When friends, family and admirers filled Manhattan’s Riverside Church to celebrate the life of Ornette Coleman, who died in 2015 at the age of 85, an opening procession was led by members of the Master Musicians of Jajouka, from Morocco. They were among the long, diverse list of collaborators with Coleman, who, as alto saxophonist and bandleader, occasional violinist and trumpeter, and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, was the most unbound and least predictable figure in jazz history. That day, pianist Cecil Taylor, Coleman’s contemporary, played with a combination of solemnity and joy that suggested Coleman’s own distinct blend. Tap dancer Savion Glover and drummer Jack DeJohnette wrung melody from rhythm, just as Coleman had.

From the podium, Sonny Rollins—the tenor saxophone eminence who, early in
Coleman's career, played duets with him, with just the Pacific Ocean as audience—explained his dear friend's “impact on music, politics and human relations.” Yoko Ono placed the white scarf she'd been knitting for Coleman on the podium. Drummer Denardo Coleman, who first recorded with his father at age 10, declared of Ornette: “It’s not that he thought out of the box; he just didn’t accept that there were any boxes.”

“Ornette’s music was emblematic of what Brian Eno called a *scenius*, ‘a whole ecology of people, groups and ideas that give rise to good new thoughts and good new work,’ ” writes Maria Golia in “Ornette Coleman: The Territory and the Adventure.” She is discussing Coleman’s arrival in New York City, in 1959, but she might as well have been describing that crowd at Riverside Church.

Ms. Golia is not a music critic. Her previous books focused on Egypt and on meteorites. Given Coleman’s lifelong fascinations with both ancient cultures and celestial phenomena, perhaps that’s fitting. She first met Coleman in his hometown, Fort Worth, Texas, at the Caravan of Dreams Performing Arts Center, where she worked and Coleman performed in the 1980s. “He was unassuming and soft-spoken; he lisped and wore shirts that resembled painters’ drop cloths, but he was tougher than he looked.” By then, Coleman had rocked the jazz world more than once, his influence spilling well beyond jazz’s or even music’s boundaries.

Ms. Golia describes with appropriate emphasis the impact of Coleman’s 1959 quartet engagement at Manhattan’s Five Spot, which elicited hero worship and stark criticism, and of landmark recordings, such as 1961’s “Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation,” which prompted DownBeat magazine to publish contrasting reviews, one hailing the “ultimate manifesto” of a “new wave,” the other denouncing a “maelstrom” in which “neuroses end and psychoses begin.” Such ground has been trod before in illuminating style by critics including Martin Williams, Robert Palmer and Gary Giddins, and in
John Litweiler’s “Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life” (1993). Yet Ms. Golia aptly outlines the aesthetic dilemma, when “jazz had become aware of itself and its strengths” and Coleman “found this self-consciousness restrictive and contrary to the purpose of deeper exploration.” She writes with demystifying clarity about the manifestations of compassion and rigor behind Coleman’s search for “unison” and the musical system he called “harmolodics.”

Ms. Golia notably grounds Coleman’s identity in his hometown, reconstructing an “idiosyncratic collage of radio broadcasts from Harlem, Western Swing fiddlers, Tejano two-steps, high-school marching bands, and the rhythm and blues that issued from storefront churches” out of which Coleman emerged with the “perception that he was different, an outsider, and a rebel—in other words, in some counterintuitive way, a true Texan.” Her reliance on secondary sources (there are 699 endnotes) lures her down at least one wrong road: Clarinetist Melvin Lassiter, who in New Orleans loaned Coleman a saxophone and “restored his spirits,” was actually trumpeter Melvin Lastie. That factual error aside, Ms. Golia points to a deeper truth when she says that in Louisiana Coleman “learned something that both disappointed and encouraged him. New Orleans may have been a cradle of jazz, but the child had grown up and moved on.”

Her writing about Caravan of Dreams, where she lived for seven years in an apartment above the stage, managing a music venue and label while tending cacti under its geodesic dome, lends first-hand insights. The place, which appeared in downtown Fort Worth “like an antibody born to neutralize a pathogenic conservatism,” proved an important, if unlikely, catalyst for some of Coleman’s furthest-reaching ambitions.

Returning to Fort Worth after 20 years away, Ms. Golia finds a ranch-themed steakhouse where Caravan of Dreams once stood, its history-of-jazz mural replaced by animal-head trophies. “I wasn’t Ornette’s biggest fan in those days,” she confesses. “I found the music difficult and was preoccupied with ticket sales.” Thirty years later, “Ornette’s is the only sound I know that captures the texture and complexity of that time.” She should have detailed the nature of that shift in her perception. Nevertheless, her book opens ears yet further to the transformative power of Coleman’s music.

—Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz and Afro-Latin music for the Journal.