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The Political Use of the Figure of John Coltrane in American Poetry

Summary

John Coltrane, one of the most influential and important musicians and composers of the 20th century, began to inspire jazz musicians and American poets in the 1960s with the Black Arts Movement poets. His music was interpreted and used for the promotion of political ideas in the poetics of Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Muhammad Toure, Larry Neal and others. This is the political Coltrane poetry. On the other hand, Coltrane's music inspired another kind of poets, the musical poets, which began to emerge in the 1970s. In this case, the poetry reflects the true nature of Coltrane's spiritual music quest. The poets belonging to this group, like Michael S. Harper, William Matthews, Jean Valentine, Cornelius Eady, Philip Levine, Nathaniel Mackey and others, go beyond politics, beyond race or gender. The paper will examine the first type of the Coltrane poetry, where Coltrane's music was used to promote the political ideas of the Black Art Movement in connection with the political movement of Malcolm X. These poets changed, rearticulated and shifted Coltrane's spiritually musical message towards the principles of the black nationalism.

Keywords: American poetry, jazz poetry, poetry and politics, Black Arts Movement, African-American poetry, influence of music on poetry, John Coltrane, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez

Politična uporaba figure Johna Coltranea v ameriški poeziji

Povzetek

John Coltrane je eden najvplivnejših in najpomembnejših glasbenikov in skladateljev 20. stoletja, saj je njegova glasba spremenila svet jazza in svet poezije ter postavila nova merila v obeh umetniških krogih. Bil je navdih jazz glasbenikom in ameriškim pesnikom že v šestdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja, saj so pesniki gibanja Black Arts kot npr. Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Muhammad Toure, Larry Neal in drugi interpretirali njegovo glasbo v smislu politične propagande. Glasba Johna Coltranea pa je navdihovala tudi drugo, glasbeno vrsto poezije, ki se je pričela pojavljati v sedemdesetih letih 20. stoletja in je izražala resnično duhovno sporočilo Coltraneove glasbe. Pesniki Michael S. Harper, William Matthews, Jean Valentine, Cornelius Eady, Philip Levine in Nathaniel Mackey kot pripadniki te skupine so pisali poezijo onkraj politike, spola ali rasne tematike. Članek se osredotoča na prvo, to je politično dimenzijo Coltraneove glasbe kot vodilo političnih idej gibanja Black Arts v povezavi s politično vizijo Malcolma X. Ti pesniki so spremenili in premaknili Coltraneovo duhovno glasbeno sporočilo v sfere črnškega nacionalizma.

Ključne besede: Ameriška poezija, jazz poezija, poezija in politika, Black Arts gibanje, afriško-ameriška poezija, vpliv glasbe na poezijo, John Coltrane, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez

The Political Use of the Figure of John Coltrane in American Poetry

1. Introduction

John Coltrane is considered one of the most important musicians of the 20th century. He was a hugely influential musician, who reshaped modern jazz and changed other forms of music at various times, since each stage of his musicianship introduced a new style and movement in the musical development of the 20th century. Along with tenor saxophonists Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Sonny Rollins, Coltrane fundamentally altered the playing techniques and the style for the instrument. His massive influence on mainstream and avantgarde jazz began during his lifetime and continued to grow after his death, so Coltrane is considered to be one of the most dominant influences on post-1960 jazz saxophonists and musicians, and has inspired an entire generation of jazz musicians.

However, Coltrane's playing style and compositions did not only influence the world of jazz, but exerted a huge influence on American poetry, which is also why Coltrane is the most often represented jazz musician in American poetry: "Coltrane has probably been the focus of more poems than any other jazz musician, but the portraits of the man and his music vary as much as his own creative endeavors – from bebop and modal music, to hard bop and sheets of sound, and eventually to free jazz" (Feinstein 1991, xix).

The occurrences of the figure of John Coltrane in American poetry were so common that critics and writers began to talk about the genre of the "Coltrane poem": "The 'Coltrane' poem has, in fact, become an unmistakable genre in black poetry" (Benston 1977, 773).

The Coltrane poem became a genre not only in African American poetry but in American poetry in general, and also in poetry on other continents. Poets, white and black, began to write poetry dedicated to the great saxophone player. However, the Coltrane poem took two directions. The first type of Coltrane poetry are the 'musical' poets, where the poetry reflects the true nature of Coltrane's spiritual music quest. The poets belonging to this group, like Michael S. Harper, William Matthews, Jean Valentine, Cornelius Eady, Philip Levine, Nathaniel Mackey and others, go beyond politics, beyond race or gender. The second type of Coltrane poetry is 'political' Coltrane poetry, connected with the Black Arts Movement, especially in the 1960s, which includes poets like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Larry Neal, Haki Madhubuti, Askia Muhammad Toure and others. In the case of these poets, Coltrane's music was used to promote the political ideas of the Black Art Movements in connection with the political movement of Malcolm X. These poets changed, rearticulated and shifted Coltrane's spiritually musical message towards the principles of the black nationalism.

2. The political and musical context

The beginnings of the political Coltrane poetry go back into the 1950s when the US society was haunted by severe racism, especially in the South, where black and white people were legally separated. It can be seen as resembling apartheid in South Africa, but in America racism was backed up by organisations like the Ku Klux Klan. The Northern states claimed formal racial equality, although the reality was different, which is also seen in many reactions by poets to the social situation, best summed up by Langston Hughes in the poem “Harlem”:

*What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?*

And the situation did, indeed, explode. On 1 December 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, the black woman Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. The consequences of her arrest were a year-long Montgomery bus boycott, which went so far that the bus companies had to desegregate the buses. The leader and initiator of the new movement was Martin Luther King.

The new social situation also influenced jazz musicians such as the tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins,¹ who recorded his groundbreaking album *Freedom Suite* in 1958. The album is revolutionary from more than a musical standpoint. Kofsky claims that this album represents the “first time a political message was so clearly attached to a piece of music by a black jazz musician” (Kofsky 1970, 50). Sonny Rollins openly stated his opinion about the situation in the States in the liner notes to the album:² “America is deeply rooted in Negro culture: its colloquialisms, its humor, its music. How ironic that the Negro, who more than any other people can claim America’s culture as its own, is being persecuted and repressed, that the Negro, who has exemplified the humanities in his very existence, is being rewarded with inhumanity” (Rollins 1958).

The year following *Freedom Suite*, the composer/bassist Charles Mingus recorded his “Fables of Faubus” on the album *Mingus Ah Um*, which had been intended to include lyrics for his stance against desegregation. However, the record label Columbia insisted that the album be recorded only instrumentally. One year after Mingus’ album, the drummer Max Roach recorded *We*

1 Sonny Rollins is considered one of the most important tenor saxophone players in the world of jazz, having also a major influence on musicians of younger generations.

2 The album had a major impact also on Amiri Baraka, whose poem “The People Burning” clearly shows the influential raging power of the music. The album represented for Baraka a call for the revolution. The poem also contains a criticism of the “failed” Harlem Renaissance and the integration attempts in the 1950s, since Baraka compares his generation to the one of their fathers: See appendix 1 on page 98

Insist! Freedom Now Suite, which clearly promoted a political message. The album presented Roach's political awareness, which had already become apparent in his 1958 recording *Deeds, Not Words*. This work can be easily connected with the Civil Rights Movement, as confirmed by the last two tunes of the album, "All Africa" and "Tears for Johannesburg," showing the Civil Rights Movement struggle for rights and freedom in the USA and the struggle for independence of African Americans and Africans as well. Feinstein connects jazz in this sense with Hughes's deferred dream, questioning whether jazz could have been some sort of warning to "white America", an instrument for promoting political and cultural ideas: "Was jazz a warning to white America, a pounding of the drums that the savages were loose and waiting to avenge themselves? Was this Langston Hughes's deferred dream now exploding?" (Feinstein 1997, 63)

The racist tensions continued, and in 1963 Martin Luther King decided to launch a non-violent assault on Birmingham, Alabama, which was still the capital of segregation. The jails of Birmingham were becoming filled with 2,500 protesters; however the authorities had to give in, which represented the greatest victory for the civil rights movement. The protests had a massive impact, since in the following ten weeks 758 demonstrations against racism took place and 14,753 arrests were made in 186 US cities, with the historic march on Washington as the high point. However, the situation deteriorated when on the Sunday morning of 15 September 1963 a bomb, planted by white racists in the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killed four black girls aged between 11 and 14.³

The music, especially jazz in its freer form again reflected the social situation that emerged in the USA. Many jazz musicians, like Sonny Rollins, showed their anger by openly supporting the new radical movement of Malcolm X. In this case, music reflected the social situation and also reacted against it. Derek Wright says that jazz and literature should not be taken out of the social context:

literature and jazz should not be discussed as though they are completely separate things, in reality, they are both subsets of a larger culture, and they cannot be taken out of that context. Both of these art forms seek to express the realities of life as experienced by the artist. You can't begin to understand jazz as an art by simply discussing its musicality, without addressing the broader social and cultural forces at work. It's not enough to talk about this musician's solo or that musician's composition, without understanding the experience that led the musician to write the song or to play the solo the way they did. (Wright 1996)

Wright continues to draw the connection between music and social context: "It was an outpouring of deep anger, dissatisfaction, or remorse that related to the conditions the artists found themselves in. The world around the artists had a massive effect on their playing and the moods they conveyed" (Wright 1996).

3 The poet Dudley Randall reacted to the tragic event with his poem "Ballad of Birmingham," written in 1969. The poem alludes to the bombing of the church in Birmingham by using a dialogue between a mother and her daughter before and after the tragedy.

This holds true for jazz musicians such as Sonny Rollins, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp and Max Roach, where the political and social context played an important role. Martin Smith sees Mingus, Roach and Rollins as the three key jazz musicians who supported the movement.⁴ Smith even mentions the codified message in Coltrane’s music, which many poets and movement leaders attached to Coltrane. However, I maintain that such was not the case for Coltrane’s music and personality; the highly spiritual thinking in his music had nothing to do with the political context. This does not mean that Coltrane was unaware of the happenings surrounding him, but his music did not reflect the politically militant context around him, at least not consciously. His music served Coltrane’s own spiritual purpose, in contrast to the political awareness and activism of the music of Sonny Rollins, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp or Max Roach.

3. Poets of the Black Arts Movement

Poets like Amiri Baraka, who was one of the main followers of Black Nationalism, used not only the figure of Coltrane to make political statements regarding the position of the Negro in America, but also jazz musicians such as Thelonious Monk, Albert Ayler or Ornette Coleman, as we can see in Baraka’s poem “In The Tradition,” where the jazz musicians John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, the funk/pop icon Stevie Wonder and the black political leader Malcolm X are all on the same level, carrying the title The Black Arts:

But just as you rise up to gloat I scream COLTRANE! STEVIE WONDER!
 MALCOLM X!
 ALBERT AYLER!
 THE BLACK ARTS!

The last line of the “In the Tradition” example shows, how important was the Black Arts Movement, to which Baraka belonged to. For the Black Arts Movement, music, especially Coltrane’s music, was a fountain of ideas and it served the movement as a model for black expression in arts. Music, along with writing and other arts, was seen as a vehicle to fight racism and oppression, while at the same time promoting the political stance, as we can see in Baraka’s poem “Black Art,” which reveals the poets’ and the movement’s political ideas:

*We want a black poem. And a
 Black World.
 Let the world be a Black Poem
 And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
 Silently
 Or LOUD*

The main concepts for the Black Arts Movement were put down in Larry Neal’s 1968 essay “The Black Arts Movement,” where Neal explains that the movement’s programme has basically four

⁴ “This music was proud to be black and clearly inspired by the civil rights movement, but its message was codified. But there were artists like Charles Mingus, Max Roach and Sonny Rollins who openly supported the movements” (Smith 2003).

parts: an assumption that its basis is already in place; second, the destruction of the “white thing” is a main motivation; third, it takes into account black interests; and fourth, it is, inherently, an ethical movement. Neal continued with his political and artistic manifesto in his poetry. In 1969, he wrote the poem “Black Boogaloo” with the message of how black music should be a source of inspiration for black writers to promote the ideas of liberation and black power. Neal’s ideas are written in the same aggressive tone as Baraka’s:

*Stop bitching. Take care of business. All get together all over America
and play at the same time. Combine energy. Combine energy. Play to-
gether. Wild screaming sounds*

...

Calling all Black People.

Calling all Black people.

However, Baraka and Neal were not the only ones using the well-known free jazz musicians to promote their own poetics and politics. One of the three most important Black Arts Movement poets besides Baraka and Larry Neal, Askia Muhammad Toure, also uses jazz such musicians as Sun Ra⁵, Pharoah Sanders, Milford Graves and Coltrane in the poem “Extension” to promote his call for freedom and action:

Let the Ritual begin:

Sun Ra, Pharoah, Coltrane, Milford tune up your Afro-horns;

let the Song begin, the Wild Song of the Black Heart:

E X T E N S I O N over the crumbling ghettos, riding

the deep, ominous night – the Crescent Moon, Evening Star;

the crumbling ghettos exploding exploding: BAROOM, BAROOM!

This poem from Toure’s collection *Juju* connects the free jazz movement with the politics of Malcolm X, where again Coltrane is co-opted by the political movement. Toure himself and the Black Arts Movement connected the new musical revolution with the new political movement, implying a political background to the new music, as Toure said in a recent interview: “This new revolution in consciousness, led by Trane, Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders, etc., was complemented by the fiery cadences of minister Malcolm X, who functioned as prophet/visionary, a goad & griot of a revolutionary, Eastern morality emerging among us...” (Lewis 2004).

The Black Arts Movement represented for poets like Toure, Baraka, Neal and others a change in their thinking as black individuals; the Black Arts Movement represented a way to find the black poetic expression, the true black aesthetic. These poets reacted, on the basis of the failed Harlem Renaissance and the “integration attempts”, against white hegemony. The new Black Aesthetic

5 Sun Ra was one of the most important jazz composers in the genre of avantgarde jazz. Initially, he also closely identified with the aggressive black political movements, when he saw his music own music has crucial in educating and liberating blacks. Later in his career, disillusioned by the aims of the black power movements, Sun Ra denied feeling closely connected to any race.

of the Black Arts Movement, based in New York, used the new innovative experiments and approaches of musical improvisation, which led to vernacular, thematic and linguistic experiments, mixed with the political message of Malcolm X. In the introduction to *Black Music*, Baraka also hints at a political background for the music of Coltrane or Ornette Coleman, claiming that this music cannot be understood without some attention to the attitude which produced it:

We take for granted the social and cultural milieu and philosophy that produced Mozart... The socio-cultural philosophy of the Negro in America (as a continuous historical phenomenon) is no less specific and no less important in any intelligent critical speculation about the music that came out of it. And again, this is not a plea for narrow sociological analysis of jazz, but rather that this music cannot be completely understood (in critical terms) without some attention to the attitudes which produced it... A printed musical example of an Armstrong solo, or of a Thelonious Monk solo, tells us almost nothing except the futility of formal musicology when dealing with jazz... Coltrane's cries are not "musical," but they are music and quite moving music. Ornette Coleman's screams and rants are only musical once one understands the music his emotional attitude seeks to create. This attitude is real, and perhaps the most singularly important aspect of his music. (Baraka 1968, 14)

Baraka easily connected the aggressive thoughts of Black Nationalism with the innovative, aggressive sound of Coltrane, connecting the spiritual music with the political situation of the time.⁶ Baraka connected his own poetics of the "murderous impulse" with Coltrane's "destruction" of western musical forms, since the latter took the famous 'Tin-Pan-Alley'⁷ tune "My Favorite Things" and turned it upside down. It is clear, nevertheless, that Coltrane's was a purely musical context, one used and interpreted by Baraka to promote his own political poetics, as Harris says: "Baraka also wants to take weak Western forms, rip them asunder, and create something new out of the rubble. He transposes Coltrane's musical ideas to poetry, using them to turn white poetic forms backwards and upside down. This murderous impulse is behind all the forms of Baraka's aesthetic and art" (Harris 1985, 15).

Won-Gu Kim also argues in his article about Amiri Baraka that Coltrane and Charlie Parker "did not base their art solely in the demolition of Western forms" (Won-Gu Kim 2003), but just took the "western musical" forms as a starting point for their musical quests. This conclusion again shows the adaptive and interpretative liberty that Baraka took in portraying the John Coltrane figure as the new revolutionary ideal. That Coltrane was preferred over Charlie Parker by Baraka is also understandable, since Parker's music was bebop and was, in comparison with Coltrane's free music, out of time. Another reason could be that Parker was already being used by white poets,⁸ the Beats, who saw in Parker the new romantic genius, especially because of his drug

6 Feinstein makes a similar claim regarding the "wrong" interpretation of Coltrane's sound and music: "Baraka interprets Coltrane's music in this light, linking the direct, aggressive sound of Coltrane's tenor with the political temperament of the time" (Feinstein 1997, 120).

7 Tin Pan Alley tunes are compositions of New York music publishers and songwriters, like Irving Berlin, Hoagy Carmichael, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and others, who dominated the popular music in the US in the late 19th century and early 20th century.

8 For Baraka, jazz is a truly African-American idiom, one which was exploited by the Beat poets in the 1950s just because "jazz was

addiction problems:⁹ “the poets writing about Parker in the fifties were dominantly white writers who almost never confronted any of the social issues of race, oppression, or protest – issues that were crucial to the emergence of bebop” (Feinstein 1997, 91).

That John Coltrane became the leading figure for the movement is also interesting when one considers that he, unlike the other jazz musicians, never made any direct political-musical statements. Feinstein also wonders why *A Love Supreme*, with its spiritual message, served as the theme for the movement, while Sonny Rollins made even more direct and aggressive political statements with his album, *The Freedom Suite*: “Sonny Rollins, to whom Coltrane was initially compared unfavorably, made a far more directed political statement with his record, *Freedom Suite* (1958)” (ibid., 144).

One of the reasons is that Sonny Rollins and Charles Mingus made direct statements regarding their political views, and their music was not as revolutionary in musical terms as Coltrane’s. Baraka explains in his autobiography why Coltrane made such an impression on him, and why he also became the unwilling hero to Baraka and other Black Arts Movement poets:

We heard him blow then, long and strong, trying to find something, as Miles stood at the back of the stage and tugged his ear, trying to figure out what the fuck Trane was doing. We could feel what he was doing.... That Five Spot gig with Monk was Trane coming into his own. After Monk, he’d play chorus after chorus, taking the music apart before our ears, splintering the chords and sounding each note, resounding it, playing it backwards and upside down trying to get something else. And we heard our own search and travails, our own reaching for a new definition. Trane was our flag.... They [the new black jazz avant-garde] all could play, and the cry of “Freedom” was not only musical but reflected what was going on in the marches and confrontations, on the streets and in the restaurants and department stores of the South. (Baraka 1984, 176)

One further reason involves Coltrane’s highly energetic and free music, which was released during the 1960s, when the racial tension was at its peak.¹⁰ Cook and Henderson explain that the incredible energy behind Coltrane’s music and his persistence on his spiritual quest puts Coltrane very close to Malcolm X: “What Coltrane signifies for black people because of the breadth of his vision and the incredible energy behind his spiritual quest, Malcolm X signifies in another way – not as musician, but simply and profoundly as black man, as Black Experience, and that experience in process of discovering itself, of celebrating itself...” (Cook & Henderson 1969, 110).

suddenly part of the lingo, the image” (Feinstein 1997, 66). This can be may of the main reasons, besides the time factor, why Parker was not taken by Baraka as the new symbol.

9 As Feinstein puts it, “Charlie Parker represented the ultimate in hipster mystique: frantic genius, coupled with romanticized overindulgence” (Feinstein 1997, 93).

10 Although Coltrane made no direct political statements, his music was so dynamic and loud that the Black Arts Movement poets could identify with it, and use it as a tool to promote their ideas: “in the sixties, Coltrane’s music, played ‘out loud,’ enabled poets of the time to break down the ‘closed doors’ of African-American silence” (Feinstein 1997, 125).

However, Coltrane denied a direct relationship between his own music and Malcolm X's militant ideas. One thing that connected both of them was their determined pursuit of their own goals, as Craig Werner says in his book *A Change is Gonna Come*: "Coltrane and Malcolm shared a determination that could be boiled down to a clear central message: 'Change the world. Now'" (Werner 1999, 125).

Camal says that "both men were highly spiritual and both were willing to challenge their previous assumptions and accomplishments in a life long quest for the Truth" (Camal 2004). He also continues that they "both sometimes chose to express their ideas through a violent discourse (Coltrane was often described as an 'angry tenor' by white critics) even though they both believed in ideals of peace and brotherhood" (Camal 2004). The idea of violence might be true for Malcolm X; however Coltrane's angry sound did not serve to achieve political goals or to express anger. It was merely the style of a saxophone player who technically challenged himself in saxophone playing by introducing new techniques. The connection between both leaders, the musical leader and innovator of the time and the political activist, has been created and used by the Black Arts Movement to promote their political stance.

3.1 Amiri Baraka and Coltrane's music

One of the clearest examples of the connection between these leaders is Baraka's political use of the Coltrane figure in his poem "AM/TRAK," where Baraka equates Coltrane with Malcolm X by naming him "the spirit of the 60s", the "Malcolm X in New Super Bop Fire":

*Trane was the spirit of the 60's
He was the Malcolm X in New Super Bop Fire
Baaahhhhh
Wheeeeeee...Black Art!!!*

For Baraka, Coltrane became in this case an "unsung hero" of his poetics and of the poetics of other black nationalist poets, acquiring characteristics of rage and anger. Baraka imposed his own ideology onto Coltrane's music. Feinstein describes Coltrane as a musical embodiment of black nationalism and black nationalist poets:¹¹ "the outspoken African-American poets of the sixties adopted Coltrane's sound as a musical embodiment of black nationalism in the United States, and some of the most explosive poetry from that period is steeped in the music of that time" (Feinstein 1997, 116).

The poem "AM/TRAK" is built from five different contextual levels. In the first part of the poem Baraka puts Coltrane on a pedestal, which shows the importance of the legacy of the saxophone great:

11 Cober-Lake describes Coltrane's music in the hands of Black Nationalist poets as a statement and tool of politics: "The music, first, was a statement of a politicized Blackness" (Cober-Lake 2004).

*Trane,
Trane,
History Love Scream Oh
Trane, Oh
Trane, Oh
Scream History Love
Trane*

The next three parts of the poem deal with Coltrane's life – his beginnings in various bands, his musical development and his influences like Miles Davis or Thelonious Monk, his battles with drugs and alcohol, the hostility of critics, and, finally, the triumphant achievement of the great John Coltrane Quartet in the fifth part of the poem, where Baraka enumerates the whole quartet (with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones), and some of the albums that the band recorded (*Meditations, Expression, A Love Supreme*):

*Jimmy Garrison, bass, McCoy Tyner, piano, Captain Marvel Elvin
on drums, the number itself – the precise saying
all of it in it afire aflame talking saying being doing meaning
Meditations
Expressions
A Love Supreme*

The fifth part of the poem is the strongest part in promoting the political stance of Baraka, and also in showing how important Coltrane's sound was for the promotion of the African-American legacy, music, art, and freedom:

*black blower of the now
The vectors from all sources – slavery, renaissance
bop charlie parker,
nigger absolute super-sane screams against reality
course through him
AS SOUND!*

Towards the end of the last part of the poem Baraka mentions Coltrane's highly spiritual album *Meditations*, to which Baraka turned while in jail. The album's spiritual title and intention contradict Baraka's use of Coltrane's music since this album supposedly told him what to do:

*And yet last night I played Meditations
& it told me what to do
Live, you crazy mother
fucker!
Live!*

*& organize
yr shit
as rightly
burning!*

However, Baraka constantly used Coltrane's music to promote his own political ideas, regardless of what Coltrane's primary intentions with his music were. An example of such imposing of ideas is Baraka's poem "I Love Music" from 1987, where Baraka takes the compositions which Coltrane played, "Like Sonny," "My Favorite Things" and "Giant Steps," and attaches his marxistic nihilist ideas to them:

*I want to talk to you
my favorite things
like sonny
giant steps, life itself, fire can be, heart explosion, soul explosion, brain explosion.
can be. can be. can be. aggeewheeuheeaggeeee. aggrrr rrruuuaggg.*

On the other hand, Baraka's interpretation of Coltrane's music is understandable, since the majority of Coltrane's later albums contains fierce and almost "aggressive," in terms of musical experimentation, saxophone playing by Coltrane. Feinstein describes Coltrane in the hands of Baraka as a martyr: "an everpresent inspiration to whom Baraka turns while in jail, and, by implication, throughout his life" (Feinstein 1997, 121).

An example of Baraka's lifetime inspiration of Coltrane occurs in one of his latest poems "Wise 4," where Coltrane is again connected with the revolution through the metaphor of black and red fire:

*in those crazy dreams I called myself
Coltrane
bathed in a black and red fire...*

Coltrane followed revolutionary events; he even played eight benefit concerts in support of King. He also recorded and wrote tunes inspired by the struggle of Martin Luther King – "Reverend King," "Backs against the Wall," and his album *Cosmic Music* was dedicated to King. It is said that Coltrane even wrote the tune "Alabama" in response to the bombing in Birmingham. His saxophone lines are supposedly patterned according to Martin Luther King's funeral speech. The whole tune reflects the movement of King's speech, since Elvin Jones's drumming rises to crescendo of rage, which represents the point where King transforms his mourning into a statement of renewed determination to struggle against racism. Jones wanted this drumming crescendo to signify the rising of the civil rights movement. Baraka describes the tune "Alabama" in the liner notes of the album *Coltrane Live at Birdland* as following: "a slow delicate introspective sadness, almost hopelessness, except for Elvin, rising in the background like something out of nature... a fattening thunder, storm clouds or jungle war clouds. The whole is a frightening emotional portrait of some place, in these musicians' feelings" (Jones 1963).

However, this can again be just propaganda on the part of poets like Baraka to promote the political agenda of the time, since Coltrane never described himself as a political activist. His musical pursuit was purely personal, although the Black Arts Movement proclaimed him as its musical and influential hero. Feinstein questions, therefore, even the overly politicized message that is connected with Coltrane's tune "Alabama": "According to various writers, none of whom cites primary sources, Coltrane incorporated not only his own emotional response but the rhythms in King's eulogy as well. Although this song might be considered an overt political gesture, Coltrane throughout his career made no direct statement about his association with the Civil Rights Movement" (Feinstein 1997, 116).

During the recording session for the tune "Alabama," Coltrane said that "the music it represents musically, something that I saw down there translated into music from inside me." Coltrane again denied the connection between politics and his own music. However, Camal offers an argument that "the very nature of the music and the timing of its recording make it impossible not to link it to the events taking place in Alabama, around the South and in the nation's capital that year" (Camal 2004). Camal's argument does not stand on solid ground, especially if we consider the interview that Coltrane gave to Frank Kofsky, the author of *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, where Coltrane was compared with Malcolm X. Coltrane, whom Kofsky saw as a god and, on the other hand, as a stereotypical black musician supporting the movement around Malcolm X, again refused any connection with Malcolm X's ideas and "side-stepped many of the loaded questions in an effort to emphasize his primary concern – the creative act" (Feinstein 1997, 119):

Kofsky: Some musicians have said that there's a relationship between some of Malcolm's ideas and the music, especially the new music. Do you think there's anything in that?

Coltrane: Well, I think that music, being an expression of the human heart, or of the human being itself, does express just what is happening. I feel it expresses the whole thing – the whole of human experience at the particular time that it is being expressed. (Kofsky 1970, 225)

Still, Coltrane's aesthetic revolution was linked to the revolutionary explosion in the Northern cities of the USA. Coltrane attracted and played before audiences of the most politically advanced blacks. King and the other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were soon overpowered by the revolution of the new generation of leaders such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, which began to realize the radical movement. For Baraka and for many of his contemporary African American nationalist poets, Coltrane "articulated the passion of a decade remembered for extreme expressions of and attacks against racism" (Feinstein 1997, 121). Even though Coltrane rejected any connection with Malcolm X, what the Black Nationalist poets saw in Coltrane was the new musical code and the new aggressive sound of the music. They did not respond to what he said in his interviews; they responded to his music and adapted it for their own purposes.

3.2 Jayne Cortez’s “How Long has Trane Been Gone”

Jayne Cortez’s poem “How Long has Trane Been Gone” is another poem where the poet equates Coltrane with Malcolm X, with the same aggression Baraka uses in his poetics – “Rip those dead white people off your walls Black people”:

*And how many more Tranes will go
before you understand your life
John Coltrane had the whole of
life wrapped up in B flat
John Coltrane like Malcolm
true image of black masculinity
...
John Coltrane
Rip those dead white people off your walls Black people
your walls Black people
black people whose walls
should be a hall
A Black Hall of Fame
so our children will know
will know & be proud
Proud to say I’m from Parker City, Coltrane City,
Ornette City,
Pharoah City living on Holiday street next to James Brown
Park in
the state of Malcolm*

Coltrane is in this poem the “true image of black masculinity,” like Malcolm X, and is therefore also connected with the poets’ message to “Rip those dead white people off your walls Black people”. An important part of the poem to promote Malcolm’s message are also the allusions to jazz musicians Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman and Pharoah Sanders, next to John Coltrane. Cortez metaphorically says that all these musicians are together with Coltrane part of Malcolm X’s state.

3.3 Sonia Sanchez’s “a/coltrane/poem”

One of the leading Black Arts Movement poets, who also used the figure of John Coltrane in the political context, was Sonia Sanchez, who dedicated one of her most famous poems to Coltrane – “a/coltrane/poem”:

*a lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme for our blk
people.
BRING IN THE WITE/MOTHA/fuckas
ALL THE MILLIONAIRES/BANKERS/ol*

...
*BRING IN THE WITE/LIBERALS ON THE SOLO
 SOUND OF YO/FIGHT IS MY FIGHT
 SAXOPHONE
 TORTURE
 THEM FIRST AS THEY HAVE
 TORTURED US WITH
 PROMISES...*

This poem ends her collection *We a BaddDDD People*, which with its jazzy rhythms of Coltrane's tunes "Brother John" and "My Favorite Things," carries the political message to burn capitalist millionaires and promise-breaking liberals, so that African Americans might rise and take their deserved position. Sanchez's use of jazz improvisation, with words spread all over the page, containing a political message also occurs in her poem "on seeing pharoah sanders blowing," from her first collection *Homecoming*, where she criticizes the "white whore america". The same political message can be found throughout her early poetry, with high peaks in poems like "malcolm" – "fuck you white man. we have been curled too long. nothin is sacred now. not your white faces nor any land that separates until some voices squat with spasms."

The poem "a/coltrane/poem" also contains an element from Coltrane's playing, transformed into the political and poetic context: his screeching saxophone playing of free jazz. Feinstein talks in this case about the angry expression of the Black Arts Movement to vent their rage and anger against the white America: "But in the Coltrane poetry, the "scream" is most often not for "the time"; it is, instead, the angry expression of African-American demands for justice, for equality of opportunity... The description of Coltrane's sound as a scream became, in many cases, a way to vent outrage at the white establishment..." (Feinstein 1997, 123).

The aesthetic scream of Coltrane's jazz was used in a way to express outrage against the white establishment, as Feinstein puts it. Malcolm X was connected with John Coltrane as a central force of the movement. Larry Neal, one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, said that Malcolm X was like jazz in reminding poets of the music of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane – a music that was a central force in the emerging ethos of the Black Arts Movement.

Sonia Sanchez uses this scream in a paradoxical connection with the spiritual "A Love Supreme." This album carries Coltrane's positive message of peace; however the "aggressive" playing of Coltrane evoked in Sanchez the idea of revolution and uprising against the white community, Coltrane's music is seen as "a love supreme" for the black people, while Sanchez found a phonetic equivalent to Coltrane's aggressive saxophone lines:

*yrs befo u blew away our passsst
 and showed us our futureeeeeee
 schreech screeech screeeeech screeech
 alllovesupreme, lovesupreme a lovesupreme.*

A LOVE SUPREME
 ScrEEEcCHHHHHH screeeeEEECCHHHHHHH
 SCReeeEEECCHHHHHHH SCREEEECCCCHHHH
 SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHHHHHHHHHH
 a lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme for our blk
 people.

3.4 Carolyn Rodgers’s “Me, in Kulu Se & Karma”

Another poet who uses the “idea of the scream” to show her anger is Carolyn Rodgers. Her poem “Me, in Kulu Se & Karma” discusses her freedom using the screaming music and playing of tenor saxophone players Pharoah Sanders and John Coltrane:

*sweet sweeeeet and its
 me in the sky moving that way going freee where pha
 raoh and trane playing in my guts and its me and my
 ears forgetting how to listen and just feeling oh
 yeam me I am screammmmmmmmming into the box and the box
 is screammmmmmmmming back, is slow motion moving sound...*

The poem alludes to Coltrane’s album *Kulu Se Mama*, which marked Coltrane’s departure into more adventurous free form improvisation, while it also featured Pharoah Sanders on tenor saxophone, besides Coltrane’s classic quartet. Rodgers supports her cry for freedom with another album from the period, Pharoah Sanders’ *Karma*. Rodgers blended both albums in the title of the poem, since both albums carry a spiritual message with free jazz playing. *Karma* was Sanders’ third recording as a leader and can be seen as a kind of a sequel to Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, especially if we consider the 32-minute long composition “The Creator Has A Master Plan.”

3.5 Haki Madhubuti’s Don’t Cry, Scream

According to Feinstein, the most representative political poem from this period, also making use of Coltrane’s scream, is Haki Madhubuti’s *Don’t Cry, Scream* “for it reflects the demands made by many African-American poems from the sixties” (Feinstein 1997, 127):

*naw brother,
 i didn’t cry,
 i just -
 Scream-eeeeeeeeeeeeee-ed sing loud
 SCREAM-EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-ED & high with
 we-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee ee feeling
 WE-EEEEEEeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEE letting
 WE-EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE yr/voice
 WHERE YOU DONE GONE, BROTHER? Break*

Madhubuti, like Sanchez, uses the scream through the phonetic equivalent of Coltrane's playing, from his album *Ascension*, to promote the political revolutionary ideas.

4. Conclusion

Poets like Baraka, Sanchez, Madhubuti, Neal and other Black Arts Movement poets in the 1960s used the "aggressive sound" of Coltrane and can be even seen as having incorrectly interpreted his music. They used his music only to break through with their own political ideas. Coltrane's music was in this sense an instrument for the ideas of the Black Arts Movement in connection with the black nationalists. Since Coltrane was one of the more spiritual jazz musicians in the history of jazz, the poetry of the Black Arts Movement did not reflect the true nature of Coltrane's music. Coltrane, as a black musician and a black person, did of course support the ideas of equality, but still he was not trying to mix his musical message with the ideas of Black Nationalism. This makes a certain sense and coincides with the poem that Coltrane wrote for the album *A Love Supreme*, which reflects Coltrane's belief in God and his belief in world peace:

*I will do all I can to be worthy of Thee o Lord
It all has to do with it.
Thank you God.
Peace.
There is none other.
God is. It is so beautiful.
Thank you God. God is all.*

The album *A Love Supreme* and others of Coltrane's spiritual albums like *Om*, *Ascension* or *Meditations* influenced on the one side the musical poets, like William Matthews, Jean Valentine, George Economou, Sascha Feinstein, Michael Stillman, and especially Michael S. Harper;¹² while on the other side, the political Coltrane poetry, especially the Black Arts Movement poets, saw in Coltrane an opportunity to express their political ideas. The musical type of Coltrane poetry is presently alive as ever in the world of poetry, since Coltrane and his music continue to be an inspiration for poets around the globe. The political Coltrane poetry had its highlights in late 60s, while nowadays we can only see its traces in poetry which tries to awake and affirm the African American legacy and history, as we can see in the poem "Dear John Coltrane" by A.B. Spellman, where the poet remembers his "flight for freedom", combined with Coltrane's slow blues:¹³

12 "In many respects, the more volatile Coltrane poems of the sixties allowed subsequent writers to be less overtly political; at the very least, they allowed the poets who followed to concentrate more on the rich legacy of jazz rather than the intensities of rage" (Feinstein 1997, 128).

13 The poem "Did John's Music Kill Him?", from Spellman's earlier period, under the influence of the Black Arts Movement, shows Coltrane combined with the Black Arts Movement idea of "black is beautiful." Spellman uses various compositions that Coltrane played to promote the Black Arts Movement ideas: then john. little old lady/ had a nasty mouth. summertime/ when the war is. africa ululating/ a line bunched up like itself/ into knots paints beauty black.

*later, different station, cold room dimming
 it's you, john, trane's slow blues
 now it's your line that opens, & opens
 & opens, & i'm flying that way again
 same sky, different moon, this midnight
 globe that toned those now lost blue rooms
 where things like jazz float the mind
 this motion the still & airless propulsion
 i know as inner flight, this view
 the one i cannot see with my eyes
 open. i hear the beginning approach, &
 i know the line i traveled was a horizon
 the circle of the world, another freedom
 flight to another starting place...*

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Appendix 1

*Got to remember just where I came in. Freedom Suite,
some five six years ago, Rollins cradling the sun, as it rose, and we
dreamed then, of becoming, unlike our fathers, and the other cowboys,
strong men in our time, raging and clawing, at fools of any persuasion.*