

THE AUSTRALIAN

Documenting free-flowing evolution of an iconoclast of jazz, Ornette Coleman



Ornette Coleman's shrill sound on alto sax initially engendered deep hostility from established musicians ... PHOTO COURTESY THE AUSTRALIAN

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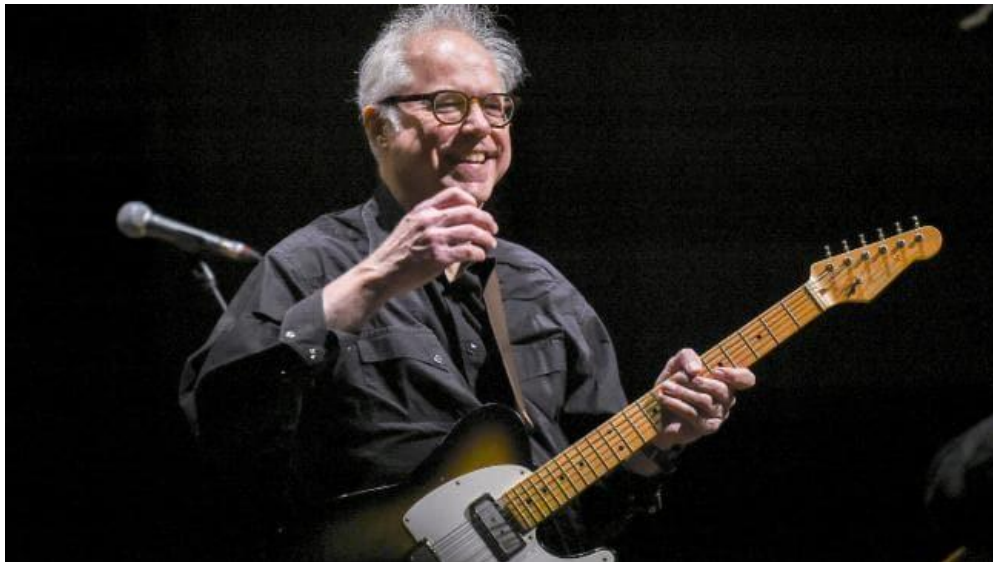
At the 2009 Meltdown Festival of mixed-genre music in London, musicians from all over the world gathered to pay tribute to saxophonist Ornette Coleman. They included Australian-American bassist Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, US punk poet laureate Patti Smith, Senegalese singer/guitarist Baaba Maal, US jazz guitarist Bill Frisell, a traditional Moroccan drum-choir, hip-hop bands, and a host of others.

Coleman was then aged 79. What explains his extraordinary reach beyond the jazz world to become, in effect, America's gift to world music?

The 1985 Shirley Clarke film *Ornette: Made in America*, currently being screened at Sydney's Antenna Documentary Film Festival, provides some answers. In this revealing film, Coleman comes alive.



Some of the musicians paying tribute to Ornette Coleman in 2009 included Australian bassist Flea from the Red Hot Chilli Peppers (above) and US guitarist Bill Frisell (below) ...FRISELL PHOTO COURTESY THE AUSTRALIAN



In the early eighties the American arts producer Kathelin Gray was developing a performing arts centre in Fort Worth, Texas called Caravan of Dreams, designed to revitalize the city. John Rockwell, music critic at the *New York Times*, mentioned that Coleman, by now a celebrated figure in American music,

hailed from Fort Worth. Born dirt-poor in a shack next to railway tracks, Coleman had evolved through local rhythm & blues, to free jazz, and then classical music - a rags to riches scenario.

Would he not be perfect to open the Caravan in 1983?



Arts producer Kathelin Gray: developing a performing arts centre in Fort Worth, Texas called Caravan of Dreams... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

When it was proposed that the opening be filmed, Coleman recalled that the experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke had filmed him in the late sixties, and he retained footage of the unfinished work under his bed in New York. Gray quickly found Clarke and encouraged her to resume the project.

The film opens with an informal ceremony on a street in Fort Worth, with Coleman surrounded by enthusiasts. The mayor gives him the key to the city and declares September 29, 1983 to be Ornette Coleman Day. Spliced in are excerpts from the performance of his orchestral work *Skies of America*, being played by the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra and Coleman's group Prime Time, with the leader resplendent in a white suit.

At the after-party, a slightly bewildered, gentle, and deeply humble Coleman is warmly congratulated by the Fort Worth classical music establishment.

Coleman arrived in New York in 1959 for a two-week engagement at the Five Spot, an 80-seater club best-known as the home of pianist Thelonious Monk. Coleman's shrill sound on alto sax, replete with honks and squeals, and the

raucous collective improvisation of his quartet, engendered deep hostility from established musicians.

“I don’t know what he’s playing”, said Dizzy Gillespie, “but it’s not jazz”. Miles Davis observed: “The man is all screwed up inside”. The legendary bebop drummer Max Roach confronted Coleman in the Five Spot kitchen, and punched him in the mouth.



Within two years, however, Coleman and various sidemen had recorded six epic albums for Atlantic, including the iconoclastic *Free Jazz*, the first recording of free collective improvisation. Subsequently, after a short retirement in the sixties, he returned to performing, now playing violin and trumpet, producing music that was even more abstract. In the seventies he embraced electronic dance music and funk with his electric band Prime Time, and branched into classical works, including *Skies of America*, recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra in 1972.

There’s a recurring motif in the Clarke film where a small African American boy walks on the railroad tracks holding an alto saxophone. It’s a reminder that

when Coleman was given the instrument by his mother, he thought it was a toy, and simply worked out by himself how to make a sound and play it. It never occurred to him that he might need instructions.



Ornette Coleman holding the alto saxophone at the North Sea Jazz Festival, 2010: he changed everything... PHOTO CREDIT HANS SPEEKENBRINK

The legendary Lou Reed said: “When you talk about someone speaking through their instrument, that’s Ornette. He changed everything.”

Shirley Clarke’s film Ornette: Made In America will be screened in Sydney on Saturday, October 26, as part of the Antenna Documentary Film Festival.