

## Conclusion

### *Last Days and Times: Islam and Jazz in the Post-Coltrane Era*

The main goal of this book has been to examine the historical interplay between jazz, African American Islam, and black internationalism during what I have termed “the golden age of African American Islam and jazz” from the 1940s to the 1970s. Drawing on the musical and political creativity of black musicians and their fans in swing, bebop, hard bop, and free jazz, we have traced their Islamic spirituality, alternative masculinities and femininities, anti-racist consciousness, and black Atlantic cool expressiveness in cities including Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. The overarching argument has been that African American Islam and jazz shared intersecting goals and values of black affirmation, liberation, and self-determination and that the conversion of jazz musicians to Islam was central to the ascendancy of the religion from World War II to the beginning of the Black Power movement. Black Muslims and jazz musicians expressed these social justice values by developing a sense of African American religious internationalism—envisioning themselves in the context of a global black religious consciousness as part of the worldwide freedom struggles of blacks in the African diaspora and Africa, and sometimes in solidarity with the anticolonial struggles and spirituality of people of color who were not black.

Unlike many other studies, this book has not focused solely on the Nation of Islam; the incorporation of the interactions of other strands of Islam with jazz and politics during this time period is significant. This book has made the case that the involvement of jazz men and women with the Muslim religion contributed to the success of the Nation of Islam, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, and the African American Sunni communities. These artists composed and played some of the greatest music in the twentieth century, music that was influenced by their religious experience and interactions in a variety of American Islamic communities.



As we saw at the outset, this book has been motivated by several research questions. What is the historical relationship of jazz to Islam and African American religious internationalism in the lives of black jazz musicians? How does the identification of important jazz figures with African American religious internationalism and black masculinities in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia help us to document the golden age of African American Islam and jazz? How are their performances of music and religion connected to resistance in the internationalist black Christian and black Islamic communities and to intercultural perspectives about Africa, the African diaspora, and African American freedom? What musical, religious, and political factors influenced the diasporic constructions of blackness and the transformations of racial identity representations in the golden age of African American Islam and jazz? What are the identity claims surrounding Islamic jazz musicians' black Atlantic legacies in the late 1960s and early 1970s?

Given the history we have just traced, we can address these questions with the following answers. Many of the artists in this book found Islam useful in reconstructing gender relations with new forms of black masculinities and femininities that brought dignity and creativity to their musical and religious lives. We have seen how the relationship of swing, bebop, hard bop, and free jazz to Islam and African American religious internationalism shaped the spirituality, black Atlantic cool, and political ideas of famous black jazz musicians and their fans in the northeastern cities during the post-World War II period and beyond. Moreover, the jazz artists who performed in the Muslim world and enriched their international perspectives by participating in the US State Department's jazz tours during the Cold War and continuing to the civil rights and Black Power movements brought their intercultural perspectives about Africa, the African diaspora, and African American freedom to musicians and jazz fans in the Third World. A myriad of black jazz musicians who became Muslim went on to play new Middle Eastern and African sounds and instruments and also embraced Black Power identities that influenced the diasporic constructions of blackness and the transformation of racial identity representations in the golden age of African American Islam and jazz. Many of the identity claims and controversies surrounding Islam, jazz, and black Atlantic religious and musical legacies in the late 1960s and 1970s are related to John Coltrane's spirituality and creativity in particular.



The saxophonist John Coltrane led the way for those African American musicians who infused hard bop and free jazz with Islamic sensibilities and musical and religious forms from Asia and Africa in the 1960s. His sacred music and Islamic poetry in *A Love Supreme* spoke to listeners' souls. Coltrane created a revolution in spirituality and sound that resonated with the Third World aesthetic of the Black Arts movement and the freedom quests of African American Muslims and Christians. Although he did not convert to Islam, the religion's influence on him was nonetheless clear in his exploration of Indian, African, and Sufi musical themes, his marriage to a Muslim woman, his Philadelphia spiritual awakening that led him to kick drug addiction, his numerous collaborations with Muslim musicians, and his political attraction to Malcolm X's ideas. *A Love Supreme* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* appeared during the same period, helping to showcase the links between jazz and Islam.

The golden age of African American Islam and jazz culminated in the 1970s, during the aftermath of Coltrane's and Malcolm X's deaths. Coltrane's tragic demise in 1967 meant that the golden age of jazz had lost its major innovator who was on a free jazz "path toward deeper spiritual truth, universality, and internationalism."<sup>1</sup> Even *Muhammad Speaks* acknowledged the climax of an important musical period when he passed: "The 'Trane' that died was to the Black and the Wise World a greater treasure than all . . . the H-Bombs and Polaris Missiles so treasured by the white world. . . . 'Trane' moved more souls than their Beethovens or Bachs or Wagners. . . . His phenomenal performances opened special spheres for untold millions in this world and in the world to come."<sup>2</sup>

Although new African American Sunni Muslim communities including Darul Islam, Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, Islamic Party of North America, and Imam Warith Deen Mohammed's World Community of Al-Islam in the West were established after Malcolm X's assassination, the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act brought more than a million Muslim immigrants to the United States in the 1970s, and these new "foreign-born Muslims" began to change the racial, ethnic, and leadership dynamics of American Islam.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, "there would be over a thousand Muslim American mosques and hundreds of Islamic parochial schools," yet many of these religious institutions were established outside African American communities.<sup>4</sup> Religious studies scholar Edward E. Curtis IV sums up the impact of these changes on jazz: "Malcolm X's



radical vision of global black liberation,” which had inspired the musical and spiritual creativity of Coltrane and other hard bop and free jazz musicians, “was not adopted by the [new] Muslim American majority.”<sup>5</sup>

During the post-Coltrane era, the links between Islam and jazz were explored in a number of albums, including by Alice Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders. In the liner notes of *A Monastic Trio* (Impulse!, 1968), which was pianist and harpist Alice Coltrane’s first album after her husband’s death, she explained, “I hope to use some of the work thought of by John, with recordings, concerts, and whatever community work, but there is a higher culminating idea in the mind of John, which I hope will become a reality during my lifetime.”<sup>6</sup> Musicians from Trane’s last quintet, like tenor saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, bassist Jimmy Garrison, and drummer Rashied Ali, played on the LP. Alice also paid tribute to John’s musical and spiritual legacy in *Cosmic Music* (Coltrane Records, 1968, and Impulse!, 1969) and *Universal Consciousness* (Impulse!, 1971). Although she exemplified a “feminist politics of interdependence,” by acknowledging the positive impact of her family and her husband on her spirituality and music, she also went on to follow a new religious path in Hinduism with Swami Satchidananda, which involved traveling to India in 1970, establishing Vedantic centers in California in the 1970s, becoming a Hindu swami, and working as spiritual director for her own Sai Anantam Ashram in Agoura Hills, California, from the 1980s to 2007.<sup>7</sup> Although Alice Coltrane’s music during this period of her life reflected her devotion to Hindu spirituality, her later album *Translinear Light* (Verve Music, 2004) featured her son, Ravi Coltrane, playing the tenor saxophone on “Crescent,” one of his father’s compositions with an Islamic theme.

Saxophonist Pharoah Sanders led the way in spiritual jazz in the 1970s with a number of albums on the Impulse! label: *Karma* (1969), *Jewels of Thought* (1969), *Summun Bukmun Umyun* (1970), *Thembi* (1971), *Black Unity* (1971), *Live at the East* (1972), *Village of the Pharoahs* (1973), and *Elevation* (1974). He explored Sufism and recorded *The Trance of Seven Colors* (Island Records, 1994) with Maleem Mahmoud Ghania, a Gnawa musician in Morocco. According to the album’s liner notes,

The Gnawa are the descendants of the black African Fulani, Peul and Bambara of Southern Mali and Guinee who originally came to Morocco as slaves beginning in the 16th century. . . . The central ritual of the Gnawa is the trance



music ceremony—with the purpose of healing or purification of the participants—an amalgam that incorporates both the Muslim panoply of saints and the original spirit system of their West African ancestors. The language used in the Moroccan ceremonies alternates between Arabic and Bambara.<sup>8</sup>

This volume has demonstrated that Islam played a more significant role in the lives of urban black people than was previously known, and that many black musicians converted to Islam or were influenced by the religion after World War II. The Muslim religion shaped the spirituality, creativity, political values, social identities, and black masculinities and femininities embraced by jazz musicians in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and this book has offered a rich social history of black life in those cities from the 1940s to the 1960s. We have seen how southern migrants and Caribbean immigrants strategically positioned themselves in the northeastern cities and influenced resistance struggles, style, black Atlantic cool, and the emergence of bebop music in the jazz world. This book has demonstrated the dynamic role played by internationalism among the mid-twentieth-century jazz musicians who critiqued white supremacy in the United States and created the political synergy between African American liberation movements, anticolonialism in the Third World, and the Cold War, a synergy that contributed to Islam's influence, visibility, and tone in black America.

By the late 1970s, a new generation of black fans celebrated the music of many of the artists discussed in this book. They attended jazz concerts in clubs, lofts, and college and university campuses in American cities; C. O. Simpkins published the first biography of John Coltrane in 1975. However, the market as well as “the audience for jazz . . . shrunk in the United States” during the post-Coltrane era, and hip hop, a new postindustrial musical form that emerged among black youth in New York City, began to fill the void with its own new sounds of rap, social protest, and Islamic messages.<sup>9</sup> Across black America, people acknowledged that the rap music of many of the early Islamic hip hop artists such as Poor Righteous Teachers, Mos Def, A Tribe Called Quest, Ice Cube, and Lupe Fiasco influenced the involvement of black youth with the Muslim religion in the twenty-first century.

Black youth in hip hop established countercultural crews including MCs (rappers), DJs (disc jockeys), graffiti artists, and break dancers whose artistic creativity, poetry, call-and-response forms, improvisation, dress,



and style challenged and documented racial profiling, police brutality, drug addiction, gender relations, and the destruction of support systems, jobs, and affordable housing in African American urban communities during the Reagan-Bush era.<sup>10</sup> The rise of this powerful new black musical tradition and its global impact on popular culture intersected with the establishment of an American prison-industrial complex that went on to incarcerate almost one-third of young black men in the late twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> In this context, “rap music became the primary medium for . . . protesting the hardness of life for black youth in the hood.”<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, Islam became more popular among African Americans, especially young black men, who were noteworthy for their conversion to the religion in prison, on college and university campuses, and in the hip hop community in the 1990s. *The Source: The Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture & Politics* even predicted that if the trend continued “particularly in urban settings, the majority of young African American males will be Muslim” sometime during the first fifty years of the twenty-first century.<sup>13</sup> The conversion experiences of hip hop men and women to Islam had a lot to do with the rise of the Nation of Islam under Louis Farrakhan’s leadership, the Million Man March in 1995, and the revival of Malcolm X’s image in African American popular culture after Denzel Washington’s Academy Award-nominated portrayal of the Muslim minister in Spike Lee’s 1992 film *Malcolm X*.

The reworking of Malcolm’s image took several forms in hip hop. Some black youth were attracted to his zoot suit and Nation of Islam identities and wore the hats and t-shirts that commodified his X and visual form. However, many MCs including Mos Def (Yasiin Bey) were inspired by Malcolm X’s hajj and converted to Sunni Islam. Mos Def also made the pilgrimage to Mecca and dedicated his CD *Black on Both Sides* to the Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton Jr.<sup>14</sup> He has led the way among the hip hop artists who have constructed religious, political, and musical identities that share connections between African American Islam, black radicalism, and the Third World.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, like many of the jazz artists in this book, Islam among hip hop musicians draws on the legacy of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement and serves as the basis for constructing new masculinities and femininities that speak profoundly to the themes of spirituality, cool dignity, and internationalism in the black struggles for social justice.