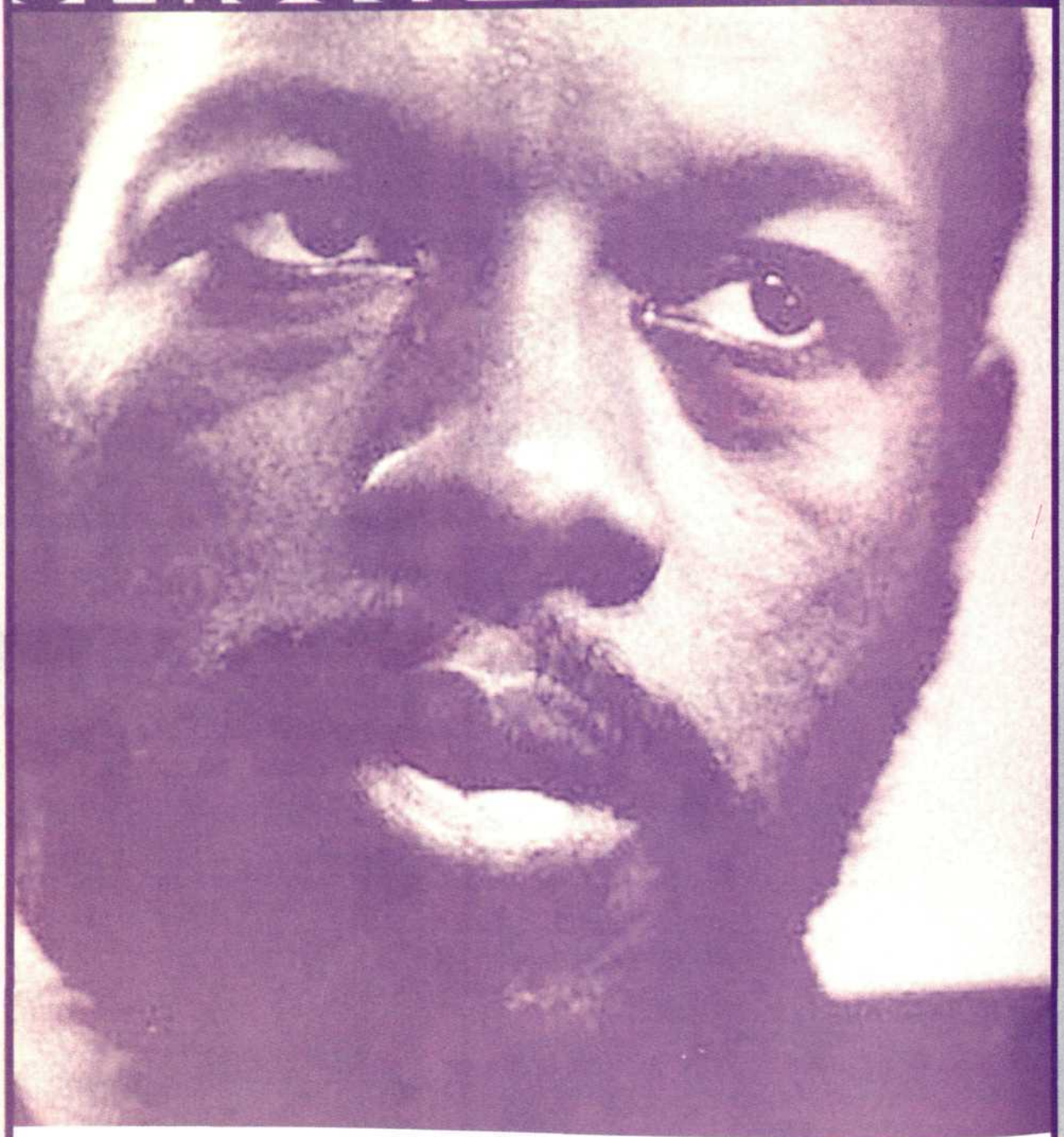
Ornette Coleman:



SUNRISE

by Scott Currie

1973-1975 was a revolutionary period of artistic transformation and renewal in the career of Ornette Coleman. In the previous two years, Coleman had consolidated two decades of ground-breaking work as an improviser and composer, and achieved his greatest success yet in the music industry: signing with Columbia Records, performing at the Newport Jazz Festival for the first time, and completing his symphonic masterwork, *Skies of America*. As 1973 approached, he was ready to set out in a new direction, and made plans to embark on a musical pilgrimage that would have profound and far-ranging effects on his subsequent aesthetic conceptions. Inspired by the music he heard on tapes that his friend Robert Palmer, music journalist and clarinetist, had made during a trip to Jajouka, Morocco, Coleman made plans to travel there in January 1973 to record with the Master Musicians of the village.

Jajouka is a small village high up in the foothills of the *Rif* mountains in Northwestern Morocco, best known locally as the site of the shrine of Sidi Hmed Shikh, the learned saint believed to have brought Islam to the area around 800 AD. The Master Musicians tend the shrine and claim descent from the servants of the saint who accompanied his prayers with instrumental music played on *ghaita*, a piercing wooden oboe, and *tbel*, a large double-headed drum beaten with two sticks. For centuries, pilgrims have come from the surrounding area to the saint's tomb, seeking his *baraka*, or spiritual power, which is thought to be transmitted directly by the musicians. On Fridays and holy days, after a twenty-minute ceremony of music and prayer, pilgrims afflicted by lameness, insanity, or infertility ask the musicians to tread upon them and touch them with the instruments in hopes of obtaining a cure.

The Master Musicians also perform in secular contexts, especially

in the late summer, when the demand for musicians to perform at weddings, circumcisions, and other important events in neighboring villages reaches its peak. Moreover, until the early years of this century, generations of Master Musicians served as royal musicians at the court of the sultan in Marrakesh, an honor that left them with a substantial musical legacy.[1] Today, the most notable musical event in Jajouka occurs during the Muslim celebration of 'Aid el-Kebir, when the Master Musicians perform a profane ritual of ancient origin: the annual festival of Bou Jeloud ('the man in skins'), the primeval nature spirit who taught their ancestor, Attarin, to play lira (cane flute). Having heard from Palmer about the awe-inspiring music accompanying the Bou Jeloud masquerade dance-drama, Coleman arrived in Jajouka just in time to witness the entire carnivalesque spectacle.

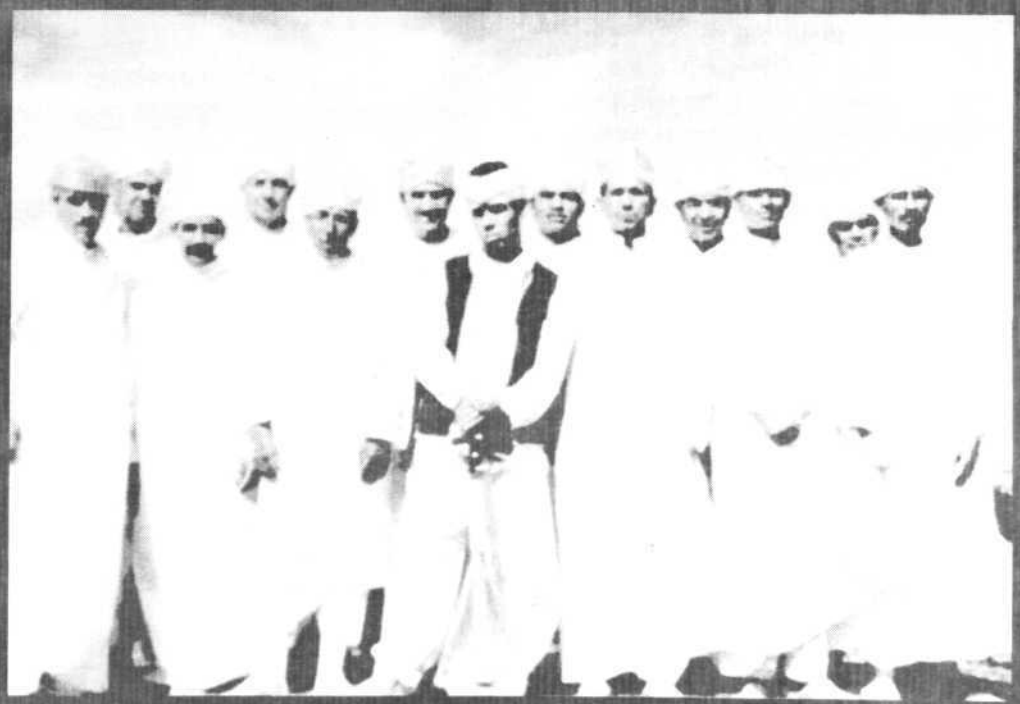
In addition to attracting crowds of pilgrims, tourists, and villagers from the surrounding area, the annual Boujeloudiya in Jajouka has also drawn a steady stream of Western poets, artists, and musicians up the mountain trails from Tangier since the 1950's. Many of them first learned about the musical events there from Brion Gysin, an expatriate writer and painter who became Jajouka's most important postwar patron and promoter. Some of the friends and acquaintances he brought to the village included composer and author Paul Bowles, writer William S. Burroughs, and Rolling Stones, guitarist, Brian Jones. Although he stayed only one night in the summer of 1968,[2] Jones' visit probably had the greatest impact on the subsequent career of the Master Musicians, since he brought along an Uher recorder and a sound engineer to tape the music he heard for eventual release on Rolling Stones Records. Finally issued in 1971 at the crest of a wave of publicity that included a three-page illustrated article in Rolling Stone magazine by Robert Palmer, the record sold tens of thousands of copies worldwide and established the Master Musicians of Jajouka as one of the first marketing successes of the nascent world music industry.

In 1971, as the sounds of Jajouka were about to reach mass audiences worldwide through the Brian Jones recording, Brion Gysin brought Palmer up the mountain to research the Master Musicians for the latter's Rolling Stone article. Amazed by the sights and sounds of the Bou Jeloud rites, Palmer soon "went back, stayed for a while, started playing with the musicians, and eventually took part in some of their rituals"[3]. When Palmer returned to the United States and played the tapes of these impromptu sessions to Coleman, Coleman decided that "he would not go only to hear the musicians of Jajouka, but that he [also] had to play with them"[4]. "Let's go," he told Palmer, "let's go over there and make a record"[5].

By the time Palmer returned to lead Coleman up to Jajouka, Coleman had reached one of the peaks of his success as an artist in the commercial music industry. One of the founders of the avant-garde jazz movement, Coleman was then expanding his artistic horizons in as many directions as possible: performing on trumpet and violin, composing concert music for woodwind quartets and symphony orchestras, and beginning to explore non-Western musical traditions. His symphonic work, *Skies of America* was inspired in part by his participation in the sacred rites of a Crow Indian community under the starry skies of their Montana reservation. In the early 1970's, he invited an East Indian classical vocalist to record with his group, and traveled to a village festival in northern Nigeria, where he played saxophone along with an ensemble of Hausa traditional musicians. Both the improvisational mode of interaction evident in these latter two encounters (conditioned, no doubt, by the time-honored modern jazz practice of 'sitting in'), and the compositional approach manifest in *Skies of America*, contributed to the conception of intercultural collaboration that Coleman would bring to his work with the Master Musicians.

At the time of his trip to Jajouka, Coleman was in the process of formulating the compositional and improvisational ideas he had developed, over the course of his multi-faceted career, on the principles of a *Harmolodic* music-theoretical system that would embrace all varieties of musical experience and transcend all stylistic or geographical boundaries. One of the themes which emerged amidst this project of philosophical retrospection and analysis was the notion of music as a healing force, an idea widespread in Islamic North Africa since the time of Al-Kindi. In an article he wrote discussing his Harmolodic system, Coleman described the spiritual qualities of his music in terms that suggest parallels to Sufi mysticism. Accordingly, Palmer's descriptions of Jajoukan musical healing rituals at the shrine of Sidi Hmed Shikh must have strongly resonated with Coleman's own musical

The Master Musicians of Jajouka with Bachir Attar in the centre (Photo below)



experience and spiritual convictions, calling to mind his early experiences in Texas playing for "a country evangelist, healing people" in settings where "the piano would be in [the key of] G, H, there'd be no such thing as key...!"[6].

The untempered tuning of the Moroccan ghaitas, whose notes fall between the semitones of the Western chromatic scale, no doubt accorded well with Coleman's unconventionally expressive intonation. And the transcendent quality of the Jajoukan music, blending together classical, folk, sacred, and ritual musics into a polyrhythmic dance of untempered melody, apparently struck a chord deep in Coleman's musical psyche: "I could see that, for once, I would be able to play whatever passed through my heart and head, without ever having to worry about whether it was right or wrong"[7].

Before departing for North Africa, Coleman had composed some saxophone lines to play along with the themes he had heard on Palmer's tapes, and he composed many more after jamming with the Master Musicians on his first night in Jajouka. In live recording sessions with various Jajoukan ensembles, Coleman played freely over tunes from their sacred and secular repertoire, working intently in the course of performance to match the lines he had composed to the themes the Master Musicians played and spontaneously improvising other motives and melodies to blend with their traditional music. These sessions demanded his utmost concentration, since he often had little more than his ear to guide him through the intricacies of Jajoukan performance practice. Recognizing and responding appropriately to the subtle musical cues that signaled sudden transitions represented one of the great-

est challenges Coleman faced in playing with a group that would "change tempos, intensities, and rhythm...together, as if they all had the same idea, yet they hadn't played what they were playing before they played it"[8]. As Coleman's account of the circumstances makes clear, achieving this sort of synchronicity represented quite a feat: "[It] sounded as if I had rehearsed it with them. It wasn't true. Not at all"[9].

The very beginning of the originally issued recording bears witness to this synchronicity, as Coleman somehow manages to fit his free-rhythm line exactly within the Jajoukans' dauntingly complex 32-beat rhythmic cycle (3+3+3+3+3+6+8+3).[10] Aside from this initial metrical concordance, though, as Coleman begins improvising over the Jajoukans' music, his interaction with them more or less fits Palmer's description of the music as "a meeting of two worlds"[11]. For the most part, in this section, he introduces and develops his themes without any obvious reference to the Jajoukan melodies, shifting his tonality independent of their mode, and tending to play across their rhythms and in between the beats. "I was struggling to sound natural," he later explained, "without sounding forceful, without sounding like I had to get inside [the Jajoukans' music] to find out what was happening"[12].

Coleman's musical strategy seems to pay off soon enough, as the Jajoukans' abrupt accelerando into the next section gives rise to a shift in interactive dynamics that brings the two worlds into much closer alignment. As the Jajoukan drummers settle into a driving quadruple-time rhythm, Coleman begins to comment on the ghaita lines, whose thematically linked chains of short melodic phrases strikingly parallel those characteristic of his own improvisational style. This intensifying musical interaction reaches a peak as Coleman joins the ghaita players for the first three notes of a repeated phrase, then continues downward in imitation of their previous motive.[13] As he repeats a modally independent variant of this blues-inflected riff, it is clear that he has succeeded in his attempt to "conceive a line that would fit in with them instantly," and thus achieved his musical goal of "playing improvised compositions"[14] with the Master Musicians.

Bachir Attar, the current leader of the Master Musicians has listened to "Midnight Sunrise" with me and commented that the recording shows the participants achieving progressively deeper levels of interaction. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that even at the time they felt that a significant intercultural musical rapport had been established in collaboration with Coleman. According to Jordan, by evening on the day of their arrival, Coleman had been accorded the status of an honorary Master Musician, given a traditional *jelaba* to wear and invited to sit among them and play. While Coleman's standing as patron and guest may well have contributed to the warmth of his reception, such a gesture of respect represents an honor rarely, if ever, bestowed upon other visiting musicians.

In fact, the Master Musicians' collaboration with Coleman appears to have not only established a model for, but also set the standard by which all subsequent intercultural encounters have been measured. While collaborations along similar lines with other Western artists including the Klezmatics, Sonic Youth, and Marianne Faithful have played a significant role in the development of their career in the years since, the Master Musicians regard their work with Coleman as the most successful of all. One possible reason for this distinction lies in the fact that Coleman, unlike other jazz artists like Randy Weston, neither attempts to place Jajoukan music in a jazz context, nor tries to play in a traditional Jajoukan style, but rather uses his Harmolodic system to establish a middle ground between the two, one which offers considerable opportunity for mutual interaction.

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In preparation for the trip, Coleman and Jordan had negotiated a production contract with Columbia Records that provided financial backing for the project in return for the rights to release a double-album set of Coleman's collaborations with the Master Musicians. However, when Coleman and Jordan returned with mixed-down master tapes, contractual disputes over international distribution delayed the release of the planned 'Ornette In Joujouka' album. Before these issues could be resolved, Coleman was dropped from the label, along with most of its other jazz artists, and the project was shelved. The master tapes containing

the selections that Coleman and Jordan had produced for commercial release remain unissued to this day. However, the hours of session outtakes, private recordings, and video footage from his Jajouka adventure that remained in Coleman's possession played a pivotal role in inspiring one of the most momentous developments of his professional career: the electric Prime Time band.

The story of Prime Time begins in 1975, when Coleman started auditioning young musicians for a new group. From the summer of that year, the new group's line-up was pretty much settled, with Jamaladeen Tacuma (formerly Rudy McDaniel), guitarists Charles Ellerbee and Bern Nix, and drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson. The new group's members all moved in or stayed over at Coleman's Artists House loft on Prince Street, studying his harmolodic system and listening to tapes and watching videos made during his trip to Jajouka. The new group then traveled to France to perform in a concert of 'Skies of America,' and shortly thereafter recorded the material released with 'Midnight Sunrise' on Coleman's *Dancing In Your Head* LP in a Paris studio. The testimony of James Jordan, who organized the journey to Jajouka, underlines its importance to the young musicians: "The players in Prime Time have all heard the Jajouka tapes. I can hear it in almost everything they play." Asserted Jordan, "The guitar harmonies get a sound like all those non-tempered horns, and the two drummers get those rhythms; it's almost symphonic"[15].

Thus far, I have suggested that Coleman's trip to Jajouka set the stage for an artistic encounter in which initially formidable cultural differences were bridged through a process of musical interaction. Before concluding, I would like to suggest that something analogous transpired in the political-economic domain. Despite certain superficial parallels to Paul Simon's collaborative approach on recordings such as Graceland, Coleman's collaboration with the Jajoukans represents a qualitatively different mode of interaction, stemming from his unique position within the structures of the multinational music industry. Unlike Graceland, and despite Coleman's own protestations to the contrary, Coleman's record was not expected by his record company to sell in the millions of copies. Rather, Clive Davis, Columbia's president at the time, seems to have funded Coleman's recording projects mainly for the prestige value of having an artist of Coleman's stature associated with the label. In this regard, Coleman's position was not unlike that of many artists on Columbia's classical roster, although, as he has pointed out, his racially predicated classification as a jazz artist resulted in considerably smaller budgets for his projects than Pierre Boulez received, for example.

In the end, Coleman spent nearly all of the money that Columbia had allocated him for the project on production-related expenses, not the least of which were the union-scale wages he paid the Master Musicians for the rehearsal and recording sessions.[16] His copyright and royalty interests in the recordings, which represented his only means of realizing any significant income from this project, never amounted to much since Columbia decided not to release the album, and the inclusion of the 'Midnight Sunrise' excerpt on his later A&M release, *Dancing In Your Head*, contributed negligibly to revenues from record sales or publishing rights. In short, although Coleman structured his relations with the Master Musicians according to the appropriative corporate conventions of the mass media industry, his marginal status within it ensured that these structures functioned neither in intention nor in actual fact to his unfair advantage. Rather, his maverick posture vis-a-vis the industry enabled him to circumvent and to some extent transcend its characteristic relations of production.[17]

For both Coleman and the Jajoukans, this collaboration marked a critical juncture in their respective careers, sparking revitalization and opening up new aesthetic horizons. Not only did the Master Musicians' work with Coleman, as mentioned earlier, establish a precedent for future collaborations, it also helped further their opportunities and aspirations for a new career as international recording artists. The publicity surrounding the 1977 release of *Dancing in Your Head* could not but have helped pave the way for their subsequent European concert tours in 1979, 1980, and 1982, which, in turn, appear to have made an indelible impression on the young Bachir Attar, soon to succeed his father Jnuin as the leader of the Master Musicians. Under Bachir Attar's leadership, the Master Musicians of Jajouka have reinvented themselves within the emerging discourses of world music and world beat, expanding into new markets, and exploring new musical possibilities.

As for Coleman, Jajouka made a deep and lasting impression. It provided a powerful validation of his Harmolodic principles and liberated him once and for all from the confining Western paradigms against which he had struggled throughout his career. "Playing with the musicians of Jajouka was a natural," said Coleman's acting manager, James Jordan, since the ghaitas' untempered sound made it impossible to play in a particular key and the drummers' cross-rhythms made thinking in terms of bar lines futile. "When we recorded in Jajouka," Jordan recalled, "he seemed to listen to himself and say, 'Oh, that's what it was all

about.' And after that his music just seemed to coalesce"[18]. Additionally, the responsive ensemble dynamics achieved in this collaboration,[19] and the heretofore unrealized prospect of blending his avant-garde improvisations with traditional music both provided significant inspiration toward the founding of Prime Time.[20] From Palmer's perspective, this new musical self-awareness stemmed from the healing power of the Jajouka experience. Despite "having created his own musical reality," Palmer believed, Coleman was "still fragmented" before his trip, "still hung up on the whole high art/folk art or art/entertainment dichotomy." According to Palmer, "Jajouka got him past all that. Jajouka gave him back his own soul, and gave it back to him whole"[21].GR

NOTES

[1] For example, the piece they recorded with Coleman, which they called "*Hadra*" (rather than Coleman's title, "Midnight Sunrise"), bears a close metrical relationship to *qaim wa nisf*, one of the five rhythmic modes of the classical Andalusian repertory.

[2] According to Schuyler, Philip D. (1983. "The Master Musicians of Jahjouka." *Natural History* 92 (10): pg. 60-69), Bachir Attar once gave the year of Jones' visit as 1967, but he is the only dissenting source. I have used the 1968 date found in Davis, Stephen (1993. *Jajouka Rolling stone*. New York: Random House.) mainly because it accords with that given in the liner notes of the 1995 CD reissue of the Brian Jones recordings.

[3] Franklin, Drew. 1987. "Playing in the Register of Light." Village Voice (June 23): pg. 24.

[4] Carles, Philippe. 1973. "Ornette: Musique non temperée." Jazz 212 (juin): pg. 16 (my translation).

[5] Franklin, Drew. "Playing in the Register of Light." Pg. 24.

[6] Litweiler, John. 1992. *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life*. New York: W. Morrow. Pg. 185.

[7] Clarke, Shirley (director). 1987. *Ornette: Made in America* (film). Fort Worth, TX: Caravan of Dreams Productions.

[8] Williams, Richard. 1973. "Ornette and the Pipes of Joujouka." Melody Maker (March 17): pg. 22.

[9] Litweiler, John. *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life*. Pg. 161.

[10] The recently discovered alternate take of "Midnight Sunrise" – which features Coleman playing the same opening line over a completely different Jajoukan tune – strongly suggests that the line had been composed beforehand, quite possibly without reference to a particular Jajoukan tune.

[11] Franklin, Drew. "Playing in the Register of Light." Pg. 25.

[12] Ibid. Pg. 25.

[13] Critic Howard Mandel may well have had this feat of interactional rapport in mind when he remarked upon Coleman's ability to "draw a phrase from the Moroccans to turn into a barbecue riff" (Mandel, Howard. 1977. "Review of Dancing in Your Head." *Downbeat* (Oct. 6): pg. 24.).

[14] Williams, Richard. 1973. "Ornette and the Pipes of Joujouka." Pg.23.

[15] Franklin, Drew. "Playing in the Register of Light." Pg. 24.

[16] At a press conference conducted shortly after his return from Morocco, Coleman said, "I put all my money into my music, it's no secret. I went to Jajouka with less of a budget than I had for my Science Fiction record, and I spent all of what I had on this record (Ornette in Joujouka)." In Mandel, Howard. "Review of Dancing in Your Head." Pg. 17.

[17] These structures, according to Meintjes, do not "readily accommodate collaboration," but instead promote "hierarchical, competitive, profit-oriented work" within exploitative structures "exacerbated by differentials in the global power of nation-states" (Meintjes, Louise. 1990. "Paul Simon's Graceland, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning." *Ethnomusicology* 34: pgs. 37-74). While Coleman's elite artist status relative to the Master Musicians' status as wage laborers could be viewed as a split that "replicates and expresses the differentials in sociopolitical and economic power" (Pg. 47), the framework developed by Steven Feld suggests that since "the economic stakes in this traffic are small, the circulation has the revitalization dynamic, of roots" (Feld, Steven. 1988. "Notes on World Beat." *Public Culture* 1: pg. 31-37.), rather than appropriation. In fact, Coleman's work with the Jajoukans took place under circumstances that approximate those Meintjes laid out for "genuinely collaborative projects," namely that "all participants contribute and benefit mutually" (Meintjes. Pg. 47-48).

[18] Franklin, Drew. "Playing in the Register of Light." Pg. 25.

[19] On the subject of ensemble dynamics, as well as the uniqueness of his Jajoukan experience, Coleman has said, "Non-tempered notes refer to collective creation, to blending with others, and it seems to me that the musicians of Jajouka go further than anyone in this respect. The musicians that I had heard in Nigeria played non-tempered wind instruments as well. But in Jajouka, it was almost as if I had heard Skies of America [his then recently completed symphonic work]. They were thirty (musicians), playing in unison and changing tempo, intensity, and rhythm, each with his own intonation" (Carles, Philippe. "Ornette: Musique non temperée." Pg. 16, my translation). This supports Peter Niklas Wilson's claim that "Jajouka was the starting point for which Coleman had long searched: a new concept of ensemble playing that could overcome the limitations of the conventional jazz combo (or symphony orchestra, for that matter)" (Wilson, Peter Niklas. 1989. Ornette Coleman: "Sein Leben, seine Musik, seine Schallplatten." *Schaftlach*: Oreos/Collection Jazz. My translation and commentary) and thus provide a medium for the "orchestral dimension" implicit in "Coleman's musical thought since the dense sound-textures of Free Jazz" (Pg. 62, my translation).

[20] As far as inspiration for Prime Time is concerned, Robert Palmer has said that, upon their return, Coleman told him "that all his life he'd played either dance music, which he felt restricted him a lot, or his own music, which gave him the freedom to create but didn't always get that visceral connection with an audience he'd felt growing up, playing rhythm and blues. In Jajouka, he saw that you could have both at once, and he realized that with electric guitars and dance-based rhythms he could do the same thing in this culture – keep the freedom and make the connection" (in Franklin, Drew. "Playing In the Register of Light." Pg. 26).

[21] Ibid. Pg. 26

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