

Ann Nguyen
Music 265
Ornette Coleman Unit
Analysis #1 of 4
Ornette Coleman: "Song X"
February 26, 2002

Although Ornette Coleman is best known for setting jazz musicians "free" from tonal and rhythmic constraints, more established devices permeate "Song X." The version from *Jazzbuhne Berlin '88 Vol. 5: Prime Time* attaches Coleman's distinct sound to basic factors like form, rhythm, and tonality. These elements, in turn, reflect the technological, commercial, personal, and sociopolitical concerns behind much of his work.

In terms of structure, "Song X" does seem slightly peculiar. Unlike in an AABA piece that frames solos with ensemble participation, the horns enter and exit at unusual points. The alto saxophone first sneaks in mid-bar and its run lasts for only five seconds before the ensemble hushes completely. This division occurs thrice in the first two minutes and twice more later on. The trumpet, meanwhile, announces its presence more aggressively and does not silence until about 50 seconds later, when the saxophone returns for another two minutes. The rhythm section—apparently drums, electric bass, and two synthesized guitars—unleashes its own surprise, switching from diffuse lines over an ostinato to a more integrated rhythm-and-blues mode at about 1:30. Also, each of the five breaks in the music follows a swirl of saxophone and rhythm instruments. Such peaks in energy, though expected in any performance, appear here in unusually discrete, well-timed bursts. The uneven horn parts, episodic form, and dollops of grooviness and intensity distinguish "Song X" from many jazz standards.

Otherwise, the work adheres to more common facets. The ostinato's return in the last minute evokes the traditionally bookended, ensemble-solos-ensemble structure, and the piece finishes with another five-second, saxophone-rhythm swirl rather than a new idea. The repetition of those themes hints at the work's careful genesis and at the manner of its conclusion. It makes sense to close with one of the post-swirl pauses after the horn players—particularly the star, Coleman—have showcased

their talents. Thus, a preconceived linearity organizes this piece's most dizzying features.

"Song X" remains rhythmically grounded, as well. Its single-pitch guitar ostinato is a 4/4 line that the cymbal strikes and drum thumps consistently reinforce. When free from that riff, such as during the chromatic descent at 2:49, guitar chords continue to sound on the beats, albeit with twice as many at a slightly slower speed. The more melodic instruments follow this setup, too. At 2:49 and 5:10, the bass briefly alternates between notes in time. More syncopated moments, like one guitar's third-beat note pairs at 2:22, also comply with that tempo. Regular pacing dissolves only during the interactions that precede each pause, as the timekeeping drums and guitar instead blend more intense colors with the saxophone's lines. Those looser improvisations, though, accelerate and halt simultaneously. For most of this work, the pulse remains strong and steady.

Harmonically, the musicians do not seem that unrestrained, either. The ostinato suggests the piece's basis on certain pitches from the very beginning. The bass and guitars' ascending or descending chromatic runs around 1:58, 2:42, and 5:08 evade chord limitations with their half-steps, but the lines after 1:08, 1:30, and 2:49 sound relatively melodic. The instruments in the first two bars after 1:30 mesh so smoothly that they could have come from a blatant rhythm-and-blues song. Even the most frenzied moments center on tones. With the saxophone's two pairs of chromatic notes and the guitar's single-pitch ostinato, the entropic instances spring from and resolve into consonance. Although the song does not progress as fluidly as standard jazz works do, the rhythm instruments' lines and the stark chord changes show that tonal guidelines do exist.

Despite its generic title, "Song X" has several facets of musical note. Since one cannot easily hum this piece, one might deem it a web of mere sounds. The sustained energy and quasi-melodies of the rhythm section around—rather than behind—the saxophone do indicate collective improvisations that make it harder to discern the lines and easier to characterize it all as noise. The aforementioned tonality, however, reduces the stress on sheer texture. By overshadowing the rhythm section, the trumpeter's contribution sounds closer to a solo than the saxophonist's does and thus feels fairly melodic. Indeed, when the bass echoes the trumpet's staccato blowing at 1:53, the

attention to harmonies becomes more salient. With the trumpet's high squeals, the saxophone's runs across the scales, and the shifting chromatics, pitch represents another striking effect. The piece's clearest facet, though, may be its beat. With its ostinato, intervallic percussion, and on-beat chord changes, metrical stability separates this work from Coleman's more complex projects. All these factors infuse "Song X" with a vigorous but not belligerent mood. Like the bustle of urban life, it balances the musically routine with the promise of serendipity.

Coleman's milieu probably prepared him to use the former. Prime Time, the band that performs "Song X," consisted of electric and acoustic instruments. The technological aspect ensured the amplification of the rhythm section's guitars, bass, and drums. The greater prominence of those instruments not only signifies Coleman's generosity with the spotlight (Litweiler 168) but also allows for more collaborative improvisations that enrich the music's layers and challenge the players in expanded roles. At the same time, the band's development reflects more material issues. A musician's repertoire needs some accessibility for commercial survival. With the rise of rock and roll and funk in the 1960s and 1970s, electric guitars and regular percussion were a popular combination among performers and listeners alike. Born into poverty (Spellman 84) and initially unappreciated as a musician (93), Coleman may incorporate such devices into "Song X" and other pieces in order to achieve the wealth and fame he desires (Litweiler 165). Aside from practical and personal interests, Coleman seems to shape his music according to sociopolitical matters, as well. The "undefined racism" he has felt in supposedly progressive cities like New York (Spellman 128) and organizations like the Communist Party (109-10) might enhance his own sense of fairness. Collective improvisation—even the equalization of rhythm, harmony, and melody in "harmolodics" (Litweiler 168)—may represent his attempt to remedy social injustices through music. Coleman's wish for "social love" all over (Spellman 101) could also be motivating him to unify soloists and rhythm players (127). Although "Song X" is not as canonical as his free jazz works, it deserves scrutiny for embodying Coleman's later directions and extra-musical concerns.

On specific and broad levels, "Song X" both fulfills and transcends its potential simplicity. As

its own title implies, it includes standard musical elements along with unexpected turns. Its performers can take over any role but must play within specific metrical parameters. It is a pleasant diversion whose "X" suggests a more militant subtext. And through its structured spontaneity, it is a balm for those who, like Ornette Coleman, seek musical autonomy as well as popular success.