds here as a final expression of anguish. (4:28)*

*The band wails together for a moment as the din rises to a pitched crescendo before Coltrane resolves the tension with a few downward sheets. Cymbals ring out, drums roll; block chords in the piano give way to an acrobatic turn through the upper register. Garrison marks the conclusion, playing three V-I cadences. Finality. Timelessness. (5:11)*

Coltrane came to be closely associated with the black freedom movement despite the fact that he saw his music ultimately as a quest for self-expression rather than as reflecting the politics of the era. However, one can never extricate music from the social matrix of the time and space into which it sounds. And Coltrane's recording career, spanning nearly two decades between his first appearance as a sideman in 1949 to the final recordings he made before his untimely death in 1967, defined an exceptionally intense period of social struggle in the U.S.

His music sounded as the Brown vs. Board of education ruling mandated public school integration in 1954; as the black public mourned the murder of Emmett Till in 1955; as the Montgomery bus boycotters fought to integrate the city's bus lines between 1955 and 1956; during the lunch counter protests and freedom rides of 1960 and 1961; as the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church was bombed by white vigilantes in 1963; as the Civil Rights Act was

passed in 1964; as the march on Selma gave way to the Voting Rights Act in August of 1965; as Malcolm X was assassinated in February of 1965. Coltrane died nine months before Martin Luther King, Jr., was laid to rest following his assassination in 1968. This was the tumultuous, revolutionary space in which the voice of John Coltrane first reverberated.

His voice became an emblem of the movement – for its strength, its genius, its loud and resolute tone always seeking something beyond what was immediately graspable. The voice of John Coltrane was a vessel into which people poured meaning and through which many found a sense of belonging. His schizophonic voice became a chronotope of the black freedom movement, a constitutive force that held space for people to hear themselves as powerfully a part of it. When listeners heard Coltrane's cries of grief at the deaths of Denise McNair, Carol Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Addie Mae Collins following the Birmingham bombing, they too felt grief and rage, and they connected, via Coltrane's voice, with a listening public similarly politicized by the times.

Today, Coltrane's voice continues to bridge dimensions of time, space and memory for listeners still engaged in the movement for black freedom. Trane's voice links today's struggles to the movements of the 1950's and 60's, reminding us that work remains to be done, that the past lingers, not just in its material vestiges, but also in its sonorous and sensuous complexities. In all these ways and spaces, the voice of John Coltrane resonates still today.

## Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich. 2010. *Speech genres and other late essays*: University of Texas Press.
- Baraka, Amiri. 1968. *Black music*: Da Capo Press.
- Barthes, R. 1977. "The grain of the voice Image music text ed." *S., Heath* New York, NY: Hill & Wang 179-189.
- Berliner, Paul F. 2009. *Thinking in jazz: The infinite art of improvisation*: University of Chicago Press.
- Briggs, Charles L. 1993. "Personal sentiments and polyphonic voices in Warao women's ritual wailing: music and poetics in a critical and collective discourse." *American Anthropologist* 95 (4):929-957.
- Brown, Leonard. 2010. *John Coltrane and black America's quest for freedom: Spirituality and the music*: Oxford University Press.
- Carson, Clayborne, and Kris Shepard. 2001. *A call to conscience: the landmark speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr*: Grand Central Publishing.
- DeVito, Chris. 2010. *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews*: Chicago Review Press.
- Dolar, Mladen. 2006. "The Linguistics of the Voice." *Sterne, The Sound Studies Reader*:539-54.
- Feld, Steven. 2012a. *Jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five musical years in Ghana*: Duke University Press.
- Feld, Steven. 2012b. "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts: 'World Music' and the Commodification of Religious Experience." *Music and globalization: Critical encounters*:40-51.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine, and Salim Washington. 2008. *Clawing at the Limits of Cool: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and the Greatest Jazz Collaboration Ever*: Macmillan.
- Gundersen, Edna. 2013. "Playlist: Sinigng the Praises of Martin Luther King." <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2013/08/27/playlist-of-songs-in-tribute-to-martin-luther-king-jr/2704649/>.
- International, United Press. 1963. "Six Dead After Church Bombing." *United Press International*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/churches/archives1.htm> - TOP.
- Porter, Lewis. 1998. *John Coltrane: His life and music*: University of Michigan Press.
- Ratliff, Ben. 2007. *Coltrane: The story of a sound*: Macmillan.
- Rowland, Steve. 2010. "'Alabama' John Coltrane and Martin Luther King". Steve Rowland. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiJ\\_0gp-T9A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiJ_0gp-T9A).

- Schafer, R Murray. 1977. *The tuning of the world*: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1967. *The phenomenology of the social world*: Northwestern University Press.
- Smith, Martin. 2003. *John Coltrane: jazz, racism and resistance*: Bookmarks.
- Stevenson, Tommy. 2013. "At Large: Coltrane's 'Alabama' Mirrors King's Eulogy." <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/opinion/20130421/at-large-coltranes-alabama-mirrors-kings-eulogy>.
- Stitton, Claude. 1963. "Birmingham Bomb Kills 4 Negro Girls In Church; Riots Flare; 2 Boys Slain." *New York Times* (September 16, 1963).
- Toop, David. 2010. *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*: A&C Black.
- Townsend, Terry. 2010. "'A Force Which is Truly Good' -- John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution." <http://links.org.au/node/1906>.
- Urban, Greg. 1988. "Ritual wailing in amerindian Brazil." *American Anthropologist* 90 (2):385-400.
- Watrous, Peter. 1998. "John Coltrane: A Life Supreme." *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary*. New York: Schirmer:56-71.