The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane

BAM Howard Gilman Opera House
Oct 10 at 8pm
Running time: approx. one hour 15 minutes, no intermission

Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda:
The Ashram Experience

Curated by Par Neiburger
ALICE COLTRANE TURIYASANGITANANDA, AN APPRECIATION

Presented with Luaka Bop

Alice Coltrane was an African American artist, mother, and spiritual leader who grew up playing gospel, classical, and jazz in Detroit. She was an exceptional musician who married John Coltrane and continued his spiritual quest.

When John Coltrane died in 1967, it left his wife of only a few years bereft. After a time of great suffering, Alice met guru Swami Satchidananda and traveled to India with him. Following a visit there, she had a vision to open an ashram, and bought 50 acres of land in Agoura Hills, California, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. There a multi-ethnic and multi generational religious community grew up around her.

The high point of living in this very special and loving environment took shape on Sundays when Alice would lead the community in a musical ceremony, mixing both gospel and Indian chant, to create a music she wholly invented. It was something extraordinarily powerful.

In 2017, 10 years since she left her physical body, in what would have been her 80th year alive, Luaka Bop released a compilation of the spiritual music created for these ceremonies, and organized concerts that includes elements of these special services, trying to share the unique experience of hearing this music at the ashram.

Performing the music during these ceremonies are many of the original members of the ashram, along with added backing musicians and special guests.

Most importantly, the ceremonies are intended to be participatory—everyone is welcome to partake through singing, chanting, or clapping (or however else you feel comfortable). We have therefore included lyrics of the songs (bhajans) within this program.

The Ashram was a mix of cultures and ages. This group is composed of the singers still alive today; it will be led by Surya Botofasina on keys, who grew up at the Ashram and learned this music from Alice herself.

Furthermore, this group will be joined by special guests who have been inspired by Alice Coltrane.
INVOCATION

Purusha Hickson

The Sai Anantam Ashram Singers

Radha Botofasina (Choir Director)
Shyam Reyes
Sathya Womack-Freeman
Jaya Lakshmi Moss
Sri Hari Ram Moss
Arianna Gouveia
Isabel Belloso
Lakshmi Myers
Sita Michelle Coltrane
Brahmachandri Bridges
Mahesh Bridges
Paramisha Warren

MUSICIANS

Surya Botofasina (Music Director, keyboard)
Joseph “Joe Blaxx” Grissett (drums)
Dezron Douglas (bass)

GUESTS

Rudresh Mahanthappa
Gang Gang Dance

VIDEOGRAPHERS

Priscilla Telmon & Vincent Moon
SAI ANANTAM ASHRAM SINGERS
The members of the Sai Anantam Ashram were seekers of truth and found it through Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda’s spiritual guidance. Along the way, they found their own unique voice through the bhajan chanting. Several had been professional singers before they were introduced to Sanskrit bhajans (songs of praise). These days, though Alice Coltrane has left her body, they continue to carry Alice Coltrane’s style forward as a wonderful synthesis of ancient and modern sounds that transcend human boundaries and follows the Atma (soul). They have performed in Australia, Europe, and in the US, and celebrate every Sunday in Los Angeles or wherever they may be.

PURUSA HICKSON
Purusha Hickson was one of the very first students of the venerable Swamini Turiyasangitananda, also known as Alice Coltrane. He is the founder and director of Stretch for Success Seminars, and has been teaching hatha yoga for over 40 years. Hickson has studied in depth the Sivananda, Iyengar, and Ashtanga yoga systems. He conducts workshops and retreats worldwide, and has developed a Teacher Training Program for aspiring yoga teachers in the Los Angeles area. His first yoga video, “The Beauty Within, Gentle Yoga for Beginners,” was released 2008 to critical acclaim.

MUSICIANS

SURYA BOTOFASSINA, (Music Director, keyboard) a seasoned performer and composer/producer, grew up on the Sai Anantam Ashram in Agoura Hills, CA, with Alice Coltrane as his mentor and guide. With influences ranging from John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk to Public Enemy and Tupac Shakur, Botofasina traverses the musical spectrum, striving towards the exploration of truth and commenting on the current musical climate. He holds a BA in music from the New School of Jazz and Contemporary Studies, and is the music director of the Alice Coltrane celebration with the Sai Anantam Singers. His new album is available via his website.

DEZRON DOUGLAS, (bass) known for his musical versatility, is one of the most in demand young bassists in jazz today. With the encouragement of his mentor, the late saxophonist, composer, and educator Jackie Mclean, he enrolled in the Jackie McLean Institute of African American Music at the Hart School of Music. Douglas has performed and recorded with Alice Coltrane’s son Ravi Coltrane, and her longtime friend and collaborator Pharoah Sanders, as well as Michael Carvin, Cyrus Chestnut, Louis Hayes, George Cables, Rene McLean, Al Foster, Billy Drummond, Victor Lewis, Mulgrew Miller, Kenny Garrett, Steve Coleman, Vincent Herring, Papo Vazquez, and the Marsalis family. He is a member of the Ravi Coltrane Quartet, Papo Vazquez Mighty Pirates, and a long standing member of the Cyrus Chestnut Trio.

JOSEPH “JOE BLAXX” GRISSETT, (drums) from Queens, NY, began turning household items into drum sets before he spoke his first word. Like many before him, his career began in the church. Formally educated at the New School University, he has performed with Wess “Warm-daddy” Anderson, Maurice Brown, Bruce Williams, Marc Cary, Chris Rob, Meshell Ndegeocello, Wynton Marsalis, and Walter Blanding. His most memorable and prestigious performance was with Stevie Wonder as part of President Barack Obama’s 2009 pre-inauguration concert in Washington.

GUESTS

RUDRESH MAHANTHAPPA
Few musicians share the ability of alto saxophonist/composer Rudresh Mahanthappa to embody the expansive possibilities of his music with his culture. What has materialized is a sound that hybridizes progressive jazz and South Indian classical music in a fluid and forward-looking form that reflects Mahanthappa’s own experience growing up a second-generation Indian-American. Hailed by *The New York Times* as possessing “a roving intellect and a bladelike articulation,” Mahanthappa has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, and commissions from the Rockefeller Foundation MAP Fund,
Chamber Music America, and the American Composers Forum. He has been named alto saxophonist of the year for seven of eight years running in *Downbeat* magazine’s International Critics’ Polls (2011—13, 2015—18), and for five consecutive years by the Jazz Journalists’ Association (2009—13) and again in 2016. He won alto saxophonist of the year in the 2016 and 2017 *JazzTimes Magazine* Critics’ Polls. In 2013, he received a prestigious Doris Duke Performing Artist Award. In 2015, he was named a United States Artists Fellow. In 2016, he was named the director of jazz and associate director of the Program in Musical Performance at Princeton University.

**GANG GANG DANCE** is an American experimental music band in New York City. The band is known for its distinctive sound which features synthesized electronics and percussion, plus the varied vocal styles of singer Lizzi Bougatsos. They have toured internationally and released several albums.

**VIDEOGRAPHERS**

**PRISCILLA TELMON** & **VINCENT MOON** are a collaborating artist duo working as independent filmmakers and sound-explorers. Together they produce ethnographic experimental films and music recordings that are based on material collected from their numerous travels. **Vincent Moon** has been dubbed ‘the re-inventor of the music video’ by *The New York Times*, Moon was the main director of the *Take Away Shows* of La Blogothèque; his work revolutionized the concept of music video and the way of filming music in the entire world. Since 2009, Moon has dedicated himself to his nomadic label, *la Collection Petites Planètes*. Crossing the world—his camera and computer in his backpack—he makes ethnographic-experimental films in an independent way, recording traditional and sacred music, religious and shamanic rituals, then shares it all for free on internet under a Creative Commons licence. **Priscilla Telmon**, director, photographer, writer, and a member of the Society of French Explorers, has dedicated herself to long trips combining history and adventure, paying homage to the wisdom tradition and mystery of the cultures she has visited. Her passion for exploration of ancient cultures has given birth to films, reportings, and books, and found its way into international press, TV, and museums. She published *La Chevauchée des Steppes* and *Carnets de Steppes* after a six-month adventure on horseback from Kazakhstan to the Aral Sea, and later published *Himalayas*, and directed the feature film *Voyage au Tibet Interdit*, on her ultimate expedition—by foot and alone—over a seven-month walk through the Himalayas in the footsteps of the French explorer Alexandra David Neel.
PRODUCERS

**LUAKA BOP**
Founded by David Byrne in 1989, Luaka Bop has introduced Os Mutantes, Shuggie Otis, Tim Maia, and William Onyeabor to the world at large, and become home to artists such as Tom Zé, Floating Points, Cornershop, Zap Mama, and Janka Nabay, among others. In 2017, it released *World Spirituality Classics Vol. 1: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda*, the first-ever compilation of Alice Coltrane’s private press cassette tapes from 1982—95, making these songs available to the wider public for the first time. Hailed as “astonishing” by NPR and “astounding” by *The New Yorker*, the compilation received worldwide acclaim, and was listed as the Best Re-Issue of the Year by *The Wire*, *Spin*, *Mojo*, and many others.

**YALE EVELEV** is president and co-owner of the record label Luaka Bop, which he has been running with David Byrne since the early 90s. He has released and executive-produced more than 85 albums, including Os Mutantes, Tom Zé, Kings Go Forth, William Onyeabor, Tim Maia, Zap Mama, Shuggie Otis, and David Byrne. Recently he co-produced Eric Welles Nystrom’s the “Atomic Bomb! Who is William Onyeabor?” concert series, featuring guests such as David Byrne, Damon Albarn, Amadou & Mariam, Pharoah Sanders, Dev Hynes, and members of Beastie Boys, LCD Soundsystem, Hot Chip, The Rapture, DeadPrez, etc. Before Luaka Bop, he was at BAM producing and programming a music festival called New Music America, which presented 500 musicians all over New York in 25 venues, including David Lynch’s *Industrial Symphony*, the World Sax Quartet, for the first time together with African Drummers, the Buttthole Surfers, Conlon Nancarrow, Heiner Müller, the return to NYC of the legendary composer Moondog, and David Byrne.

**ERIC WELLES-NYSTRÖM** is a creative music consultant working with Luaka Bop, the independent record label founded by David Byrne in 1989. His most recent projects include creating a world-wide touring vending machine for the band Phoenix, and directing a series of high school music videos with David Byrne. With Luaka Bop, he helped introduce the iconic Nigerian synth-pioneer William Onyeabor, and has produced multiple music documentaries, short films, album campaigns, and live shows, with artists ranging from Damon Albarn to Pharoah Sanders. His work has been nominated at the American Association of Independent Music, and commemorated in *The Guardian*.

CURATOR

**PAR DAVID NEIBURGER** provides music programming for venues in New York City through his company Eulipion Sounds. He is the artistic director for The Rhythm Foundation in Miami and was the artistic director of World Music Institute in New York from 2014—18 and the cofounder and executive producer of the Trinumeral Music and Arts Festival. He is a curator, writer, musician, and DJ.
1. Sivaya
Sivaya Parameshwaraya
Shashishekharaya Namah Om
Bhavaya Guna Sambhavava
Siva Thandavaya Namah Om

Translation:
O Siva, Lord of all, whose hair is adorned with
the moon,
Embodiment of all good qualities, performer of
the Holy dance.

2. Rama Rama Sri Bhagawan
Rama Rama Sri Bhagawan
Om Tat Vishno Paranam Padham
Iswara Allah Tere Tere Nam
Masjid Mandir Para Para Dham

Translation:
O Rama, You are Vishnu, that Supreme Lord
Who is the highest Goal.
Ishwara and Allah are Thy Names.
Holy temples and mandirs are Thy holy Places

3. Krishna Japaye
Krishna Krishna Japaye
Tera Nam ji bolo
Rama, Rama Krishna Guru
Rama Krishna Rama Guru
Krishna Rama Para Atma Guru
Rama Para Atma Guru
Krishna Para Atma Guru
Para Atma Guru
Krishna Krishna Japaye
Tera Nam ji bolo
Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram Ji bolo!

Translation:
Chant the Names of Krishna and Rama
Victory to Rama and Krishna

4. Om Rama
Pt. 1 & 3
Om Rama Jai Jai Rama
Om Rama Jai Jai Rama

5. Journey to Satchidananda

6. Om Shanti
Om Shanti Om Shanti Om Shanti Om
Ananta Natha Parambrahman Om
Vitthala Keshava Madhava Hari Om
Om Jaya Krishna Jai Rama Hari Om
Om Jaya Rama Jai Krishna Hari Om

Translation:
Divine symbol of peace is of and in the Supreme
Eternal Lord, Whose names are Vitthala,
Keshava, Madhava and Hari.

7. Universal Chant
Krishna Krishnaya - Janandanaya
Allah Devaya - Jehovaya
Jesus Christaya - Isa Nathaya
Siva Sivaya - Brahma Brahmaya
Rama Ramaya - Vishnu Vishnaya

8. Om Namah Turiyasangitananda
Pt. 1
Om Namah Turiyasangitananda
Om Namah Guri Devi
Sri Guru Devi Charanam
Om Bhaja Rama Charanam

Translation:
Obeisances to Turiyasangitananda, our divine
teacher.
Worshiping at the Feet of the Guru is like wor-
shiping at the Feet of God.

Pt. 2
You are the essence of God’s Will
And I, the privileged to serve

You are the Song of God
And I, the privileged to hear.

Radiant, opulent, forever
transcendentally free.

Turiya sangita nanda
When did you move to the ashram?
I was born in Northern California and raised on the Sai Anantam Ashram in Southern California. My mom and I started our experience when the Vedantic Center was in Woodlands Hills. I was five years old when the ashram moved to Agora Hills in 1982. I had a bike that my mother bought from Oran Coltrane, Swamini’s youngest child; I rode it there. (We called Turiyasangitananda Alice Coltrane “Swamini.”)

How many kids grew up there with you, and who else was there?
The core group of us was about a dozen. There were our parents, people who did not have children. Swamini’s oldest child, John Jr., was not at the ashram as he was in a car accident at the age of 17 and passed away. The other three kids we had the most interaction with—Oran, Michelle, and Ravi.

Did Swamini live in the Ashram as well?
She stayed at the same residence in Woodland Hills for the duration of her life but she came down daily. It was 12 miles away but it only took 15 minutes by car to get to the ashram. In her latter years, she was there less, but at least three times a week. Her “presence” was daily. Her physical presence was felt frequently because there were events on Wednesday night and Sunday. Consistently, it all revolved around Sunday. That was the day when time was not able to be calculated by the measures that we use today.
Can you tell us about Swamini arriving? It was very distinct when Swamini came—it would be early afternoon, and she had a maroon Lincoln Continental and you’d hear the music from her car and a minute later, her car would pull up and the bhajans [songs] would be blasting at a nice volume level. She had on her distinct orange robe—and that’s when the day really began. That’s when time wasn’t a factor any longer. There would be a pause and then she would turn on the organ and the takeoff would begin!

Did she just play organ? Or did she play piano or harp? The organ was just there. There wasn’t a set-up. There were a lot of handheld instruments that the congregation would have—percussion, mundung, the two-headed drum from India, and a lot of shakers. I remember the organ, not the OB-8 that you hear on the recordings, just the organ and that Leslie speaker.

Were the bhajans [psalms; Hindu devotion songs] evocative for you immediately? Or did it take awhile for them to sink in? As kids we would either play outside or were told to join our parents inside the mandir [house of worship], where I got my first exposure to the bhajans. As we got older, from seven to 13 and beyond, we didn’t go to Sunday school so much, but went to where the adults were and listened to what she had to say and be a part of the music. It was a big deal. At first the music just felt good, it felt unique—I never heard anything quite like it. My mom was also a musician, and started me on piano lessons when I was in second grade and years later when I played jazz as a teenager. The music of the bhajans really began to take form and shape as I grew older. In one sense, I would hear in it this healing, uplifting aspect. Later on, as my musical ear developed, I started to hear the technical prowess and that was another level of “wow.” I thought, I can’t believe she’s playing a melody with her left hand, chords with the right hand, bass and volume pedals with her feet, and leading a choir all at once.

I’m under the impression that even if you were familiar with these psalms from India, her versions of these bhajans are different. There are differences and there are similarities. An African-American woman from Detroit brought something unique and musically rich that’s clearly brought to these bhajans. But there are still a lot of very traditional things. In its simplest form, bhajans are call-and-response, as were the bhajans that we sang on a weekly basis. The gentlemen or the ladies would start. The tempo would increase at the second go-round, which happens in India. You hear that a lot also in gospel—the tempo goes up after a little bit and the energy changes.

Did you ever have lessons with Swamini? I never had formal lessons with Swamini. I got my most personal instruction from her when I was learning the text of the Bhagavad Gita—there are melodies that run along with the text. It’s a story about self-realization, where the god Krishna is speaking and showing the way of enlightenment. It’s about how to live your life to achieve that ultimate bliss. There would be a keyboard set up in our small classroom and she would teach us the book. And as the only person in our class who played, she would literally lean out of the way and she would play something and I had to learn it that way. It comes by once—try to get it or jot it down. I got a chance to play the bhajans in the ashram. One time, she was kind enough to come and allow me to play right next to her. She adjusted the key to how I had learned to play. I’ll never forget—she showed me as we were playing and she would just call out the chords: “A-flat, G, E-flat,” and then at one point she said, “Just play.” Music is a very aural thing that we learn with our ears. It’s a primary version of learning music; very rarely do you learn to play music by learning a score. That’s how she was teaching me. Then when there were different things I was trying to learn and figure out on my own, I would try to play it for her and she’d give me different pointers. Overall it was just encouragement. She also gave me the chance to experience the biggest stage when I was still young, playing at the John Coltrane Festival.
Did you have a sense of her as a person?
Swamini was the most generous, kindest person I’ve ever known. I’m very much a mama’s boy in the first place, but if I had to step outside of that bubble, the most super-human person on earth was Swamini. A lot of people are kind to kids, but you really saw a lot of kindness from her when interacting with these intense “I love John Coltrane so much I have to be around you” fans. Her grace in handling each person, whether they be as young as a kid who’s never listened to a John Coltrane record, versus someone who has every single Coltrane record memorized and they’re star-struck, it didn’t matter—she exuded the same amount of grace. She was so approachable and so truly graceful. The dignified level of interacting with people on a much deeper level than just surface conversations was remarkable.

Can you talk about what the songs are about?
By definition, the bhajans are called devotional songs that are typically found in Hindu lore. There are bhajans that also reference the beauty of Islam and Allah and the purest form of Christianity and Christ and the other aspects of Hindu lore, Krishna, Ram, Vishnu, and Shiva. These songs, all of them—they are a praise of a higher energy, a divine energy—and some of them would be recounting a particular story, like about Rama and his youth.

There are various uses for bhajans. People use them as ways to put the “good juju” out there before starting a good-sized task. Say you’re moving into a new house with a new baby—you go to your home and sing this bhajan, or say this prayer, and that’s to put the good vibes out there. Almost akin to the Native American tradition of smudging a home, walking around with the sage and whatnot. They are there to remind us of the devotion that we who are looking to find something deeper than gratifying our five senses—to hear and eat and walk—are looking to really get to know the deepest parts of ourselves in order to offer them to a higher purpose.

You touched on this earlier, this tradition of the African-American churches—was it singular to have an African-American commune like this?
It’s one of the most unique experiences in the world; you just don’t hear about it. I’ve sung bhajans in different places here in America; it’s just not the same as the ashram. As a youngster, I had no context in realizing how unprecedented it was to have an African-American woman leading a spiritual community that was based in global consciousness but that had a lot of Eastern influence, that equation alone is quite unique. For me, it was normal. It’s just how I grew up.

The ashram community was very much African-American, which if you know anything about Agoura, California, is very rare. By the age of 13, I had been to more bar and bat mitzvahs than a lot of people. Going to school, I always knew how different we were—we didn’t look like everybody, our names didn’t sound like everybody else’s. I remember going to gas stations where you look for your name on a keychain and going “Oh, I’m not on this and I never will be.” Then I went to India and saw my name everywhere, even on a light bulb shop!

Is there anything else that you would like to add, or let people know?
If people ever get a chance to experience our ceremony, I hope they feel welcome to join us. We would love to have them!