

Alice Coltrane's *Journey In Satchidananda*:

Digital spaces as restoration

Irenosen Okojie

Journey In Satchidananda (1971) is a meditation, a molten, silvery vehicle from an Afro-futurist past, an unknown destination requiring your pulse rate during REM. A luxurious ode to divinity containing an untraceable prophecy gifting the listener its edges. It sheds skin as a form of restoration to be consumed. This song, featuring Pharoah Sanders, is a portal that contains multitudes. A plane which not only shows the freewheeling expansiveness of blackness but embraces its unique iterations. I first heard it when Spotify suggested it as a recommended track after I listened to Santigold's *Disparate Youth* (2012). I was deeply struck by its celestial quality, the jazz composition, its melodic shapes, the range of instruments on display. The sense that I was becoming spectral whilst listening to it. Immersing myself in the track was akin to being in a trance.

Coltrane recorded it in 1970. Named after her spiritual adviser, Swami Satchidananda, it was a musical love letter to the passing of her husband, jazz legend John Coltrane who died of liver cancer in 1967. Devastated by his death, Alice lost weight, saw visions, then visited Satchidananda, a guru who had mesmerised Woodstock crowds. He became her spiritual adviser. The album was born, but it's this title track which truly encapsulates a spiritual flight through loss, grief and renewal.

That Santigold, an artist I love for her visionary, indefinable creations, her somewhat enigmatic persona (she is all about the music), unwittingly led me to

Alice, another experimental musical doyenne whose work had been angling towards me from the periphery, made me feel buoyed. Lifted. It was incomprehensible to me that I had not discovered her earlier in my youth. A black woman who played the harp, side-stepping regressive expectations in ways that are wondrous as well as nebulous. Santi and Alice are distant relatives. One led to the other, invoking the feeling of falling through a brightly lit, half-formed chasm. When the mood strikes me, I hunt for the song in digital spaces because I like to know it lives several lives – breathing, pulsing, disrupting and regenerating. I find it an antidote to the cataclysms in the world. Here are some of my favourite digital hubs in which it resides, infiltrating frequencies and minds. Alongside are listed the manifestations of instruments or entities it conjures in my mind's eye:

YouTube – lightsaber

Spotify – reservoir

Pinterest – painting

alicecoltrane.com – Afro-comb

NPR – torch

Rough Trade – ink

AfroPunk – mural

Momaps1.org – larva

Etsy – opium

luakabop – dew

Alice's harp digital footprints keep rambling.

Alice's harp digital footprints are marauding.

Interconnected archives making room for
personal translations.

Permutations possessing.

Frequencies sitting within the body waiting to be unleashed.

They speak to each other, lurking in the glare of artificial usurpers. Even its title, *Journey In Satchidananda* invokes a pilgrim passing into an incantation, a

subconscious layer of oneself that can be accessed only through the song. It feels both unencumbered and restorative, both vaguely political and deeply personal. I adore this track. It makes me think of art making from a place of absolute freedom, which is all I ever intend with my work. It gives me permission to do that and push boundaries. Indeed, the image of a resplendent Alice playing that harp as though she emerged from the womb destined to know its chords is seared into my mind. *Satchidananda* is a multi-limbed memory, an incoming self. Its healing qualities are not to be underestimated. This transcendental, spiritual offering mutates as an act of love, a subtly radical, virtuosic offering that never ceases to astonish me.

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Irenosen Okojie is a Nigerian British author whose work combines the surreal and the mundane to create vivid narratives that play with form and language. Her short stories have been published internationally. Her writing has been featured in the *New York Times*, *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, the BBC and the Huffington Post. Her debut novel, *Butterfly Fish* and short story collection *Speak Gigantular* have won and been shortlisted for multiple awards. Her new collection, *Nudibranch* is published by Dialogue Books. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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