

Ornette Coleman: The Territory And The Adventure

Maria Golia

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Maria Golia's *Ornette Coleman: The Territory And The Adventure* claims to be first non-technical biography of its subject. While books by John Litweiler, Stephen Rush and Peter Niklas Wilson go deep into formal analysis of Coleman's innovations in free jazz and harmolodics, Golia takes a broader approach, situating the great saxophonist and composer in his cultural, social and geographical contexts. Each of the four sections pivots on a particular time and place, establishing the territory then striking out on an adventure in a manner akin to a Coleman solo.

In contrast to Litweiler's track by track commentaries in *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life* (1992), Golia opts for broader discussions of key stages in Coleman's development. The opening section offers the most thorough telling of Ornette's early years in Fort Worth, Texas to date, complementing biographical details with a vivid sense of the "social conditions and sonic ambience". Raised in a series of rented shotgun shacks, Coleman

discovered music through storefront churches, school bands and jukebox joints, guided by his older sister Truvenza, a remarkable woman who managed and led a big band. While Litweiler argued that Coleman's starting point was bebop, Golia emphasises his gospel and Texas blues roots. It was through playing for a country evangelist that Coleman realised he needn't worry about "keys, chords, melody" if he had "that emotion that brought tears and laughter to people's hearts".

Rather than present a classic albums version of history, where *The Shape Of Jazz To Come* is elevated above all else, Golia conveys the classic Coleman Quartet's revolutionary impact by focussing on their legendary 1959 residency at New York's Five Spot club. New York, she writes, was a portal for Coleman to "other artistic dimensions, the place from which he would travel, return, and call home". Golia works back through his formative years in Los Angeles, where the hirsute Texan with the plastic alto found a group of musicians willing to join his quest to liberate jazz from conventional harmony and metre: Don Cherry, Charlie Haden, Ed Blackwell, Billy Higgins. She loops back to The Five Spot to assess The Quartet's impact, before

following Coleman's adventures through the 1960s.

The third part opens on his return to Fort Worth in 1983, where he received the keys to the city and opened The Caravan Of Dreams performing arts centre. Founded by a wealthy oil scion with an interest in the avant garde and environmental science, the venue featured a jazz club and a rooftop geodesic dome populated with cacti. Its mix of Texan earthiness and utopian futurism was a good match for Coleman's aesthetic.

Golia, who managed the venue from 1985–92, uses it as a starting point for discussing Coleman's admiration for Buckminster Fuller, his connections to William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, and his interest in visual arts. The presence of Coleman's electric band Prime Time at the 1983 celebration opens up a consideration of harmolodics, as it develops from a musical system into a philosophy of art and life. As Coleman told Jacques Derrida in 1997, "I'm trying to express a concept according to which you can translate one thing into another." By deftly tracing these connections and transformations, Golia has created a valuable and highly engaging survey of Coleman's harmolodic life. □



Ornette Coleman with William Burroughs (centre) and Brion Gysin

A new biography of **Ornette Coleman** looks beyond the canonical works to trace his backstory from the storefront churches of his youth to the utopian projects of his later years. By **Stewart Smith**

Courtesy Caravan of Dreams Productions