

Review: Alice Coltrane, *World Spirituality Classics 1: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda*

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Daniel Bromfield



The Sai Anantam Ashram surely revolved around Alice Coltrane like a hive around its queen. Even ten years after her death the website for the ashram — now simply the Vedantic Center in Agoura Hills, CA — drops the name “A.C. Turiyasangitananda” on nearly every page. It was her music that was distributed on now-coveted tapes to her followers and wafted from speakers set at the ashram’s entrance in the back roads of Agoura Hills, CA. And *World Spirituality Classics: The Ecstatic Music Of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda*, the first wide release of Coltrane’s ashram recordings, presents an interesting contradiction: insular music made to nourish a community, heard by few, and clearly the work of an auteur indulging her wildest ideas.

The music here ascribes to the tradition of kirtan: massed, ecstatic music in which congregants will themselves into

a spiritual state by repeating divine names, phrases, and praises. Most recorded kirtan play it straight and are strictly functional — not the kind of music you enjoy for its qualities as art as for its ability to facilitate spiritual communion. Technically speaking, that was the function of Coltrane’s recordings. But you imagine this brilliant woman was still bursting with ideas when she packed up the jazz life to live in isolation, and she unspooled them into religious music that should prove listenable even to those who resent the idea of higher beings. One wonders how much great art like this is being made in hermetic communities around the world.

It feels like a natural evolution of what Coltrane was doing, anyway. She was a furious instrumentalist, and on her later jazz recordings like 1977’s live album *Transcendence*, she let the notes of her tinny Wurlitzer organ swoop and dive in patterns that seemed to mimic speech. Similarly, her favorite trick throughout *The Ecstatic Music* is to detune her synth, then let the chord slowly rise until it’s in tune with the strings or chants, as if she was offering up the notes to heaven. There are no pianos or organs here, just dense synth pads that evoke ambient music or even synthpop (the opening of “Journey in Satchidananda” might bring to mind something as cold as the *Blade Runner* soundtrack rather than the warmth of a close-knit community).

They’re mixed way in the front, and at times, they swallow the congregants whole. “Om Rama”, which opens this collection, starts with the sound of dozens of voices chanting the title in unison and clapping. It might take listeners who are only familiar with Coltrane’s ashram tapes through the insular and introspective *Turiya Sings* — by far the easiest tape to find, and thus the only one most listeners will have heard — by surprise, even for a second. None of the voices are hers. But then a massive synth chord subducts the soundscape, and the chanters disappear deep into the mix. There can be no doubt whose instrument that is — and who’s really running the show.

The congregants get their chance to shine, too, especially a dude who shows up towards the tail end of “Om Rama” and seems to be channeling Tom Jones; it’s hard not to love him as he belts and blusters his praises to Rama. Occasionally a distinct ululation rises up out of the distance. Anyone who’s heard Turiya sing will recognize her voice instantly as she steps into action to lead “Om Shanti”. But she eventually disappears into the din, and only towards the tail end of the hour-long collection — during the quiet harp-and-voice piece “Er Ra” (the only appearance here of Coltrane’s most eccentric and famous instrument) and the sprawling pad clouds of “Keshava Murahara” — do we get the sense as on *Turiya Sings* of a woman alone in prayer.

I have no doubt Coltrane’s love was true and her spirituality deep. No one quits public life to disappear into the country hills if they’re not serious about it. And nobody makes music this good for only a handful of people to enjoy if they’re not committed to using their art to nourish the community. She’s clearly not showing off like so many visionaries do. But it’s hard not to imagine the inhabitants of the Sai Anantam Ashram putting on one of their swamini’s tapes for their daily meditation or prayers and getting distracted by thinking: “This shit’s really good.” **B**

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