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News, Opinion & Things That Matter

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A freestyle first meditation on "being a force for good" on Trane's 81st birthday (done in one take)

By [Fred Joiner](#)
September 24, 2007

Yesterday September 23rd marked what would have been the 81st birthday of an artist that has been central in how I have come to see myself as an artist; John William Coltrane or affectionately known to the world simply as, Trane.

Obviously, his musical virtuosity immediately comes to mind when talking about him. In 2007, The Pulitzer Board posthumously awarded him a Special Citation for his "masterful improvisation, supreme musicianship and iconic centrality to the history of jazz."

Also, his monk-like dedication to his craft inspired his contemporaries as well as many generations to come. One of the most striking things about this influence and inspiration is that as you read and hear interviews, not only with other musicians and artists but also with life truth seekers, those seeking some other meaning deeper meaning in life; all of these folks from various walks of life have talked Trane's influence on how they see the world.

In reading a few biographies about Trane's life one thing that all that has stayed with me, almost haunted me, and has been a recurring theme that all of the biographers seem to mention. Trane often said that "I want to be a force for good." the biographers go on to give various accounts of how he went about actualizing this not only in his musical pursuits, but also in his everyday life. It appears that he saw it all as one entity, one way of being and living.

This simple sentence "I want to be a force for good", is one that seems to challenge me more as an artist, than it does simply as an individual living in the world. I have found (and continue to search for) small ways to live deliberately and daily harmony with my surroundings, even down to the type of work that I do. However as an artist, I still battle with how to "be a force for good" in my art without becoming mired and burdened with rhetoric.

How to create art that has a political sensibility and trajectory, yet still create something beautiful, these are not new concerns; yet they are made new as we come to grips with them as a result of our own life experiences.

Because his words were the impetus for me beginning this train of thought in the first place; I decided to attempt to deal with these concerns while looking to Trane's process to provide some further insight on how to approach this in my work. This is some of what I have found.

First, be open. be available. be a vessel. In everything that I read about Trane he was always open to new ideas and information. I also think that a corollary to being open is being humble, which is something that many if not all account of Trane spoke of quite often.

Secondly, is practice, which for me as a poet also means read and study other poets, artists, thinkers and other inspiration personalities that have done great things in their efforts to affect change or "be a force for good". For me this also includes learning all you can about my craft, the tradition that I am operating under and whose shoulders I am standing on.

Thirdly, embrace change. Trane always talked about "making a change" both regard to music and his personal life. One story (from one of the biographies) that is still ringing in my head was how Trane brought the subject of his separation from his first wife, his Wise One, Naima. The account says that Trane simply said "I am going to make change". Similarly, when asked to comment about his detractors, Trane would often explain that he could only play what came through him and that those who did not hear and feel the music, it was his hope that one day they would engage with it.

While I am fully aware that this three points vastly simplify the mind and work a one of the most important American artists, I can only say in my defense that it is my attempt to make practical "being a force for good" in one's creative endeavors.

One final example, that stands as one of the strongest example for me how Trane, using his art, attempted to be a force for good in society while also making a beautiful, yet erudite political statement, was in the composition Alabama. This song was composed and performed after the church bombing that killed 4 little girls attending church activities.

ABOUT THIS PAGE

This page contains one single entry posted to Everyday Citizen on September 24, 2007 8:25 AM.

The post previous to this one is titled "World War II: John Gilligan with Kathleen Sebelius"

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The mood and the movement of this song captured this solemn and somber moment in time. In listening to the piece it is fairly obvious that while there is an undercurrent of righteous, dignified anger, there is also a social commentary and even a call to action. Many artists of the period speak about how Trane's work said in music what they could not find words for. In fact Amiri Barka in his serial poem Masked Angel Costume was actually written as a companion to the song, the final section reads:

Birmingham
Birmingham

was where
4 of my daughters
Were killed

John Coltrane
composed
Alabama

It was the music
that moved
my feet

they never
failed


Although, some of my contemporaries may not feel the same connection to Trane as I do, thus they don't reference or attempt to encapsulate Trane's idea in the same way that Baraka did, I feel that we are forging our own path "to be a force for good" in our attempts to engage the world as artist as we find our voices. In that regard we are the progeny of those expressions and those risks that Trane took in approaching his work as an agent for good.

I will end with a passage from a Saul Williams song/poem called Coded Language, because for me it perfectly captures the spirit of how I would like to engage the world as an artist of conscience. Furthermore, I think that the things that Trane did to actualize (be a vessel, study and embrace change) are all present in what Williams is saying. The passage begins to give language to what I see as my charge, my manifesto and how I approach telling the stories, the truths and shining light on those things that are hidden., somehow I don't think I am alone.

The song says

"we are determined to be the channelers of these changing frequencies into songs, paintings, writings, dance, drama, photography, carpentry, crafts, love, and love.

We enlist every instrument: Acoustic, electronic. Every so-called race, gender, and sexual preference. Every per-sun as beings of sound to acknowledge their responsibility to uplift the consciousness of the entire f*cking World."

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Full Text posted on September 24, 2007 by Fred Joiner
Tags: [Alabama](#) [Art](#) [Jazz](#) [John Coltrane](#) [Poetry](#)

COMMENTS (3)

Fred Joiner - I love your first piece. I'm so glad you are writing here! Our voices can indeed join together here - shining lights - making changes - power in numbers. To be forces for good. Fred thanks for joining us. Nora Thomason

Posted by [Nora Thomason](#) | September 24, 2007 8:53 AM

Fred - I can't wait to read your future installments. You are certainly worth the wait! I really liked this paragraph and have copied it down to consider for my own life: "How to create art that has a political sensibility and trajectory, yet still create something beautiful, these are not new concerns; yet they are made new as we come to grips with them as a result of our own life experiences." Being open to change and being a vessel - these are huge. Zola J. (ZJ)

Posted by [Zola Jones](#) | September 24, 2007 9:17 AM

Fred! I have a huge smile because I am so happy to see you here!!!! And, your first post is awesome. Don't be shy. Your words are so welcome as are the words of others that you may choose to share. Welcome! Pam

The Missing Class, by Newman and Chen

The Last Days of Democracy, by Elliot Cohen and Bruce Fraser

Steeplejacking, by Sheldon Culver and John Dorhauer

Deer Hunting with Jesus, by Joe Bageant

City Adrift, by Bergal, Hiles, et al

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