

## **Alice Coltrane Interview Conducted by Stuart Nicholson 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2004**

Q: You must have been pleased with the reaction of the fans when you played Joe's Pub in Manhattan with your son Ravi

AC: That was a wonderful evening, a fine evening, yes

Q: How did it feel like to be back on stage in a jazz club?

AC: Very interesting. It was almost as if no time had passed at all. Of course it had, it was very ordinary, it was not unusual, or necessarily surprising, it was good

Q: Later you did a *Love Supreme* in NYC

AC: That was the same evening, because I was asked to be there to present the music, and he also wanted to share the book *A Love Supreme*

Q: You didn't play at that?

AC: No. It wasn't that sacred musical composition it was based on his book

Q: Turning to *Translinear Light* it seems the fulcrum of the music has got very much a spiritual thread and that has been very much part of your life over the last 30 years

AC: Definitely so

Q: Can you tell me a little bit what that means to you

AC: I think it is a basic continuation of where you are in your own life and your own evolution, you're the same person – if you are going forward then you are often sitting higher knowledge and spiritual experience, you wish to reach new vistas of understanding and purpose so 'Translinear' – is moving in that line, but in a more transcendent way. A more transcendental way, because it will be over and above the area you have covered already in your life. So you are going forward over and above and definitely with the aim to reach the higher experience in revelation of spiritual insight,

Q: Your spiritual priorities had sometimes deflected you from practicing your music, what made you feel the time was right to make another recording?

AC: I can think of four or five years ago when I didn't think the time was right because of my own schedule. I've been in India practically every year over the past ten years or so, and also projects here in California in our centre here, so time was involved, there was this opening for myself to be available and it was also a feeling this is something I would agree to, my son was quite, I should say in a position of practically pleading, 'Mom, you must do this, you have to!' It sort of originated from him, 'Mom, please make a record, make a CD.' So I said okay and this is what we did. And that expanse of time to completion of the CD was about five years because I took years and we did one or two selections and that was it, everything stopped, then when he said, 'Mom, why don't we make this record.' So that's what happened

Q: You said you weren't going to start a new career, is that written in stone

AC: No it isn't. Let's say indelible ink, we could change it, but I think its okay as it is because there's been so many changes in the technology, in terms of instrumentation, in terms of recording, many musicians now have their own studios they're doing their own distribution and maybe a new day in which things being so different from the past when the whole mechanism was already in place to do everything, all you had to do is record. Its maybe the time when musicians are the ones that are selecting their time, and they are recording their music because I don't see the strength of the industry right now, particularly what we are doing in

out music in our jazz idiom, I don't see the strength of it, and it may be such that it will be more, I would say not as conducive as it was in the past for musicians to be able to record and hope to further their career

Q: Just a few months ago there was a re-release of Terry Gibbs *Jewish Melodies in Jazztime* and there was a certain Alice McLeod on it

AC: Yes, that's because I wasn't married to John Coltrane at the time

Q: Terry Gibbs said you stole that date because of your wonderful playing

AC: Oh no. He always makes such nice commentary about me. He was such a gentleman and a fine musician, and very nice to concertize with, travel with and record and it was nice time of my life. I remember the sessions very well, I think he played excellently and some of the music was very serious

Q: Even at the stage Terry Gibbs said your playing had come under the influence of John Coltrane and you were looking – he said when you joined him originally you were more of a bebop player

AC: Yes, because I am from Detroit, and we're all under that influence! We had fine and wonderful musicians who came from Detroit, from that part of our world

Q: You were ahead of your time, you and Melba Liston, because it was a very male dominated world then wasn't it

AC: Yes, because ladies probably were brought up with the wonderful principals of children and home and families. I do strongly believe in those principals, but I think maybe they didn't get the encouragement or help they needed to branch out and really expand their career beyond their home base and then some of them couldn't afford, shall I say promote their music or

have an agent, many of them did regret having not the opportunities even though they loved their home and family, children, they saw later that you could be all you are in your womanhood and motherhood and yet have a career.

Q: What gave you the energy? You were one of the few ladies making your way, where did the dynamic come from

AC: I think you need the support, even if its only moral support, you need the support of your family, they shouldn't say 'stay in school.' I received a scholarship to the Detroit Institute of Technology I didn't have my chance, I didn't have my parents after I graduated school insisting you will go to school you will not listen to this music. If you succeed and want to go to New York and be in that environment it may not be best for a young lady. I had parents who encouraged me to be the best at what I wanted to try, to be the best in my work in school, however academically I wished to pursue music, to wholeheartedly engage in it. They helped me, they provided me with one beautiful instrument for me, I went there I had one relative living in Harlem. I stayed with her for several months and it wasn't too long before I was working, I had people like Barry Harris call me for jobs, Johnny Griffin, mainly Barry would just turn over jobs he didn't take himself, it was very good, Sonny Stitt I worked with. From there it was with Terry [Gibbs] and after Terry, John Coltrane.

Q: Then you had your own bands and quite a distinct career followed for about ten years

AC: I think it was five albums for ABC Records [interruption]

Q: Your approach to the piano had shifted quite dramatically by then

AC: Yes, from like Bud Powell to John Coltrane, a way of playing which I would have to say is by hearing the sound and being in his proximity because he never really showed improvisation, he never instructed me on improvisation, he had to give you the chords if we were playing the songs so you'd know what the chords are, but unless there was a specific chord he would

never voice chords, but he would sometimes say for that particular one I would like you to use whatever it was 'Diminished over A' or something. He would do that if it was something specific because he did have a way of hearing and actually producing sounds on his horn, but choral sounds from the horn he could translate to the piano, some of those actually came out, on the piece 'Crescent' and its in that last section, the last A section at the end, and the chord is so wonderful, in the bass its A, Eb and in the right hand its C#, F# and Eb, play those together and you'll know what I'm talking about. These are some of the sounds that we could almost hear, choral sounds, that I know he heard

Q: The difference between the music you played with the great John Coltrane and your music was I think, for me at least, the music was very much more serene

AC: Do you know where that comes from, where you are in your heart, spirit, because every moment doesn't require that. It's the journey of life, isn't it? We go forward and we meet with all kinds of situations and circumstances, so the situation may be nice, others are challenging, others are presenting you with quite a task, and some of them are very opposed to what your considerations are, to move through that, just as we go through life we face our changes, but we work through them, so that is sort of like what you hear because I've heard people say the music sounds this, and we're expressing ourselves in all those ways. That's the world we live in

Q: I think what I was trying to say is that your approach is more calm

AC: I think it would meet the moment, I think it could stand up to the moment

Q: It stands up now of course

AC: I think it would, it would rise to the occasion based on what you had to encounter, have you heard that beautiful Hymn that is played on Translinear?

Q: You're breaking up...

AC: On the CD there is a piece called 'A Hymn,' its all meditative, moving into the higher vistas of life, into the higher echelons of life, it just goes straight, ever upwards, not looking back and its all beauty and all light and peace, and we're filled with intensity, when something of that sentiment is played and Leo is not violent. I don't think our sun is in this universe, we do have an astrological sign don't we? And we see our sun daily and we're pleased because it nourishing, its life giving its energising, so powerful it's the source of life, it causes us to nurture, to grow and receive all the bounty of the earth, and God explains it is at the point where its just right, if the sun was one mile closer we'd experience major problems, but its in the right position with all that heat and all that light and all that energy, so I don't see that, only when there's a problem with nature do we say 'Why is the storm so violent?' 'Why was the rain so horrible?' Because people are seeing the other side of our nature, the strenuous side of our nature, instead of saying the rain was obviously needed or the balance has to be maintained on this earth

Q: It's like saying the glass is half empty or half full

AC: Yes. So we appreciate our world as it is to the best of our ability and it is a little of what I try to express in the music, with intensity and depth, it comes from the heart and the spirit, sometimes not even how your mind can rationalise on. It comes from the heart and it comes from the spirit and that's the major character of creative music, it really doesn't come from the brain, it comes from within. Your creating – it comes from the heart, the spirit, the soul, you're not manufacturing somebody else's plan, somebody else's blueprint, somebody else's idea that's not yours, so when you're creating that's the beauty side of art, you know? It comes from within you

Q: Where you surprised with some of the results when you listened to them again?

AC: In terms of what, results?

Q: When you listen to it again were you surprised that you were able to access these emotions in your playing once again?

AC: Not really, because they are a part of you, you live with them, this is who you are, this is the component parts that make up the being that you are

Q: This is a component that is missing in a lot of contemporary jazz, it has become very mechanical

AC: Yes, maybe for commercial purposes, we don't know the reason, if a person has to feed his family, sometimes we don't know because I saw that years ago when we had this migration of people to Europe, it was survival purposes, so God only knows it was to say I can respectfully present my art, my music, whereas here they can tell you how many companies say can you add this beat to it, add this these additional instruments to it to make it more saleable, to make it more acceptable to a wider audience. Some musicians knew that they couldn't in mid-stream make a change like that, a number of them left this country to go over there, you know the story. *Round Midnight* that was a good example of a filming of Dexter Gordon, just represented one of I would say dozens of musicians who left, so

Q: Did you ever feel that urge yourself

AC: Never to leave no, because

Q: You go to India quite regularly

AC: I go to India for spiritual purpose, I know it's a higher culture, I feel, for the arts, I go to Europe to have the higher culture, and this is why the people of this country could go with the arts, they could be accepted to go with their music and not have to compromise it

Q: We were talking about spiritual pursuits, do you have anything to do with the Church of St. John in San Francisco,

AC: I met him years ago, and that was an effort to try and have a centre, and just somehow could not succeed, they had certain ideas about how they wanted to present themselves, but somehow it did not work out very well

Q: I thought when you said the centre, that that was it

AC: No, I'm at the centre that is in existence now here in Southern California, and that was the first effort towards a centre was in San Francisco, with Hank John building it

Q: That came about because they felt that God had spoken to the great John Coltrane, what are your feelings on that?

AC: I feel that he is entitled to be their leader, and entitled to his beliefs, I don't even doubt his heart's response. In fact, he explained to me that it was because of John Coltrane he is alive today. In his encounter he tried to make experience in just mentioning the name of John Coltrane to the person who creating him threat and he mentioned John Coltrane and that seemed to instantly change the mental state and change the attitude of the person who had proved...so he had always told many people that, because of John Coltrane the man is living, I can respect that

WIND UP

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