

# Institute for Studies In American Music

Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

**N E W S L E T T E R**

Volume XXXI, No. 2

Spring 2002

## Meditations on Coltrane's Legacies

by  
Salim Washington

Although John Coltrane achieved canonical stature during his lifetime, the meaning and even the worth of his music are still controversial more than three decades after his death. Just as there are multiple Coltranes, corresponding to the various styles and techniques that he employed throughout his career, there are multiple Coltrane legacies as articulated by musicians, listeners, musicologists, critics, poets, writers, and even theologians.



*McCoy Tyner, John Coltrane, Jimmy Garrison, Elvin Jones  
Photo copyright Duncan Schiedt*

The assessments of Coltrane tend to fall into one of four groups. Primary among these various legacies is Coltrane the innovator in American music. Coltrane is seen as an unusually fecund, almost continually evolving artist, whose impact on the language and practice of jazz was as paradigmatic as that of Louis Armstrong or Charles Parker. Another legacy for Coltrane is as an iconic figure for those who would honor the tradition of black creative genius in America. While this assessment is based upon Coltrane's musical achievements, those who see his significance in this light regard him as a black champion of freedom and justice.

Alternatively, others regard Coltrane as a charlatan. These commentators vilify Coltrane as the man who help to kill jazz, or at least hindered its progress due to the musicians who follow the "wrong" aspects of Coltrane's *oeuvre*. Some of the people in this camp allow that Coltrane is an important figure in the music, but feel that he threw away the promise that shone through his pre-1965 virtuosity, and squandered it on self-indulgent assaults against the beauty, and even meaning, in jazz.<sup>1</sup> Finally, for still others there is Coltrane the spirit-filled man who, through both his art and his life, found a way to wed compassion and religious expression to the pursuit of truth and wisdom. This is Coltrane the prophet, who appeals to the spirit, leading himself and his listeners towards worshipful appreciation of life and creation, and compassion towards humanity. The vertical axis of man's faith-based relation to God is accompanied by a concern with man's Earthly relationships. His music calls for love, peace, and even serenity, while at the same time fully acknowledging the need to truthfully confront the terrible and the potentially devastating.

Coltrane's place as an innovator in jazz is secure, as there are now several generations of jazz musicians who have taken up aspects of his personal idiom as standard material to be absorbed by all improvisers. Some of these innovations are harmonic, including extensions upon the discoveries in diatonic harmony that the beboppers offered as well as the introduction of Indian and African

---

## Inside This Issue

Reminiscing on Ruth  
by Bess  
Lomax Hawes ..... 4

New Music Notes  
by Carol J. Oja ..... 6

Celebrating Jelly Roll  
by Jeff Taylor ..... 7

Transcribing the Folk  
by David Evans .... 9

A Beach Discography  
by Adrienne  
Fried Block ..... 10

## Coltrane's Legacies (continued)

melodic materials in jazz practice. His tritonic harmonic substitutions are also standard fare for jazz musicians, as is the more general abstraction of harmonic motion in major or minor thirds (rather than fourths or fifths), which he also explored during the same period. The harmonic sequences that Coltrane utilized to reharmonize standard jazz progressions in songs like "Giant Steps," "Countdown," "26-2," "But Not For Me," and "Body and Soul" have become known as "Coltrane changes."

The compositional techniques utilized in his later periods are equally influential. The introduction of playing in a single mode for long, indeterminate periods is another compositional practice that was widely accepted in jazz due to Coltrane's example. The abolition of harmonic cycles helped to open the door to Coltrane's introduction of long enduring evocations of timelessness, and hence spirituality, that are influenced by the music of various African and Indian cultures through such practices as rhythmic chanting or the playing of ragas. Even more fundamental are the expanded timbral qualities and extended range of Coltrane's saxophone playing.

Another way to view Coltrane as an innovator is through a consideration of him as a performer. Bootleg videos of Coltrane's 1965 tour and photographs of him from this time on reveal a bodily involvement that was quite unrestrained compared to the videos and photographs of his earlier years. As his performance practices evolved, Coltrane became less restricted by "correct" posture and instrumental technique, just as he became less bound to the conventions of harmony or of sound production. This unself-conscious absorption in Coltrane's late performance style is part of a virtuosic jazz act that in Coltrane's social moment signified a transcendent process and an exalted state of concentration. It also implies that nothing is held back, that the musician is completely available to his muse, and hence to his audience. Coltrane's musical innovations combined his harmonic and melodic discoveries with the quartet's rhythmic innovations.

The idea that the performing musician is a conduit brings the notion of spiritual involvement to the fore. First, the preparation for the transcendent performance relies upon inspiration and genius as much as the products of the titanic com-

poser. Second, the performer must have a degree of humility to be able to be so transparent about his/her struggles with the form and the message of their art. Of course, this kind of generosity with the spirit has always been recognized as a hallmark of African American performance style, and is often what is referred to as "soul." What makes Coltrane so compelling as a performer is that he was not only one of the most soulful players, but also one of the most virtuosic, technically and harmonically, and one of the most conceptually visionary as well.

Not everyone hears innovation and genius in Coltrane's music, and indeed, some question his basic competence. Some of his detractors, such as Ira Gitler, have since become admirers of his music. In addition, there is the perhaps tacit apology from one of Coltrane's harshest critics, John Tynan, who demonized Coltrane while he was alive, but since the saxophonist's death has honored him by publishing transcriptions of his solos. However, many remain at least skeptical of Coltrane's late phases, and for some, Coltrane's chief legacy is not as innovator, but as a charlatan. This skepticism about his music during his later phases at times lapsed into hostility when some critics speculated about the putative harm done to jazz by those who followed his example.

Coltrane and his disciples were accused of being "anti-jazz" by certain quarters of the critical establishment in the 1960s, and even held responsible for dwindling jazz audiences in the decades since. In *Down Beat's* 1998 commemorative issue on Coltrane, John McDonough gave a dissenting opinion to the hagiography that lay within. In his article "Dissin' the Trane," McDonough makes an impassioned plea for Coltrane skeptics to come out of the closet. Arguing that Coltrane's version of "In a Sentimental Mood" would have been a preferable "gift to God" than "A Love Supreme," he, in effect, disparages Coltrane's personal vision, implying that Coltrane should have remained closer to Ellington in his muse:

Unfortunately, the longer Coltrane played, the more elusive the results became. In his last years, the command and lucidity that had brought him to greatness seemed to disintegrate under his fingers. After the almost unlistenable *Ascension*, he became lost in his own quest, a not-ready-for prime time player and mystic always in motion in the hopes that he might, by some accident, bump into an idea.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of this kind of criticism is a basic unwillingness to understand the music on its own terms. McDonough condemns "A Love Supreme" as a chant, without commenting that Coltrane does nothing to disguise this fact. Given Coltrane's investigations into the world's religions, it is, in fact, the point. The non-linear sense of time and the disruption of the Cartesian world through spirit possession are practices

*Continued on page 12*

ISAM Newsletter Vol. XXXI, No. 2 / ISSN: 0145-8396

Editors ..... Ellie M. Hisama and Ray Allen

Managing Editor ..... J. Graeme Fullerton

Contributing Editors ..... H. Wiley Hitchcock  
Carol J. Oja  
Jeff Taylor

Production Assistant ..... Kathleen Mason Krotman

The ISAM Newsletter is published in the Fall and Spring. Copyright 2002 by the Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 2900 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11210.

Tel: 718-951-5655 Fax: 718-951-4858

Email: <isam@brooklyn.cuny.edu>

Website: <<http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam>>

## ISAM Matters

After the tragic events of 11 September 2001, our conference **Ruth Crawford Seeger: Modernity, Tradition, and the Making of American Music** took place as planned on 26-27 October 2001 at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Over 500 people attended the conference, traveling from California, Colorado, Indiana, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Canada, France, and elsewhere; the chamber music concert and the Seeger family tribute concert were sold out. We thank those who came to New York to celebrate Crawford Seeger's centennial and gratefully acknowledge the conference's funders: the New York Council for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Edward T. Cone Foundation, the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, the Baisley Powell Elebash Endowment, the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities, the Brooklyn College Provost's Office, Essential Music, Lucille Field Goodman, and Patsy Rogers. For those who could not attend, the conference booklet is available on our website: [depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam](http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam). In recognition of Crawford Seeger's centennial, we are pleased to publish in this issue of the *Newsletter* **Bess Lomax Hawes's** "Reminiscing on Ruth," a condensed version of her conference paper (p. 4); **David Evans's** review of Crawford Seeger's long-awaited *The Music of American Folk Song* (p. 9); and **Jane Palmquist's** review of Mike Seeger and Peggy Seeger's CDs of children's folk songs transcribed and arranged by their mother (p. 11).

We had the pleasure of hosting **Robin D. G. Kelley**, Professor of History and Africana Studies at New York University, for a week in March as the Robert L. Hess Scholar in Residence at Brooklyn College for 2001-2002. During his residency, Professor Kelley gave ten thought-provoking talks on topics ranging from Thelonious Monk and the artist Ellen Gallagher to academia and social responsibility, race and the American labor movement, and black feminism. High points of Professor Kelley's residency were his lecture "Jazz and Freedom Go Hand in Hand" and his performance of Monk's "Pannonica" and "Misterioso" with the **Salim Washington Ensemble**. His most recent book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2002), analyzes jazz, hip-hop, black liberation struggles, working class radicalism, and U.S. and African American history. We look forward to reading his forthcoming book *Misterioso: The Art of Thelonious Monk*, to be published by The Free Press.

ISAM's Spring 2002 colloquium series, *American Music at the Millennium*, featured **Jason Kao Hwang**, who presented excerpts from his recent opera *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown*; **Ned Rorem**, who talked about his own music and contemporary culture; and **Salim Washington**, who gave a paper on John Coltrane. Professor Washington's article "Meditations on Coltrane's Legacies" appears in this issue. As always, we are grateful to the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities for sponsoring the series.

Congratulations to current and former CUNY faculty members who have garnered awards and grants this year:

## Behind the Beat A Mark Tucker Tribute

A collection of Mark Tucker's *Behind the Beat* columns culled from his years of writing for the *ISAM Newsletter* is being compiled for publication.

Please help us to defray the production costs of this volume by contributing to the Mark Tucker Fund at Brooklyn College.

Please make checks payable to **Brooklyn College Foundation** (memo: Mark Tucker Fund) and send to:

**ISAM**  
Conservatory of Music  
Brooklyn College  
2900 Bedford Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11210

**Tania León** received a honorary doctorate from Oberlin College in May. **Carol J. Oja** won the Irving Lowens Book Award from the Society for American Music for *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s*, and she was elected President of the Society for American Music. Former ISAM Research Associate **R. Allen Lott** received the H. Earle Johnson Print Subvention from SAM for his forthcoming book *Grand Tours: Five European Piano Virtuosos in the New World*, and was elected Vice President of SAM. **John Graziano** won the Lowens Article Award for "The Early Life and Career of the 'Black Patti': The Odyssey of an African American Singer in the Late Nineteenth Century." **Adrienne Fried Block** received a second year of funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities for her project *Music in Gotham: The New York Scene, 1863-1875*. **Ray Allen** and **George Cunningham** received a PSC-CUNY grant for their ongoing research project, *Porgy and Bess: A Critical Reader*.

News from the Conservatory: We extend a warm welcome to **Amnon Wolman**, who will join the composition faculty this fall as the new Director of the Center for Computer Music. Professor Wolman has taught at Northwestern University since 1989, and has composed music for theater, radio, film, and dance, electroacoustic music, orchestral and chamber works, and music for solo instruments with tape or live electronics. His compositions have been premiered by Heinz Holliger, Charles Neidich, Ursula Oppens, and the California EAR Unit, and his recent song cycle *Thomas and Beulah*, with text by Rita Dove, has been recorded on Innova. **Jeffrey Biegel** premiered Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's *Millennium Fantasy* for piano and orchestra with the Cincinnati Symphony, and will

*Continued on page 15*

# Reminiscing on Ruth

Bess Lomax Hawes, daughter of the renowned folk song collector John Lomax, was an original member of the Almanac Singers, a folk ensemble known for its politically charged renditions of "people's music" in the 1940s. She went on to pursue a successful career as a folklorist, culminating in her appointment as the first Director of the Folk Arts program at the National Endowment for the Arts in 1977. Below is an excerpt from the paper she presented at ISAM's Ruth Crawford Seeger Centennial Festival held on 26-27 October 2001, in which she reflects on the collaboration between her brother Alan Lomax and Ruth Crawford Seeger in preparing the 1941 folk song collection *Our Singing Country*.



The Almanac Singers: (l to r) Woody Guthrie, Millard Lampell, Bess Lomax Hawes, Pete Seeger, Arthur Stern, Agnes "Sis" Cunningham  
Photo by Sid Grossman

As the jazz age spiraled into the Depression years and renewed focus on the situation of the "common man (and woman)" emerged, songbooks like Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* and my father and brother's *American Ballads and Folk Songs* began to appear alongside the familiar hymnals, opera chorus excerpts, and the popular song collections of Gilbert and Sullivan, Berlin, and Gershwin. The typical songbook of the period included lyrics, an outline of the tune in musical notation together with full piano accompaniment, and occasionally guitar chords. The idea was to gather around the piano and sing the songs *en famille* and I remember when everybody I knew used to do just that on Sunday afternoons.

The folk music collections contained a potpourri of Appalachian ballads, sea chanteys, African American spirituals, blues, and work songs, and now and then a Spanish dance tune and miscellaneous city song. While transcriptions of basic melody lines and harmonic accompaniments proved invaluable for us Sunday crooners who wished to sing the songs ourselves, the increasing popularization of the recording machine in the 1930s inevitably led to a teasing problem. What bits of the tunes got written down hardly ever really sounded like what you could hear with your own ears when you finally listened to the field recordings as performed by the

original singers. And sometimes the written music seemed a pale reflection, or even a totally different version, from what was coming out of that Victrola horn.

Composer Ruth Crawford Seeger was one of the first Americans to grapple with this problem in a serious and systematic fashion. Her marvelously descriptive musical introduction to the 1941 collection *Our Singing Country* is an early and admirable attempt by a classically trained musician to figure out how to cope with other peoples' musical languages.<sup>1</sup> The book itself was composed of songs gleaned from the original recordings of black and white singers made by my father and brother while they crisscrossed the southern states during the 1930s. For me it has always been my family's purest, most creative work, and they themselves wanted very much to make it available.

Selection of what to include in the final published volume—and what to leave out—was a painful process. Father, Alan, and Ruth formed the basic editorial committee though Charles Seeger was often there too. And I was always among them taking notes as we listened to hour after hour of field recordings in the old Library of Congress attics where the dust and

the heat blew in and the painted friezes and gilded decorative panels filtered the roaring ax-chopping songs and the great crashing shaped-note hymns down through the prim and orderly library stacks below us. In the evenings string quartets would play Beethoven and Haydn in the Library's concert hall; but in the attics the unsilenced and unquenchable voices of the southern working people sang on.

I used to require students in my folk music classes to read Ruth's musical introduction as it finally appeared in *Our Singing Country*. I had been personally privileged to observe at first hand what a tough job she had taken on and how hard it was to do. I was seventeen that year, and after the weeks of listening at the Library of Congress I worked as a messenger girl between Ruth, living in Maryland, and my father and Alan, living on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Every week I would go back and forth between them on the bus carrying bits of manuscript, alternate music transcriptions, copies of the original discs, critiques and messages, both passionate and hilarious.

Ruth was a marvel. She tackled the presentation on paper of a fiddle tune like "Bonaparte's Retreat" with the same precision, determination, and awe that she would have devoted to a brilliantly realized cadenza from a Mozart violin concerto.

Ruth listened, and listened, and then listened some more. She used the recording for what she believed it to be—a true record of the music as played or sung. She took as her basic assumption that the music was sounding the way the player wanted it to sound—not like a failed imitation of something else.

Most people at that time thought of the folk song as “simple,” “naïve,” “natural” and crude—indeed many people still do—but Ruth’s splendid classical education and democratic personality left her devoid of that snobbery. She believed her job was simply to move the music as performed into another form of communication—print—thereby allowing it to circulate in a different kind of way. Most people doing that kind of work at that time were content with an approximation of what they thought they heard; Ruth never was. When she had to approximate, she grieved over it and agonized and changed it back and forth interminably, and finally wrote footnotes saying she was sorry and it wasn’t exactly what she had hoped for.

In the meantime my brother Alan—as passionate and committed as Ruth to social needs, social justice, the importance and artistry of the especial messages of ordinary people, but with much more experience in the twisting and cramping effects of translating sound into print—was trying to make up in a different way for the separation of musician, music, and performance that we all observed occurring when songs were put into books. He thought a great deal about how to present the songs in *Our Singing Country* within their special place and time, how to bring their unknown singers into prominence, and how to convey his respect for their poetry, passion, and artistry. He grouped the songs in terms of their use and their place of singing rather than according to literary criteria, struggling in every way he could conceive to rejoin the artist with the art. These were truly radical years in our country and both Ruth Crawford Seeger and Alan Lomax were themselves conjoined in an attempt to change the basic assumptions that had underlain both the academic and popular attempts to understand American music. And if you are going to support the changing of things you must observe the small details for they will eventually lead you into the large.

So like all the good New Dealers and left-wingers of that time they argued constantly with rage and humor, with anger and affection, and with unrelenting enthusiasm. To cite one

example that has lasted in my mind, a mammoth battle over the blues song “Go Down, You Little Red Rising Sun” went on for weeks, the point at issue being whether in the second line the singer had sung “you redder than rouge rising sun” with a voice break or “redder than ruby rising sun.” Alan’s position was that no blues singer he had ever recorded would consider singing such an awkward and unpoetic line as “redder than rouge” while Ruth maintained that the only problem with that was that it was just what had indeed happened. And she had listened enough number of times to prove it—

eighty-five, perhaps, or eighty-six? She kept a running tally on the number of listenings she had devoted to each song and she would enquire of Alan a report of how many times he had listened to something.

By that time Alan had talked with, broken bread with, and contemplated the wonders of the world with hundreds of tra-

ditional singers. Ruth had not had that chance, and so they sometimes arrived at different though mostly complementary conclusions. Alan and Ruth represented very different human beings from different backgrounds with different ways of perceiving aesthetic systems, but they were trying together to do something new and honest, ground-breaking and important. And as I watched them struggle, I began at my tender age to absorb some of the subtleties of art and the complexities of change.

I also began to shudder at the thought of the thousands of such difficulties that must be faced in the construction of a past reality. In every case there are the facts about what actually happened, the unassailable on-the-records rendition of the performance that Ruth held was the vital element, the almost holy data. But then there are the issues that she couldn’t really take into account because they weren’t immediately perceivable on the disc—things like the situation of the singer’s age and background, the health or sickness of the surrounding community, the intensity of a particular historical tradition or moment, the customary ways of telling a story in a particular community—all the surrounding information that can be summarized as context. And those are the things Alan tended to insist were vital. Where should the weight fall? Which was more important? Could some new amalgam of perspectives develop? Well, they struggled and they sweated and, to my mind, they came up with a volume that was worth

Slow, free ♩ = 48

Uh - go down, go down, you little red,

Redder than rouge ris - ing - sun, And don't you never -

uh - bring - day - Great God - a - might - y, no - more.

“Go Down, You Little Red Rising Sun” from *Our Singing Country*

*Continued on page 15*

## New Music Notes by Carol J. Oja

Sad to say, after the horrors of the Oklahoma City bombing, September 11th, and the escalation of violence in Israel, the kidnapping of heiress Patty Hearst by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) in 1974 almost seems like a quaint chapter in the history of terrorism, dating from a time when politically motivated brutality yielded a few deaths rather than dozens or thousands. For those too young to remember, Hearst was kept blindfolded and locked in a closet for nearly two months, while the SLA communicated with the outer world through a series of videotapes, much like Osama bin Laden has been doing recently. The true story of what happened to Hearst during this period remains a mystery. The SLA made various ransom demands, including a request that her family donate money to every poor person in California. As the videotapes continued, Hearst appeared on them increasingly, and her rhetoric grew ever more militant. Finally, she declared allegiance to the SLA's ideals, saying she had been renamed "Tania." She was photographed robbing a bank in San Francisco and then spent nearly a year as a fugitive after a gunfight between police and the SLA led to a massive fire in a house where the group had been hiding out.

Anthony Davis's opera *Tania*, premiered in 1992 and released this past October by Koch (3-7467-2 HI), provides a riveting reminder of those grisly events and of the techniques common to terrorists. Set to a libretto by Michael John LaChiusa, *Tania* "re-imagines" Hearst's kidnapping "as a surreal trip 'through the looking glass,'" as Davis describes it in liner notes. "The opera begins and ends in Patty's bedroom," he continues, "with the Symbionese Liberation Army hiding in her closet. Patty's voyage through her closet door plunges her into a political and sexual world of dreams and nightmares filled with ambiguity and dark humor." Narnia turns very bad. *Tania* is especially clever in evoking the disorientation of watching events unfold in real time while they are simultaneously replayed *ad nauseum* in the media. It is a brilliant and intensely relevant work—imaginative yet reportorial, comic yet terrifying.

Davis is one of a group of contemporary American composers who has managed to refashion opera to suit our time, newly outfitting a genre beset by images of buxom sopranos in voluminous gowns for an age of anorexia and lycra. His *X*, *The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986) and *Amistad* (1997) have gained more critical attention than *Tania*. But the latter is just as dramatically effective and unstintingly political.

Coincidence with events over the past year make *Tania* especially unsettling. Since September 11th, John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer* has entered the news, mostly because of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's decision to withdraw the opera's "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" from a program this winter. *Tania* has received no similar media scrutiny, though it too provokes. "I'm the smoke in your jumbo jet," sings Cinque, Tania's SLA rapist. "I'm the bomb at your super bowl. I'm the outlawed. I'm the other law. I'm the anger you hunted down who now hunts you." Disorienting,

non-linear, ingeniously incorporating video (there is both a "Patty" and a "TV Patty" in the opera), the work effectively evokes the discombobulation of a trauma.

As is typical of Davis's style, *Tania* fuses gestures from R&B, funk, jazz, and the gamelan. "I have often been troubled by the false dichotomies of popular vs. fine art," Davis wrote in a 1999 tribute to Duke Ellington. "In America, as well as elsewhere, these dichotomies are more a product of racism and class identity than a true reflection of the worth or value of a given work of art" (<[www.schirmer.com/composers/ellington\\_bio.html](http://www.schirmer.com/composers/ellington_bio.html)>). His style is distinctively ecumenical. The "Overture," for example, uses a sultry saxophone solo and dark timbral sheen to set a mysterious, even sinister scene, redolent of a film by David Lynch. By contrast, music for "Interlude II" alludes fleetingly to the percussive clangor of a gamelan. Davis and LaChiusa underscore the absurd ordinariness of Hearst's saga with the recurring image of a box of crackers. At the opening, as Hearst and her "husband" watch TV in bed, they pass crackers back and forth; their exchange culminates with, "They're fucking, fucking good." "Pass me" is the phrase that gets transformed throughout the work, and the word "fucking" inspires some energetic music, such as on CD 2 (track 10), where there is an ebulliently pointillistic setting of the phrase "Fucking fascist bourgeois pig." Other highlights include the rollicking groove "And the funk goes this way" (CD 1, track 8) and the gospel-tinged "In the claws of the eagle I will fight like the cobra" (CD 1, track 18), which perverts its spirit of collective jubilation by using the music to evoke the climax of a rape.

\* \* \*

Experimentalism defined the career of Henry Cowell much more than politics. Yet he and his contemporaries set in place many of the activist ideals that subsequent composers, like Davis, have carried on. Whether through radical political engagement, most notably with the Composers' Collective of the 1930s, or through a commitment to breaking down class barriers between so-called "high" and "low" forms of music, Cowell, Charles Seeger, William Grant Still, and Aaron Copland, to name just a few, sought ways to defy the hegemony of "art for art's sake" and make their work relevant to the social and political issues of their time.

*Essential Cowell: Selected Writings on Music by Henry Cowell, 1921-1964*, edited by Dick Higgins, brings together a vivid assortment of Cowell's prose, making some long-out-of-print essays now available (McPherson & Company, 2002; \$35). The volume is by no means a complete or systematic collection of Cowell's writings. But it takes an important step toward pointing out his distinctive position among the strong tradition of composer-journalists in the twentieth century. It is divided into seven sections, "HC in Person," "Contemporaries," "Music of the World's Peoples," "HC on Works by

*Continued on page 14*

# Celebrating Jelly Roll

During his tragic final months in Los Angeles in 1941, gravely ill and deeply resentful toward a music establishment that he felt had cheated him out of a prominent and lucrative career, pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton could hardly have imagined how brilliantly his legend and legacy would survive him. Yet, today, after dozens of books and articles, countless recording reissues, a variety of festivals and tribute bands, and at least two prominent stage productions based (if, at times, rather loosely) on his life, Morton's reputation as one of America's most important musicians of the twentieth century, and one of its most endlessly fascinating personalities, seems assured.

Interest in Morton has intensified in the past three years. In 1999, the *Chicago Tribune* ran three articles starkly outlining Morton's troubled legal entanglements with his publisher, Melrose Brothers, a company that apparently swindled Morton out of most of his rightful profits. In November 2000, Stephen Kinzer wrote an article in the *New York Times* with the telling subtitle "The Man Who Made Jazz Hot is Suddenly in Vogue." Last year saw the publication of Pete Pastras's important study of Morton's years in California, *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West*. The University of California Press also recently reissued Alan Lomax's *Mister Jelly Roll*, a famous book based on Lomax's 1938 recorded interviews with Morton at the Library of Congress, with a new afterword by Morton scholar Lawrence Gushee. In 2000 the UK's JSP Records released a beautifully mastered five-CD collection of Morton's 1926-30 recordings that includes some hard-to-find alternate takes. And perhaps most intriguing, a Danish publisher has brought out William Russell's massive *Oh, Mr. Jelly: A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook* (Copenhagen: JazzMedia, 1999; \$115).

For years jazz enthusiasts had known about a treasure trove of Mortoniana that Russell, a composer, collector and New Orleans jazz expert, had gradually accumulated, though few had been able to examine the materials first-hand. The Missouri-born Russell was one of the prominent voices in Frederick Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Edward Smith's 1939 *Jazzmen*, the first serious study of the music's early history. Russell played a pivotal role in reviving interest in New Orleans jazz in the 1940s, partly through his rediscovery of trumpeter Bunk Johnson. In 1958 he became the first curator of Tulane's Hogan Jazz Archive, which remains one of the country's most important resources for the study of early jazz.

For over thirty years, Russell methodically gathered articles, photos, correspondence, music, and other materials related to Morton's life and career. Even more important, he conducted dozens of interviews with those who had known and worked with him, capturing a priceless oral history of both the pianist and his native city.

*Oh, Mr. Jelly* is one of the results of this lifelong passion. This enormous, strange, flawed but fascinating volume was mostly complete at the time of Russell's death in 1992. Judging from the publisher's note, the intervening seven years were

devoted to formatting and editing the book, as well as finding a publisher willing to commit to Russell's original, rather unorthodox vision of the project. The result, of which reportedly only 1,000 copies were printed, is truly a "scrapbook" as the title implies: readers are presented with a varied collection of documents from a wide range of sources, with a minimum of commentary, and left to draw their own conclusions about Morton's life and work. The documentation is sloppy at times: for example, the comments from Eubie Blake are partially credited to an interview in 1987—four years after he died! The editorial method should also have been clarified—most interviews are transcribed from tapes, but some come only from notes, and others combine more than one conversation in ways that are not explained. Nevertheless, the book's publication is an important event in Morton scholarship.



Jelly Roll Morton, ca. 1920

The book assumes familiarity with the basic chronology of Morton's life, as well as its major players, and those with no prior encounters with the musician may find the volume difficult to approach. Yet for established enthusiasts it will prove deeply absorbing. Since his death, innumerable stories about Morton's diamond tooth, his pearl-handed revolvers, his women, and his claims to having single-handedly "invented" jazz have obscured aspects of his character and musical gifts that are crucial to appreciating his art. Though the celebrated ego is a familiar presence throughout the interviews, they also often give glimpses of other sides of this complex musician. Morton's sister, Frances Oliver, who barely knew her brother when she first visited him in Chicago in 1925, tells of a gentle, caring, and protective sibling. In a particularly touching moment, she tearfully recalls Morton playing and singing Berlin's "Always" as she came down the

*Continued on page 10*

# Listening to Beach

The work of scholars and performers has often gone hand in hand in changing the standard repertoire. Both have recognized that significant works of art have been neglected because of sexism and have sought to rectify this situation. The many recent recordings of music by Amy Beach demonstrate that such work is now taking root.

The first substantial interest in Beach occurred in the 1970s, simultaneously with "second wave" feminism. Pianist Virginia Eskin's extraordinary recordings in the 1970s and 1980s sparked widespread interest in Beach's music.<sup>1</sup> Along with pianist Mary-Louise Boehm's recordings of Beach's monumental piano concerto, piano quintet, and *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Beach's place in the musical mainstream should have been ensured, but she remained invisible from music history. If Beach was mentioned at all, her music was often dismissed as trivial, suitable only for the parlor. With a significant body of scholarship on Beach now available, including Adrienne Fried Block's authoritative biography, and with many performers who are dedicated to her music, it seems likely that Beach will not be dropped out of history yet again.<sup>2</sup>

Beach's piano concerto exudes the confident bravura of the works in the same genre by Tchaikovsky and Grieg, as can be readily heard in the first movement, with its expansive cascading arpeggios and brilliant, closely spaced chords in the piano. The recordings by Joanne Polk (Arabesque ZR Z6738, 2000) and Mary-Louise Boehm (Vox Box CDX 5069, [1976] 1992) both capture the compelling dynamism of the work. Boehm, however, offers more warmth and intensity in the piano tone, as in the second movement, which draws upon Beach's own "Empress of the Night" song. Here Boehm brings out the lyricism of the piano part so it provides a rich contrapuntal statement. In Boehm's recording (with the Westphalian Orchestra) the brass play with a dated style of vibrato, and the remastering suffers from some technical problems, such as the tinny timbre near the end of the second movement. Polk's recording is energetic, and the orchestra plays a strong role.

The generalization that Beach's music is sentimental and old-fashioned is unfortunately still held by people who know little of her music. Her *Quartet for Strings* easily dispels such beliefs. This cerebrally introspective work reveals her study of Beethoven's late quartets. The striking opening, with its dark harmonic motion of abstract ideas, is gripping in its purity and intensity. The work eventually foregrounds its Native American thematic content (melodies of the Alaskan Inuit),

first with the insistent and probing "Summer Song," and later with the sprightly "Itiajung's Song," which is given intricate contrapuntal and fugal treatment. The Lark Quartet offers a thoughtful interpretation of the *Quartet* (Arabesque AR Z6748, 2000). While their performance is rich and satisfying, I sometimes wished for more edginess and intensity in their interpretation.

The *Theme and Variations for Flute and Strings* was recorded by Doriot Anthony Dwyer and the Manhattan String Quartet in 1990, a recording that is sadly now out of print.<sup>3</sup> Its theme (based on one of Beach's choral works that employs a Native American melody) is haunting and mournful in its initial statement by all strings. A sprightly (although minor and chromatic) waltz-like variation evokes Vienna. Two recent recordings reveal the beauty of this evocative piece. The Ambache Chamber Players capture the rich layers of insight in this expansive work (Chandos CHAN 9752, 1999). Another lovely recording is by flautist Eugenia Zukerman and the Shanghai String Quartet (Delos DE 3173, 1995), although in some passages—the dramatically climbing cello solo of Variation 5, for instance—it lacks the intensity of the Ambache's.

A vast amount of Beach's total output of more than 300 published works remains little known, particularly her choral music (both sacred and secular) and some other large works. The Capitol Hill Choral Society's recording of Beach's *Canticle of the Sun* and other of her choral works, including the gem-like unaccompanied choral responses, is particularly important (Troy 295, 1998). Their vivid performance of the *Canticle* makes this recording a revelation. This highly chromatic work uses a repeating ostinato, evocative of Stravinsky's *Firebird*. While one might wish for more refined soloists, this moving recording stands up to repeated hearings. I hope it will inspire more ensembles to perform this serious and powerful work.

The availability of these recent recordings is certainly cause for celebration, yet more remains to be done. Beach's monumental *Mass in E<sup>b</sup>* is unavailable apart from poor amateur recordings. Beach left the orchestration of her *Balkan Variations* unfinished; it should be completed and performed. Additional recordings of her "Gaelic" Symphony and of her opera *Cabildo* should be available. Only Neeme Järvi's recording of the "Gaelic" with the Detroit Symphony does it justice, and the 1995 recording of Beach's opera is of a live

*Continued on page 15*



Amy Beach  
Courtesy of the Peterborough Historical  
Society, Peterborough, NH



# Transcribing the Folk

*The Music of American Folk Song and Selected Other Writings on American Folk Music*, edited by Larry Polansky with Judith Tick (University of Rochester Press, 2001; \$45), contains Ruth Crawford Seeger's previously unpublished 75-page essay intended to be an introduction to John A. and Alan Lomax's original 1941 edition of *Our Singing Country*. Crawford Seeger was the music editor and did the tune transcriptions for this volume of folk songs, most of them collected in the field by the Lomaxes. Macmillan's refusal to publish such a lengthy essay, a stand supported by the Lomaxes, resulted in Crawford Seeger's "Music Preface" being shortened to eight pages. Three other short essays by Crawford Seeger are added to the present volume, but they pale in significance when compared to "The Music of American Folk Song" and largely serve to reinforce points made there. The book also contains brief forewords by Pete, Mike, and Peggy Seeger, a "Historical Introduction" by Judith Tick (Ruth Crawford Seeger's biographer), and an "Editor's Introduction" by Larry Polansky.

Polansky's editorial work is excellent. He created this edition of the main essay out of four manuscript sources, one of which has become the main portion of the text although it was incomplete. Polansky supplies 137 endnotes discussing editing problems, commenting on certain statements by Crawford Seeger, providing references to related literature and published recordings of the songs, and remarking on other relevant topics. Crawford Seeger's essay itself is divided into two parts, "A Note on Transcription" and a lengthier "Notes on the Songs and on Manners of Singing." The former deals with problems and general methods of transcription, while the latter might be characterized as an introduction to American folksinging style.

An ambiguous statement by Pete Seeger about the failure of this essay to be published in *Our Singing Country* is quoted or cited several times here: "Ruth suffered one of the biggest disappointments of the last ten years of her life. It just killed her." As much as we might wish in retrospect that the essay had been published in the original 1941 edition, it is easy to understand why it was not. Leaving aside the fact that Crawford Seeger had strained her relationships with the Lomaxes and Macmillan by delaying the publication of the book for a couple of years through constant revision of her transcriptions and time spent on writing this essay, the work was simply too detailed for a book whose main purpose was to provide a collection of folk songs to appeal to a mass urban audience and get them singing. It was also too long and would have taken up about twenty percent of the entire book if printed.

Over sixty years later, the questions must arise: is this essay worth publishing now, and does it have anything to teach us today? The answer to both is yes. Ruth Crawford Seeger was an important musical figure in her day, both as a composer and a musicologist. This essay was quite advanced for 1941 and still has much to teach us about transcription and about American folk song. Crawford Seeger's consistent method of transcription, constant attention to detail and nuance, insistence on the importance of hearing the music in

order to understand the style, and favorable comparison of folksinging to fine art singing are laudable. Her original concepts of song norm (pp. 22-23), majority usage (pp. 23-25), and model tune (pp. 26-27) are important contributions to the field of transcription. Given the fact that her transcriptions were intended to be both descriptive and prescriptive, she was wise to choose a middle course between complexity (printing all the details) and simplicity (an outline). Crawford Seeger's insightful observations on style (e. g., lack of dynamics and dramatization, metrical irregularities, tone attack and release, blue notes, etc.) resulted in generally very good transcriptions throughout the book, and allowed her to convey in notation the ornate vocal technique of "Pauline," the metrical complexity of "Belle," and the dense multi-part organization of "Dig My Grave."

Despite the sympathy and enthusiasm we should feel for this essay, it does have its weaknesses. Crawford Seeger had an agenda to document the "complexity" of American folk music so as to deny its reputation for "simplicity." She was herself a modernist composer who explored dissonance in her works. Tick makes a virtue of this fact (p. xxii) and suggests that Crawford Seeger found parallels between American folk music and the work of modern composers and theorists (pp. xxv-xxvi). Polansky also supports Crawford Seeger's relentless pursuit of "complexity" and the "difficult," an opinion shared by ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger (pp. xxxiii-xxxiv). In the twenty-first century, when American class lines are thankfully more blurred, this argument seems beside the point. What we really need to do now is abandon the simple/complex dichotomy and find other bases for identifying good music.

Crawford Seeger's concern for intricacy led her to introduce needless metrical complications into some of her transcriptions. For example, "Choose You a Seat 'n' Set Down" (pp. 51-54) has only one irregular measure, whereas she recognizes four. "Ain't Workin' Song" (pp. 50-53) is transcribed in a strange 9/8 meter, when it is actually duple. Oddly enough, she recognizes and even prints the more accurate meters of these two pieces but rejects them in her search for greater complexity. Similarly, her transcription of "Go Down, Ol' Hannah" in 3/4 meter (p. 31) would have been better without any metrical signature. Her treatment of rhythm also sometimes displays problems. Although she is aware of swing triplets, she generally chooses to notate them as dotted quarter and eighth notes (or dotted eighth and sixteenth), giving them too much of a lilt.

Crawford Seeger's constant stress on the unity of "American folk song" results in an exercise in musical nation-building. Admittedly, this unity was implicit in the approach of the Lomaxes and was part of the spirit of the times in the New Deal era. To her credit, Crawford Seeger recognized some degree of variety within this unity, but the diversity that most scholars would recognize today is seldom stressed. African American and Anglo American styles tend to be lumped to-

*Continued on page 15*

# An Amy Beach Discography

A spate of recent recordings of the music of Amy Beach (1867-1944) has brought the percentage of works on disc to over fifty percent. Now some record stores have five or six CDs sitting behind the Beach divider at any one time. One can find her opera, *Cabildo*, in a recording by some of today's outstanding singers (e.g., Lauren Flanigan, Paul Grove, and Anthony Dean Griffey). There are two recordings each of the piano concerto and "Gaelic" symphony, but not one of her delightful light orchestral work, *Bal masque*, played recently by the Boston Pops. Also in the half empty department are concert arias, the Mary Stuart soliloquy, *Eilende Wolken*, *Segler der Lüfte*, for mezzo and orchestra, and *Jephthah's Daughter*, for soprano and orchestra—singers, take note.

Of her songs, about one third are recorded to date, among them the best known—e.g., the three Browning songs—and lesser known but stunning "Rendez-vous" and "In the Twilight." Still awaiting singers are many fine songs. For starters, see two songs to German texts, the peaceful "Nachts" (Night), and the dramatic "Allein," the latter on the same text as Schubert's "Ihr Bild" and Clara Schumann's "Ich stand in dunklen Traümen."

All of her chamber music is now on disc, most of it in multiple versions: the piano trio, the piano quintet, and the *Theme and Variations for Flute and String Quartet*. Each has five recordings; the Violin Sonata has seven. A casual browse in a record store one day turned up the *Pastorale* for woodwind quintet—the only remaining unrecorded chamber work—played, to my surprise, by the Reykjavik Wind Quintet.

The complete solo piano music is on disc; one will even find Beach's *Suite for Two Pianos Founded Upon Old Irish Melodies*. The exception, to date, has been her music for children to play. Some of that, however, will soon be available on a CD by pianist Sahan Arzruni.

The genre only begun to be explored is choral music. Beach wrote over forty sacred works of which ten are recorded. Fortunately three of the largest works, the *Service in A* for choir and organ, *Mass in E<sup>b</sup>*, and the *Canticle of the Sun*, are on disc, the latter two with orchestra. Among the missing is the historic *Festival Jubilate*, written for the opening of Women's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, a work most suitable for a music service. All the secular choruses await recording, including attractive works such as the three men's choruses on texts by John Masefield, and the two women's choruses, *The Sea-Fairies* (Tennyson) and *The Chambered Nautilus* (Oliver Wendell Holmes).

Names of publishers of modern editions of Beach's music can be found in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition.

—Adrienne Fried Block  
Music in Gotham  
The Graduate Center, CUNY

Editors' note: Amy Beach: A Discography can be found online at [depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam/beadis.html](http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam/beadis.html).

# Jelly Roll Morton (continued)

stairs of her Chicago rooming house for the last time. And guitarist and banjoist Danny Barker relates a remarkable story of Morton helping to rescue the victims of a serious accident while on the way to a gig in New Jersey.

The insights the musicians give into Morton's talents are especially intriguing, particularly since the same events are often described from different vantage points. For example, most of those who participated in the historic 1926 Red Hot Pepper sessions for Victor tell, in different ways, of Morton's deft combination of strong leadership and sympathy for the art of the individual. Guitarist Johnny St. Cyr puts it most succinctly when he comments that "he didn't make you feel like he was the boss and you was a workman. He gave you lots of liberty, but he didn't want you to get too far from what he wanted" (p. 129). One is struck by the similarity of St. Cyr's testimony to comments made about Duke Ellington's role as bandleader, arranger, and composer.

The autobiographical material included in the book complements the famous stories Morton told Lomax at the Library of Congress. Some of the text comes, in fact, from parts of those conversations not recorded on disk but transcribed by Lomax's secretary, including a fascinating story about Morton's first meeting in Chicago with pianist Earl Hines (one cannot help but smile at the subtle jab in Morton's comment: "Earl said he had heard a lot about me and I said I was very sorry I could not say the same" [p. 59]). Interspersed throughout the text are dozens of photos, some quite rare, included Morton's earliest known portrait (at age 17) and shots of him in blackface with his vaudeville partner Rosa Brown. The book also includes facsimiles of several previously unknown Morton manuscripts of piano solos and band arrangements. But most moving for me is the extensive correspondence, from Morton's last three years, between the musician and his friend and music publishing partner Roy Carew. Though some readers may find the day-to-day details of Morton's frustrating final years in New York difficult to wade through, they provide a fascinating glimpse of a musician trying to weather the city's fickle musical establishment—a business at times indifferent, at others outwardly hostile. One senses Morton's pride and expectation as he carefully arranges and publishes his song "We Are Elks" to promote at the 1939 Elk's convention in New York (we are party even to his selection of the colors for the cover page), only to share in his crushed hopes when not a single copy is sold there. Morton's bitterness toward the music business, often expressed in troublingly anti-Semitic rhetoric, intensifies throughout the correspondence. Yet even in his final letters, their slanted scrawl vividly captured here in facsimile, there remains an indomitable optimism. Just a few weeks before his death, barely able to breathe, he writes of being "so anxious to get things started." Sadly, Morton did not live long enough to realize his dream, leaving it to Russell and the rest of us who treasure his legacy to celebrate his tragic but brilliant life.

—Jeff Taylor  
Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center, CUNY

# Our Singing Children

As a music educator, I eagerly awaited last fall's performance of Ruth Crawford Seeger's *Let's Build a Railroad*, a children's musical history of railroad construction in the United States presented as part of the Ruth Crawford Seeger Centennial Festival. The lively performance by Jody Diamond, Mary Ann Haagen and Larry Polansky was enthusiastically received by sixty symposium participants and seventy-five public school students bused to Brooklyn College for the program. All listened attentively to the storytelling, folksinging, and banjo/mandolin interludes. When the adults spontaneously joined in the chorus of "John Henry," however, children spun around in their seats and stared in amazement, apparently stunned by the sight and sound of an audience participating in a sing-along. Despite the music's accessibility and the welcoming manner of the adults, few of the children participated. Singing a simple folk song seemed an unbelievable and foreign concept to them. I left the performance profoundly saddened. How and when was the practice of folksinging lost to these children? How can folk music traditions be restored? Ironically, these were some of the very problems Ruth Crawford Seeger addressed over a half century ago when she compiled three volumes of children's folk songs.

By the early 1940s, Crawford Seeger's interests in folk music, coupled with the responsibilities of motherhood, led her to delve into music education, beginning with weekly volunteer teaching at the Silver Spring Cooperative Nursery School and eventually leading to what biographer Judith Tick called a "career as a music consultant in early education." Drawing from songs compiled for the 1941 publication, *Our Singing Country*, and supplemented by additional sources, Crawford Seeger produced three collections of children's songs: *American Folk Songs for Children* (Turtleback, [1948] 1980), *Animal Folk Songs for Children* (Linnet, [1950] 1993), and *American Folk Songs for Christmas* (Linnet, [1953] 1999). Each volume included melody and text, simple piano arrangements, and short commentaries on the songs. Their usefulness has been significantly augmented by the release (and re-release) of three companion recordings performed by her four children and six grandchildren.

Ninety-four of the songs appearing in *American Folk Songs for Children* were recorded by Mike and Peggy Seeger in 1978 and reissued in 1996 (Rounder Records 11543/44) in a compilation of the same title. The songs were drawn almost exclusively from southern African American and Anglo American sources, many obtained through Crawford Seeger's me-

ticulous transcriptions of John and Alan Lomax's field recordings from the 1930s. Mike and Peggy's performances are engaging and exuberant, yet with an efficient feel. Most have similar tempi and textures, featuring unison or simple two-part harmony singing, either unaccompanied or with spare instrumentation. A number of songs, such as "Old Molly Hare," are in call and response form. Others, such as "Oh, John the Rabbit," have short repeated refrains, making it easy for anyone to join in.

It is refreshing to hear Mike and Peggy's singing—real voices of real people singing real music, rather than the slick, over-produced sound of many children's recordings. Both singers skillfully employ scoops, slides, and bent pitches rarely heard in contemporary recordings of children's music. The banjo, mandolin, autoharp, dulcimer, and fiddle accompaniments, while unfamiliar to many of today's children and classroom teachers, are tasteful and appropriate, often realizing Crawford's single bass line accompaniments. The accompanying CD booklet is filled with fascinating observations on text variation, tune adaptations, singing style, and the recording process itself. Unfortunately, little information about the songs is included. Readers are referred to the original book, which also lacks precise attribution of music tradition, cultural origins, or form/style (Anglo American ballad, African American work, and so forth).



Peggy and Mike Seeger  
Photo by Dave Gahr

*American Folk Songs for Christmas* (Rounder CD 0268, 1989) presents a slightly different approach to children's folk songs. Unlike the other recordings which are collections of songs without a thematic thread, the fifty-three pieces on this CD are grouped in three logical sections pertaining to Christmas: stars and the preparation; the birth; celebration and festivities. Here, Peggy's and Mike's voices are a decade richer. The addition of the voices of Penny Seeger and Crawford's grandchildren and more varied instrumental accompaniments including slide guitar, bowed psaltery, piano, mandolin, fiddle, English concertina, banjo, autoharp, harmonica and dulcimer add a depth and variety missing in the first recording. While the music is appropriate for all ages, this CD seems intended more for older children. Also, the songs on the Christmas recording have been transposed and adapted to suit the individual musicians, as described in Peggy Seeger's liner notes. The overall effect of this CD is that of simplicity and sincerity.

*Continued on page 14*

## Coltrane's Legacies (continued)

that are common in the world's sacred musics, and they were consciously incorporated into Coltrane's work.

However, McDonough is right that this music is not for prime-time consumption. His instincts show through in his selection of Coltrane's exquisite "In a Sentimental Mood" as better suited to represent Coltrane than what he calls the "pontifical, self-asserted pretenses of 'A Love Supreme.'" McDonough's conservative opinions about American music are not limited to Coltrane, but extend to all who questioned the European hegemony over the nation's musical language. This kind of critique does not value the quality of risk-taking exemplified in the music in part through explorations of new systems of sound and forms.

Cornel West suggests that the "professionalization of the scientific endeavor" results in the modern evasion of the dark side of humanity. The resultant idolatry of technique that West identifies in the public notion of the scientific has found its way into the realm of art. A school of jazz criticism has flourished since Coltrane's time, and especially in the last two decades, that values perfect execution over risk-taking, that idealizes the hip or the clever idea over and above the notion of feeling the spirit through art. Coltrane's example stands out as one of the more comprehensive rejoinders to this point of view.

Not all of those critical of Coltrane are so dismissive. Gerald Early paints a picture of Coltrane as a "brilliant," if "greatly flawed" artist. Nevertheless, he does not hear Coltrane as earnest, but rather as obsessed. His appreciation for Coltrane does not come from an aesthetic point of view, but chiefly from a technical one. Thus, he praises Coltrane for being "a very proficient player—arguably the best technician of the tenor and soprano saxophone in the history of jazz...."<sup>3</sup>

Despite whatever empathy Early, as a black intellectual, may have for Coltrane and his devotees, he has little sympathy and no admiration for them with respect to their stance on the relationship between artistic innovation and "therapeutic redemptive spirituality." He dismisses Coltrane's grasp of religion as "not profound" on the basis of his pantheistic poem printed on the cover jacket of *A Love Supreme*. He also finds his music to be misguided, if not insubstantial. Early simply does not hear in Coltrane's music what sympathetic listeners claim is there: terrifying beauty, redemptive spirituality, earnest goodness, and courage.

These perceived qualities in Coltrane's work are what fuel his legacy as a cultural prophet. While the writers of the Black Arts movement, like Amiri Baraka and Henry Dumas, saw Coltrane as a black avenger who murdered white forms musically, and white oppression symbolically, others understand him as the bearer of the message, the songs that uplift souls. As a religious expression, his message is, of course, decidedly non-sectarian, as the sacred rituals take place in

that most secular of places, the jazz club. In a sense, the ritualistic nature of his mature stages and the willingness to be explicitly spiritual in non-consecrated spaces evoke the sacred worldview of traditional societies rather than the compartmentalized modern world.

However, Coltrane's music and understanding are modern, and his spiritual message was non-religious in the sense of expressing no single dogma. He was ecumenical in his studies of both religion and music. He was known to travel with the sacred books of various world religions, and was an avid student of the world's folk musics. Indeed, his incorporation of Indian, South American, and African musical elements into jazz in some ways was a prototype of what we today call world music.

The St. John Coltrane African Orthodox Church, located in San Francisco for the past three decades, has taken Coltrane's example of courage and truth-seeking to formal principles in their version of Christianity. It began as a group of revolutionary black nationalists, and evolved into a group of spiritualists learning the Vedic scriptures and practices under the leadership of Coltrane's widow, Alice Coltrane. The church's liturgy is a mixture of Church of God in Christ practices—chants, songs, glossolalia, Bible-based, sanctified preaching—and the music of John Coltrane. In addition to holding Sunday school and other traditional church activities, the church offers food and clothing to poor people, and airs a daily broadcast of Coltrane's music over community radio station KPOO. The Pentecostal character of the worship service hearkens to the spirit-filled, emphatic voice of Coltrane's saxophone. Coltrane's music from 1957 onward is understood a sacred text and figures prominently in the church's liturgy.<sup>4</sup>

Because of certain events in Coltrane's personal life, and certainly the music he created through his personal muse, we know that Coltrane was well aware of what Cornel West refers to as the "dark side of modernity." This underside of modernity is, of course, experienced by all of humanity, but in a particular fashion by black folk in America. Blacks have paid a disproportionate cost for so much of the spoils of the nation without being fully included in the benefits and advantages of our aspirations towards democracy or modern enlightenment. African American culture therefore necessarily remains in tension with the nation's view of itself as innocent and as somehow being outside of the responsibility of history.

In a nation that is so identified with modernity, progress, and near invincibility, there is a push for perpetual celebration. West argues that often modernity's celebration gives way to an evasion of the fundamental problems of human existence, of "death, disease, dread, and despair." It is the confrontation with these ever present conditions, along with the acceptance of the challenges and techniques of moder-

nity, that has allowed the jazz/blues aesthetic to escape the sentimentality of much of American culture. Coltrane's music was ultimately a meditation upon the joy and beauty that is possible in human life through knowledge and understanding of reality and devotion to goodness. His deep awareness of death and disappointment tempered his celebration through music, and retained the character of struggle that is necessary to gain real understanding of the fundamental conditions of human existence.

Jazz has always been associated with such celebration and with the spirit of modernity. Albert Murray's insight into the blues (which for him includes jazz as a refined expression of the blues) also associates the music with a celebration. In this case, it is a celebration of victory in the heroic battle between the individual and the cosmos. Murray also emphasizes the more mundane impulses such as the desire to play or compete with oneself that informs the music as well. Coltrane's music embodied these principles in such a way as to stand against the idolatry of technique that has been the potential danger of jazz ever since it became primarily a listener's music rather than a dance music in the 1940s. Coltrane certainly embraced technical superiority and a particular methodical, scientific approach to his musical explorations. Yet, he always retained in his music a connection to black vernacular traditions, traditions in which the emotional and the spiritual were categories at least as important as the intellectual.

The revolutionary potential that is at the heart of the jazz/blues aesthetic is of course there; it is at least latent. However, Coltrane was not interested in revolution per se. He was methodical and comprehensive in his search and experiments, arriving at his mature voice after a long apprenticeship with several of the music's greatest practitioners. In a 1963 interview he remarked: "I'm kind of—actually, I'm groping, I'm trying to find my way. I can only try to work out of what I've been in.... Work my way forward, so I just try to set one stone upon another as I go."<sup>5</sup>

The quest for freedom was in Coltrane's music all along, particularly from 1957 onward. The revolutionary zeal that characterized the music of his later years was the fruit of an evolutionary process that had unfolded more or less continuously for at least a full decade. In part, it is this coupling of such a remarkable respect for tradition with the far-reaching implications of his most radical music that makes him such an authoritative figure. Wedding these two extremes brings to the fore the notion of freedom, as opposed to unrestrained license. The seemingly relentless exuberance that some criticize as self-indulgence was always tempered by the extraordinary levels of preparation as well as a willingness to experiment and take chances. Coltrane's reverence for truth required that technical restraints be placed upon his art at all times. These restraints, inasmuch as they reflect or seek truth, place the music in service of a higher good. It is intended to

render the artistic creation more true to life, and to give its impact greater strength.

At the heart of Coltrane's spirituality is the search for something he had never heard before, but believed he would recognize if he could only play it. Nevertheless, his goal proved unattainable. Whereas Early asks rhetorically whether the search for more freedom was a search for its own sake, Coltrane's search for change becomes the journey towards an asymptotic ideal. The American emphasis on improvisation and contingency is thus recognizable in Coltrane's artistry as a composer and performer. It is as if Coltrane would agree with Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* protagonist, Lauren Olamina, when she declares that "God is Change." If Coltrane's God is Change, it is not only St. John's revolutionary, apocalyptic change of an avenging God as might be easy to construe from such songs as "Om" or "Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," but also the God of Agape, as depicted in "Peace on Earth" or "Love."

Coltrane's quest for the truth engendered huge risks that he met with courage and humility as well as with mastery of his chosen idiom. When he advised aspiring musicians to improve themselves first as persons, he drew a connection between jazz and the moral life. Certainly, for many musicians and African Americanists, Coltrane as prophet is one legitimate way of understanding his ultimate significance. Any student of art can appreciate in Coltrane's music the effort to wed the Dionysian passion with Apollonian control and form. Perhaps his most lasting legacy will be the example of the spirit-filled life combined with the intellectual rigor that Nietzsche called for in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Coltrane's contribution to American civilization is clear, but his significance extends farther. His music represents a compelling example of how artists wrestle with the complexity and profundity of human life.

—Brooklyn College

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 1965 is the year that Coltrane recorded *Ascension*, easily his most challenging work from the standpoint of the listener. Most commentators mark this year, with the dissolution of the classic quartet, as the point where Coltrane joins the avant-garde. While most people consider the classic quartet to represent Coltrane at his best, there are those, like John McDonough, who imply that Coltrane's descent into decadence begins with the classic quartet.

<sup>2</sup> John McDonough, "Dissin' the Trane," *Down Beat* 65/6 (1998), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Early, "Ode To John Coltrane: A Jazz Musician's Influence on African American Culture," *The Antioch Review* 57/3 (Summer 1999), 372.

<sup>4</sup> Coltrane had a religious experience in 1957, claiming to have seen God. It is the year he quit his drug addiction and dedicated his life and music to God.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Benoit Quersin, in *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary*, ed. Carl Woideck (Schirmer, 1998), 120.

## New Music Notes (continued)

HC, "Music and Other Arts," "Musical Craft," "Theory and Music History," and it concludes with a discography.

The introduction by composer, writer, and performance artist Dick Higgins (who died in 1998 at age sixty), opens with a summary of Cowell's career. Its real strength, however, lies in the "Personal Aside" toward the end. There, Higgins tells of first encountering Cowell's music in 1956, when he discovered a recording of the Fifth Symphony conducted by Dean Dixon. It's a fascinating window on the mysterious process of dissemination. In the serendipitous way that life can unfold, within a couple of years Higgins was taking courses from John Cage at the New School for Social Research and studying composition with Cowell at Columbia. A preface by composer and critic Kyle Gann reveals even more about Cowell's impact on other composers.

The book should be approached for its charm and the wide-ranging possibilities for future research that leap off almost every page, rather than with high expectations for its annotations or documentation. Among the more enticing essays are "Playing Concerts in Moscow," an account of Cowell's trip to the USSR in 1931; selections from his important contributions to the *Musical Quarterly's* "Current Chronicle"; a personal reminiscence of Ruggles, first published as part of Lou Harrison's *About Carl Ruggles* of 1946; and the much-discussed but previously unpublished "The Nature of Melody" from the late 1930s. Over the summer, if you're lucky enough to indulge in leisurely stretches of reading on a screened porch, keep *Essential Cowell* by your side.

\* \* \*

While you're at it, pick up *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, edited by **Robert G. O'Meally** (The Modern Library, 2001; \$19.95). Over the last year, it's provided me with some exceptionally pleasurable reading. Ellison devotees already know his wise and musically informed musings about American culture in *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), which are reprinted here. Other gems are added in, like Ellison's 1955 essay for *High Fidelity* about the mid-twentieth-century experience of negotiating a life surrounded by sound, a life in which his apartment became "an audio booby trap." There are interviews with Ellison about music—one by Ron Welburn, another by a reporter from WKY-TV in Oklahoma City, and yet another with O'Meally (all from 1976)—as well as letters exchanged with the writer Albert Murray (mostly republished from *Trading Twelves* of 2000) and musical excerpts from *Juneteenth* and *Invisible Man*. O'Meally's introduction is fulfilling as well, with downright musicality to the rhythm of its language.

Like his near-contemporary Virgil Thomson, Ellison could barely open his mouth or pick up a pen without being thoroughly quotable. So I can't resist ending this column with an excerpt from Ellison, culled from the conclusion of his article for *High Fidelity*. By acknowledging the wide-ranging diversity so fundamental to American society, Ellison articulated the

very credo by which artists such as Anthony Davis and Henry Cowell have shaped their work:

Living with music today we find Mozart and Ellington, Kirsten Flagstad and Chippie Hill, William L. Dawson and Carl Orff all forming part of our regular fare. For all exalt life in rhythm and melody; all add to its significance. Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one's origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire. Art thou troubled? Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee. (14)

Truth is, we're not only ennobled by music but by minds like Ellison's.

---

## Our Singing Children (continued)

My favorite CD set is *Animal Folk Songs for Children and Other People* (Rounder CD 8023/24, 1992) performed by all four of Ruth Crawford Seeger's children, Mike, Peggy, Barbara, and Penny Seeger and six grandchildren: Neill, Calum, and Kitty MacColl; Sonya and Rufus Cohen; and Kim Seeger. Ranging from wistful to silly to jubilant, the songs lend themselves easily to educational objectives. Each song clearly exemplifies some concept appropriate for an elementary music class: simple contrapuntal accompaniment, chromatic pitch sets, cumulative song form, call and response form, pedal point, hand-clapping accompaniments, free tempo, blues tonality, open intervals, and so on. The songs are fun, singable and imaginative. Most encourage active participation through repetitive vocal refrains ("Little Rooster," "Song of the Doodlebug") and clapping ("Jane, Jane," "Jack, Can I Ride?"). For general classroom teachers, the songs readily lend themselves to lessons in language arts, such as narrative form, exaggeration, repetition, rhyming, personification, and anthropomorphism. The simple accompaniments contribute to the song without distracting from or competing with the vocal line—important for the musically inexperienced. As with the other CDs, liner notes on the cultural, geographic, and stylistic background of the individual songs would be helpful.

Ruth Crawford Seeger and her descendants have preserved this music joyfully, intending for it to be adapted and sung by others. In tandem with her three song collections, these recorded sets offer wonderful source materials for music and classroom teachers and for parents wishing to introduce children to the venerable tradition of group folksinging.

—Jane Palmquist  
Brooklyn College

## Reminiscing on Ruth (continued)

all the work—not as final solution, but a pretty darned good beginning. And I am sure that, whether they recognized it or not, it was worth it to them.

For if you really dig into something, all that energy comes back into you and makes you just slightly different than before. I believe that my brother was enormously influenced by Ruth's firm and loving identification with the unassailable recording and the depth and capacity of the sound of the music. She in turn was deeply affected by my brother's ever attentive focus on the uncharted and complex relations between aesthetics and life itself, especially the sophistication and depth of the transmitted message. To my mind, both Alan's cantometrics research and Ruth's three volumes of children's folk songs stand as later independent creations giving testimony to the impact of those two intellectuals on each other.<sup>2</sup>

We are all fortunate that Ruth and Alan met at a time in our history when to be called truly "radical" was a glowing compliment and at a time when there was a project worth their combined efforts. And as a woman I feel especially lucky to have had the opportunity during my impressionable years to watch a healthy, passionate, intelligent woman undertaking a ground-breaking job. Ruth Crawford Seeger set lofty standards for herself, fulfilled her personal and professional responsibilities impeccably, and left at least one seventeen-year-old girl a noble goal to reach for.

—Bess Lomax Hawes

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John A. and Alan Lomax, eds., *Our Singing Country* (Macmillan, 1941; repr. Dover, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (Transaction, 1968); Ruth Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, (Doubleday, 1948; repr. Turtleback, 1980), *Animal Folk Songs for Children* (Doubleday, 1950; repr. Linnet, 1993), *American Folk Songs for Christmas* (Doubleday, 1953; repr. Linnet, 1999).

## Listening to Beach (continued)

performance.<sup>4</sup> While much of Beach's music can be now heard, there are still some serious lacunae in the discography, especially of works for larger ensembles. This recent batch of recordings will, however, help us to build a multi-layered understanding of Beach's remarkable spectrum of artistic achievement.

—Liane Curtis

Women's Studies Research Center  
Brandeis University

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eskin's all-Beach recordings include a wide range of Beach's piano music, including the *Prelude and Fugue*, op. 81 (Koch 3-7254-2HI, [1975] 1995), *Les Rêves de Colombine* and *Variations on Balkan Themes* (North-eastern NR 22, 1987), and a number of Beach's character pieces, songs, and shorter piano works.

<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Fried Block, *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian: The Life and Work of an American Composer, 1867-1944* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Koch International Classics 3-7001-2, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Symphony in E minor* (Chandos Records CHAN 8958, 1991); *Cabildo* (Delos DE 3170, 1995).

## Transcribing the Folk (continued)

gether, although this is due in part to the Lomaxes' favoring of southern sources for their material with its resultant display of acculturated styles. Needless to say, the concept of "American" excluded non-English-language material, with the exception of a handful of Louisiana French examples. (Inexplicably, the Lomaxes also included one Mexican and several Bahaman examples.)

Crawford Seeger might have been able to recognize more of American folk song's diversity if she had done fieldwork. Her essay, for example, would be a very useful text for ethnomusicology graduate seminars in transcription or American folk music. Yet lacking field experience, she willingly made generalizations about style and processes of transmission, learning, and composition. For example, her statement that tempo is usually constant from beginning to end of a performance (p. 33) contradicts the readily observable acceleration in a great deal of African American performance.

We should admire Crawford Seeger's work, both as a product of its time and for what it can teach us now. But we should not be seduced by the belief that "the ears of a composer" (p. xxii) are necessarily the ones best suited to hear the character of American folk song or to transform oral performance into written notation. Composers bring certain skills to the task, and their contributions are to be welcomed, but they can also bring the baggage of their art music training and background. What we all need to strive to acquire are the ears of a musically sensitive member of the folk community along with the necessary symbols to represent the music in print. Ruth Crawford Seeger appears to have been striving for such "ears," as she continued to immerse herself (and her family) in folk song and its performance in her subsequent career.

—David Evans  
University of Memphis

## ISAM Matters (continued)

premiere Charles Strouse's *Concerto America* with Keith Lockhart and the Boston Pops Orchestra on 30 June and 2 July 2002.

We invite you to join us for a conference on the legendary folklorist and world music scholar **Alan Lomax**, to be held in April 2003 at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. The conference is supported by a grant from the Baisley Powell Elebash Endowment. For more information on this and other upcoming ISAM events, please call our office or visit our website.

\*\*\*

This will be my last *ISAM Matters* column until Fall 2003. I received fellowships from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities to work on a book about popular music and the politics of race. **Ray Allen** will serve as acting director and *Newsletter* editor during my leave. See you next year!

—Ellie M. Hisama



*Mike, Pete, and Peggy Seeger  
Seeger Family Tribute Concert  
CUNY Graduate Center, October 2001  
Photo by Wayne Geist*

## Inside this issue:

**Ruth Crawford Seeger**

**Jelly Roll Morton**

**Anthony Davis**

**Amy Beach**

Enclosed is my contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_.  
Suggested donation: \$25. Please make payable to:  
Brooklyn College Member Organization (memo ISAM)  
*All contributions are tax-deductible.*

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address** \_\_\_\_\_

**City, State, Zip** \_\_\_\_\_

*f*

Are you among the 4,000 scholars,  
composers, and performers passionate  
about American music who receive the  
*ISAM Newsletter* twice a year and free  
of charge?

*Please become a voluntary subscriber.  
Your help is essential  
to continue issuing this publication.*

**Brooklyn College**  
**Institute for Studies in American Music**  
Conservatory of Music  
2900 Bedford Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11210

Address Correction Requested

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
Brooklyn, NY  
Permit No. 671