

Music Talk:
An Oral
History of
Alice
Coltrane

July 21, 2024
2-3:30 pm
Edlis Neeson Theater

Museum of
Contemporary Art
Chicago



A Note from the Curator

The music is within your heart, your soul, your spirit, and this is all I did when I sat at piano. I just go within.
—Alice Coltrane¹

These are the words of pianist, composer, harpist, and spiritual teacher Alice Coltrane, drawn from a 2004 interview she gave upon the release of her final album, *Translinear Light*. At times, the audio cuts out, and the transcript reads “unintelligible.” Yet I don’t need to hear the missing words to understand what she’s saying; immense wisdom echoes in these quiet moments, just as it echoes in her music. Though not all of us had the great luck to meet Alice or watch her perform, events like today’s underscore the power of those who knew Alice—and the artists she continues to influence—to amplify her artistic legacy. Performance is an ephemeral art, yet it can resound across generations.

I am eternally grateful to Alice’s living legacy—her children—for ensuring her music, life, and spirit are remembered through interviews, recordings, and events such as this one. Like her mother, Michelle Coltrane is a multi-hyphenate extraordinaire: a vocalist and composer, she also leads the John and Alice Coltrane Home, the historic landmark and nonprofit dedicated to preserving the Coltrane family home in Dix Hills, New York, where *A Love Supreme* was composed in 1964. Perhaps influenced by their mother’s stewardship of John Coltrane’s musical catalogue after his death, Michelle and her siblings similarly care for their mother’s creative legacy and have dubbed 2024 “The Year of Alice Coltrane,” organizing events across the US.

Given Alice’s roots in the Midwest and the history of jazz in Chicago, there was no doubt that this year of celebration should include our city. Indeed, at the MCA alone, Alice’s musical legacy lives on in recent performances by artists and composers such as Meshell Ndegeocello, Angel Bat Dawid, and Alexis Lombre. In 2023 the MCA acquired multimedia artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith’s installation *SPACE STATION: A Rock in a River* (2022), which draws on Alice’s work and features the related film *Sojourner* (2018). Set to Alice’s music, *Sojourner* visits a series of historic sites, including the ashram Alice founded outside of Los Angeles in 1983, to craft an alternative and utopian Black history.



Harpist Brandee Younger is committed to honoring the legacy of Black women musicians such as Alice through her own research, performance, and curatorial work. Ravi Coltrane invited Brandee to perform at Alice’s memorial in 2007, and she has since rerecorded many of Alice’s songs. Reflecting on Alice’s influence—as well as that of pioneering Black harpist Dorothy Ashby, to whom Brandee’s album *Brand New Life* (2023) is a homage—she says:

Growing up, playing such a rare instrument, it is not often that a young African American woman sees the grown-up version of themselves. I didn’t realize just how much of an impact they both had on me at the time, but merely learning that they existed gave me validation and confidence to know that, ‘Yes, I can play this instrument and also walk the path less traveled.’ Representation is MAJOR. I haven’t found it a challenge to establish my own artistic identity because I still feel that their contribution is under-celebrated. You really won’t find me playing a concert where I don’t reference them in some form or fashion, whether by playing their music or my own, giving them a nod.²

As a curator of performance, I often reflect on the paradoxical desire to find ways to capture and preserve rare, magical moments on stage while allowing the mystery of ephemeral art to unfold fleetingly in its own time and place. Writing on performance and memory, choreographer Emily Johnson (Yup’ik) contends that there is uncapturable knowledge held within our bodies:

Our bodies are EVERYTHING. They hold EVERYTHING and they are also the EVERYTHING, possible. Our bodies hold the stories from our lives as well as the stories from our ancestors. Our bodies remember. . . . Can this archive of living knowledge, body memory, and experience be of use? . . . Would it lead to an understanding beyond that which I can grasp?³

I think of these words when I listen to Brandee perform Alice’s 1970 song “Turiya and Ramakrishna,” which Brandee rearranged for harp from the original piano. I am astounded by Alice’s genius and how Brandee brings it into the present through her own body and instrument. In Michelle’s recollections of her mother and Brandee’s reincarnation of her songs, the magic of Alice Coltrane is alive, here, today.

—Laura Paige Kyber
Assistant Curator of Performance

¹ Alice Coltrane, interview by Jimi Izrael, *Alice Coltrane, Wife of John, Left Her Own Mark*, *NPR News*, January 16, 2007. <https://www.npr.org/2007/01/16/6868236/alice-coltrane-wife-of-john-left-her-own-mark>.

² “Five Questions with Brandee Younger,” *Textura*, June 2019. https://www.textura.org/archives/interviews/fivequestions_younger.htm

³ Emily Johnson, “The Stories in Our Bodies,” in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, eds. Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 113.

Left: Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner* (still), 2018. Single-channel video (color, sound); 22 minutes, 41 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey.

This program is organized by Laura Paige Kyber, Assistant Curator of Performance, in partnership with the John and Alice Coltrane Home.

About the John and Alice Coltrane Home

Tucked away in the residential neighborhood of Dix Hills, New York, this two-story, brick and wood-frame home was where John and Alice Coltrane chose to put down roots and raise their family from 1964 to 1973. John and Alice wrote and recorded some of their most enduring works in this peaceful suburban setting. The Coltrane Home seeks to inspire and educate by providing a tangible link to a period of deep creativity and transformation in the lives of two great African American artists: John and Alice Coltrane. To learn more, visit: thecoltranehome.org

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The MCA is a proud member of the Museums in the Park and receives major support from the Chicago Park District.

About the Artists

For more information about the program, including details about the artists and their work, please scan:



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CONTEMPORARY ART
CHICAGO

THE
JOHN & ALICE
COLTRANE
HOME



Michelle Coltrane.
Photo courtesy of the artist.



Brandee Younger.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

Cover: Alice Coltrane. Photo: Chuck Stewart,
courtesy of the John and Alice Coltrane Home.