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Driving that Trane: Hegel and How John Coltrane Invited the Warlocks to Become the Grateful Dead

EDUARDO DUARTE

John Coltrane, the African-American virtuoso jazz horn player and composer, had a decisive influence on the musical identity of the Grateful Dead. Band publicist and historian Dennis McNally describes Coltrane as “the musical hero” of the Dead and suggests that Coltrane’s audacious improvisational performances with his quartet were the catalyst that led the band then known as the Warlocks to evolve into the Grateful Dead (McNally 2002, 29; 91). This paper explores McNally’s contention that it was Coltrane who “taught” the Warlocks how to improvise, and, as a result, led them to discover the art of extended jamming that would be a signature aspect of the Grateful Dead’s legendary thirty years of live performances.

But what was it that Coltrane “taught” them? Put otherwise, in what sense did Coltrane “invite” the Warlocks to become the Grateful Dead? Using the philosophical framework of the Hegelian *Zeitgeist* theory of cultural history, a hermeneutics of the Grateful Dead’s cultural education suggests that the early Dead were not only students of Coltrane’s music, but were captured by the very same spirit of the cultural era that inspired Coltrane and others to create Free Jazz.¹ While scholars have usefully explored the Dead and their work in the light of numerous philosophers, Hegel’s work offers a way of connecting the band’s project to the music of John Coltrane in a uniquely revealing way.² This essay offers a first reading of how Coltrane’s influence on the young Warlocks set them on a path of exploration that would define their work for the rest of the Dead’s career.

I.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* just a few months after Jerry Garcia's passing, Bob Weir reflected on the Shanachie Records project *The Music Never Stopped: Roots of the Grateful Dead*, commenting that "I think it's real important that people understand where the music comes from. If you can see where the music comes from, you can also see the future. It gives you a trajectory" (Rense 1995). The Dead modeled that belief—which was also a gentle admonition or instruction to listeners—by inviting guests like Ornette Coleman, Branford Marsalis, Etta James, Baba Oluntunji, Hamza El Din or Flora Plurim to join the band on stage. The presence of those musicians was proof of the Dead's ecumenical musical spirit, an acknowledgement of their debt to the blues and jazz, as well as an expression of their global music aspirations.

Unfortunately, the figure who may have had the most important impact on the Grateful Dead never had the opportunity to join the band on stage. One member of the band, Phil Lesh, had the opportunity to meet Coltrane after he performed a gig in San Francisco, but like his chance encounter with Charles Mingus in New York's Central Park, Lesh was unable—intimidated, by his account—to engage him in conversation (McNally 2002, 91). Yet his music spoke volumes: After hearing Coltrane's "sheets of sound" and listening to recordings of his quartet perform a single song for seventy-five minutes, the band that would become the Grateful Dead discovered the musical identity that would define it for the next three decades. The music and spirit of John Coltrane was a major catalyst in the birth of the Grateful Dead.

"Hero" has many synonyms: champion, person of courage, lionheart, victor, warrior, exemplar, paragon, paladin, and conqueror, among others. Any of these could stand in for "hero" when we read Dennis McNally's statement that John Coltrane was "the musical hero" of the Grateful Dead. McNally's account of Coltrane's influence is concise, a mere two paragraphs in his 684-page history, but he makes clear that impact, calling Coltrane "the man who taught them how to improvise," and noting that for both Garcia and Lesh, what Coltrane offered was nothing less than "an essential vision of how to play, and from the beginning they taught Trane's lessons to their bandmates" (2002, 91). Lesh

introduced Kreutzmann to the work of Coltrane's great drummer, Elvin Jones, and the younger drummer's world expanded dramatically. Most of all, Coltrane's band demonstrated the power of a collective improvisational approach, with every musician improvising, not just the soloist. No wonder McNally concludes that "No rock band in that era or after would take the lessons of John Coltrane more to the soul of their playing than the Warlocks" (2002, 92).

McNally's account is supported by Lesh, who describes Coltrane's influence in his memoir *Searching for the Sound* (2005). There Lesh reminds us that he was already a student of the extended improvisational performances of Coltrane's classic quartet, citing the famous "possibly apocryphal" exchange between Miles and Trane, when Miles asked, "How come you play so long?" Trane replied, "Takes that long to get it all in" (Lesh 2005, 58n). It was during a fall 1965 multi-week engagement at a bar called the In Room that the Warlocks "continued our explorations in scaling up our material in order to, to paraphrase Coltrane, 'get it all in.' We started to feel like a band, as opposed to a collection of individuals, as if we were onto something unique, something that hadn't existed previously in music" (Lesh 2005, 58). That uniqueness came from Coltrane: "those of us who weren't soloing began to vary and differentiate our 'background' material, almost as if we were also soloists, in a manner similar to jazz musicians" (2005, 59). After a rehearsal of "Viola Lee Blues" Lesh saw the future, telling his bandmates, "Man—this could be *art!*" And Coltrane was the model:

I urged the other band members to listen closely to the music of John Coltrane, especially his classic quartet, in which the band would take fairly simple structures (the show tune 'My Favorite Things,' for example) and extend them far beyond their original lengths with fantastical variations, frequently based on only one chord. (Lesh 2005, 59)

Clearly, Coltrane was the musical hero of the nascent Grateful Dead, the pathbreaking artist and exemplar who showed them a new, audacious way to play music as a collective group of improvisers. But Coltrane's influence was more far-reaching than just providing a model of how to improvise; he also invited them to do so. How so?

II.

In his introductory essay to *John Coltrane and Black America's Quest for Freedom*, Leonard Brown identifies the trope of "invitation" to describe the way the musical culture of spirituals, blues, and jazz was transmitted from one generation to the next, one musician at a time. After musicians were deemed worthy, they were "invited" to learn from more established elders (2010, 3–10). And the tragic character of Levee in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* teaches us that talent alone did not guarantee an invitation. Commitment to craft and having a trustworthy character were essential. Once Coltrane's talent was recognized, he was "invited" into the inner sanctum of jazz, first by Miles Davis and then by Thelonious Monk.

The groundbreaking improvisational style that Coltrane and his quartet developed emerged from and thus extended a Black American tradition that, as Brown puts it, "collectively conceptualized and created the performance and stylistic approaches based on black cultural aesthetics ... Consequently, the musicians had the responsibility of determining to whom, when, and where this knowledge would be passed" (Brown 2010, 4). Given this, was the Dead's embrace of Coltrane's improvisational approach to music better seen as an instance of cultural appropriation? Had they received an "invitation"?

While there may be merit to that critique, it is unlikely that Coltrane would have supported it. Indeed, because Coltrane was both a humanist and a cosmopolitan, as well as a deeply spiritual man, he himself found inspiration in a wide range of music, and departed from the monasticism implied in the cultural pedagogy of "invitation." Coltrane was radically inclusive and inquisitive, and his music was an expression of those fundamental character traits. He was an avid listener of sitar greats Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan, and he explored the polyrhythms of African drumming and the harmonics of the Chinese flute. Music, for Coltrane, was the ultimate form of human expression, and in order to probe the depths of the human experience one had to explore all forms of music. And he did. In short, it is highly unlikely that Coltrane would have objected to the Grateful Dead taking up his approach to music. On the contrary,

he would have encouraged them to do so, while prodding them to make it their own. And they did.

At first glance, McNally's claim is startling: "No rock band in that era or after would take the lessons of John Coltrane more to the soul of their playing than the Warlocks." Yet his statement is evocative in large part because it indicates a path of analysis and interpretation that entails speculation on what we might call the cultural education of the nascent Grateful Dead. McNally's comment invites a hermeneutics of the band's musical identity, an attempt to understand how the *soul* of the Grateful Dead came into being, as it were. That kind of analysis does not necessarily entail listening for moments in the band's early days when they might be trying to "sound" like Coltrane. There are commentators who have attempted to identify moments when the early Dead were quoting or indexing Coltrane (Light Into Ashes 2011), but indexing or quoting does not itself disclose the kind of cultural education that forms the soul or spirit of an artist or artist collective. Rather, it expresses the playfulness of improvisation, and identifying those moments within the Dead's jams is one of the many aesthetic pleasures of listening carefully to a recording of a show.

"Hearing" Coltrane in the Warlocks and early Dead only confirms what we learned from Lesh: they studied Coltrane's *Africa Brass* and were familiar with his live recordings, such as the extended performances of "My Favorite Things" Lesh cites. Moreover, in interviews, Garcia identified Coltrane's approach to soloing as a primary inspiration for his own solos, but was quick to qualify that statement by insisting he "was not copying him" (Gans 2021). Thus, a hermeneutics of the Grateful Dead's cultural education as an improvisational musical collective demands a macro analysis, a method of interpretation that does not get lost in the granular moments of their live performances.

Hegelian *Zeitgeist* theory offers such a method (Hegel 2004; 2012). It suggests that the early Dead were not only students of Coltrane's music, but were captured by the very same spirit of the cultural era that inspired Coltrane, along with Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, to initiate Free Jazz. While it did not capture all musicians, either in jazz or other genres, Free Jazz—or the New Thing, as it was first described—slowly but surely

captured the hearts and minds of select musicians and audiences around the world, who appreciated the cultural revolution that was being initiated by this so-called “anti-jazz,” as it was dismissively labelled by jazz critic Leonard Feather (DeMichael 1962). As an expression of a cultural Zeitgeist, Free Jazz was both a progenitor of the emerging counterculture, as well as an extension of Modernism’s deconstruction of traditional forms of literature, painting, and music. In this sense, the Grateful Dead emerged from the same spirit of the times that first opened up the musical possibilities of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and John Coltrane. In a sense, these young rock musicians were next in line to be captured by the zeitgeist.

A correlating line of analysis and interpretation that supports this view is the tropological approach advanced by Herman Gray in his essay “John Coltrane and the Practice of Freedom” (2010). Gray’s approach disaggregates the cultural trope “Trane” from the historical musician John William Coltrane, analyzing how the symbol of “Trane” is a socio-cultural construction, a figure that signifies music and the quest for human liberation and collective consciousness:

In other words, through the image of and stories we tell about [Coltrane] and such concepts as freedom, politics, authenticity, or sincerity we attribute to him, we continue to produce ‘Trane’... and in the process we make him an emblem (and a suitable one for sure). (Gray 2010, 35)

Gray’s tropological approach to “Trane” is, of course, revealed first and foremost by Coltrane, who fashioned himself as a philosopher-musician. Coltrane cultivated the persona of “Trane” on and off the stage. Mindfulness is perhaps the best way to describe the manner through which he approached his music making, creating his art as an extension of a profound spiritual journey he had undertaken. In “A Statement of Musical Purpose,” Coltrane wrote:

We should pray for and seek knowledge which would enable us to portray and project the things we love in music, in a way that might, wholly or in some part, be appreciated as having been conceived and composed or performed and presented with dedication and in positive taste. (Coltrane 2010, 1)

In the April 1962 *Down Beat* magazine interview he explained, “It’s more than beauty that I feel in music—that I think musicians feel in music. What we know we feel, we’d like to convey to the listener. We hope that this can be shared by all. I think, basically, that’s about what it is we’re trying to do.” He continues:

But, overall, I think the main thing a musician would like to do is to give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things he knows of and senses in the universe. That’s what music is to me—it’s just another way of saying this is a big beautiful universe we live in, that’s been given to us, and here’s an example of just how magnificent and encompassing it is. That’s what I would like to do. I think that’s one of the greatest things you can do in life, and we all try to do it in some way. The musician’s is through music. (DeMicheal 1962)

We can hear echoes of that existential wisdom in a conversation Garcia had with McNally, ruminating on the nature of community. “We’re all in this together, you know,” Garcia mused. “Let’s everybody have all their dreams fulfilled. You know what I mean? It’s like if we have a vehicle to dreams, let’s knock ’em down. You know what I mean? This life is what we can do with it, I guess. I mean, it seems to be encouraging us to do that” (McNally 2015, 72).

With the signifier “It” as an expression of Life, Garcia is reminding us that the *Zeitgeist* theory is properly deployed when we understand cultural history as the concrete realization of a universal power or force moving “behind our backs.” This is the thrust of Hegel’s metaphysics of history: Absolute spirit in the form of *Leben* (life) has an intentional movement, a plan and purpose that moves through our actions, and, in effect, moves us. “It” does indeed seem to be encouraging us. But it is important to remember that Hegelian thinking is always dialectical, and here that means we must understand that between Spirit and the artist there exists a collaborative, existential relationship. We are both made by and make history, feeling and thinking our world into being while at the same time feeling and thinking it forming us. We are both constructing and being constructed by culture.

Art made individually or as a collective emerges from an attunement with the movement of Spirit. It is an attunement that is one part conscious

decision and will to create—the realization and manifestation of what Coltrane calls the “creative urge”—and at the same time an unconscious propulsion: art as the manifestation of the universal will to be, the historical unfolding of Spirit: Life. Hegel called this behind-our-backs propulsion the “ruse of reason” because it befuddled philosophers who could not fathom that they were not entirely in control of their actions. Not so artists, especially the musicians emerging from the Free Jazz zeitgeist. For those, like Coltrane and Garcia, being moved by the absolute spirit of life was, in effect, liberating as opposed to debilitating. Those artists understood intuitively what modernist existential philosopher Martin Heidegger called *Gelassenheit*: the necessity of letting go and letting be; the willing of non-willing in order to find oneself in the location of poetic possibility where improvisational music unfolds (Heidegger 1966; 1968).

Of course, this is no easy task, and artists struggle with letting go and letting be. For some, like Coltrane, the struggle is embodied in the form of a stern, iron-fisted bandleader like Miles Davis, who suffered no fools and had no patience for Coltrane’s creative urge to play extended solos. For others, like Garcia, the struggle is internal. As he told McNally:

I can be a terrible puritan. It’s one of the things I constantly have to bust in myself ... I have a desire for too much structure, too much purity, or something. I err on that side of things. I recognize it as a weakness, really. I don’t like that about myself ... the Grateful Dead for me has been a tremendous mind-expanding experience, because it has ways of doing the things that I like to do that aren’t the way I like to do them ... it’s taught me all these other possibilities. (McNally 2015, 145–146)

The Dead’s discovery of those possibilities, and the idea that such possibilities even existed—that was what Coltrane invited them to experience, and what he taught them by his heroic example. Beyond his powerful and immediate musical influence, Coltrane’s larger artistic vision inspired the Dead in profound and far-reaching ways that go to the heart of their project.

Notes

1. The emergence of the Grateful Dead's experimentation with non-linear and modal extended jamming emerged in their rehearsal and performances in 1966 and 1967 of Noah Lewis' jug band blues song "Viola Lee Blues," explored in my radio program *The Dead Zone* (Duarte 2021a). The follow-up episode explores Coltrane and his influence on the Grateful Dead (Duarte 2021b).
2. For more on philosophers whose work has been explored in Grateful Dead studies, see Tuedio, and Spector (2010) and Gimbel (2007).

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