Alice Coltrane – The Vedantic Center Ashram’s Infinite Chants (1990)

1 Sita Ram
2 Om Rama
3 Rama Guru
4 Hari Rama Hari Krishna *play*
5 Hari Rupa & Siva Mantra
6 Radhe Govinda
7 Gopala
8 Krishna Japaye
9 Hari Rama Hari Krishna

Alice Coltrane - Arr, organ, synth
John Panduranga - Male lead singer
Chanting and percussion by students of The Vedantic Center

The late Alice Coltrane's least known works are the series of devotional cassettes recorded for her California ashram in the 1980s and 1990s. Between her last Warner Brothers album released in 1978 and her comeback album "Translinear Light" released a few years before her passing, she had largely disappeared from the jazz world. I've tried to feature everything I could find by her from that period on this blog, and here is the last piece I know of, "Infinite Chants."

Very much in the style of "Glorious Chants" this is far from a jazz recording; and unlike "Turiya Sings" and "Divine Songs," Alice Coltrane does not sing here. She is heard in the background as an instrumental presence, her whooshing synthesizers and noodling organ setting a spacey mood for the exuberant choral chanting. Again the material is all Sanskrit Hindu devotional songs. But I hesitate to call these traditional songs. There are some wonderful new albums of kirtans, sing-along chant albums by American Hindus such as David Newman that meld

accessible pop-folk to the religious songs that actually feel somehow more traditional, at least as in the chant-along do-it-yourself-Hinduism new-age bookstore tradition. But the energy of this album is very different than that.

The songs here are flavored more by a gospel sensibility: the massed anonymous voices give way to some remarkable solo moments, and the spiritual fervor communicated is, at least to me, quite affecting. Repeatedly on this album the combination of vocal harmony, percussion, spacey synths, and one of the singers standing out from the mix creates an absolutely sublime moment inside songs that are otherwise, as they are meant to be, repetitious and not particularly melodic or hook-laden. And of course there's the visionary presence of the Swamini Turiyasangitananda, as Mrs. Coltrane came to be called, with its completely off-center, ecstatic, man-overboard commitment to sharing her spiritual quest.

The only thing the All-Music Guide has to say about this album is that some of this music is from a television program called "Eternity's Pillar." I used to have a short VHS clip from that program: it had a bizarre low-budget, public-access flavor, featuring Turiyasangitananda doing her best Sun Ra impersonation, seemingly broadcast from another plane of reality where most of her consciousness was otherwise engaged. Sort of a mesmerizing culty trainwreck at first glance. But as with this album, if you can suspend your disbelief long enough to realize how deeply heartfelt all this stuff is, you can connect not just with its blissful spiritual energy if you're so inclined, but with its musical beauty.

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