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## **From suits to robes: The use of African inspired apparel as a communication tool in the mid-twentieth century American avant-garde jazz community.**

### **KEYWORDS**

African fashion  
Afrocentricity  
Afro-jazz  
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### **ABSTRACT**

*Many musicians working in the avant-garde of American jazz in the post-Civil Rights era publicly aligned themselves with black power cultural ideologies. The Afrocentric fashions worn by some of these musicians were a visual representation of their cultural beliefs and endure as a major component of the musical form's legacy. This article reevaluates these performers' standing in popular culture, recognizing them as fashion innovators on top of being musical revolutionaries. These musicians' adventurous style lives on in popular culture through fashion statements in hip hop, neo soul, and other musical genres.*

Expressions of Afrocentric fashion are relatively common in modern American culture, but this was not always the case. For most of the country's history, mainstream fashion was dominated by European traditions. In the 1960's and 1970's, however, African American cultural nationalists and black power advocates began to utilize traditional African clothing and jewelry to show pride in their cultural heritage. Today, many of

these African stylistic components have been assimilated into mainstream American fashion, particularly in the realm of urban fashion.

In the Sixties and Seventies, it was not uncommon to see popular African American entertainers wearing African clothes. Nina Simone frequently exhibited an Afrocentric look, and even Sammy Davis Jr. can be seen wearing an African robe on the cover of his 1970 album *Something For Everyone*. Nowhere did Afrocentric fashion and music integrate as strongly, though, as in the underground, avant-garde jazz scene of the time period. This article aims to spotlight the Afrocentric fashions present in avant-garde jazz of the Sixties and Seventies while giving these musicians credit for their bold fashion innovations and their future influence on popular culture.

Many musicians working in the avant-garde of American jazz in the Sixties and Seventies publicly aligned themselves with black power ideologies in the post-Civil Rights era. These radical artists deliberately positioned themselves outside of the mainstream musical culture by forming artistic collectives and music distribution networks. As a result of taking control of their own music, these artists often had complete creative control of their art. In a primarily non-verbal form of artistic expression, these artists' cultural and political views were made quite evident through their clothing, song titles, and album artwork. Scholars such as Austerlitz (2005), Anderson (2007), Francesconi (1986) and Kofsky (1970) have pointed out links between avant-garde jazz and black power. Others scholars like Van DeBurg (1992), Ogbar (2004) and Brown (2003) have discussed the impact of black power upon the fashions of the era. However, the importance of African clothing in the avant-garde jazz scene of the Sixties and Seventies has rarely been discussed. These musicians' adventurous fashion choices stand to be reevaluated. Afrocentric garments are one of the distinguishing aspects of this era of jazz music, and the musicians who wore them were integral to their acceptance in mainstream American popular culture.

In his information theory, Wenger (2002) defines communities of practice as groups of people with shared interests who learn and grow through regular interaction. Individuals in a community of practice mature together through shared information. By this definition, nearly any music "scene" can be viewed as a community of practice, and the term certainly applies to the American avant-garde jazz scene of the Sixties and Seventies. As items of shared information, the progressive fashion statements made by the musicians in this specific genre are significant components of the scene's identity. A striking album cover of black musicians wearing garments designed in vibrant African patterns can portray the musicians' cultural stance just as strongly as the sounds contained on the album. In this particular music scene, the clothes are nearly as crucial as the music itself. For example, a clear message of African heritage and identity is evident in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The Afrocentric fashions worn by some avant-garde jazz musicians of the Sixties and Seventies are a major element of the musical form's legacy, and their influence can be seen in the R&B and hip-hop artists who followed in the footsteps of these pioneering jazz musicians.

## **AVANT-GARDE JAZZ**

It should be emphasized that the sound of underground experimental jazz in the Sixties and Seventies was a far cry from the prevailing notions of jazz among today's popular music audiences. In a modern musical world filled with brazen figures such as Kanye West and Rihanna, jazz is frequently perceived as a tame, safe and boring form of music. Its place in popular culture has been relegated to background music. While some jazz music is entirely suited to this task, to think of jazz as a single form of music is an erroneous generalization. The term "jazz" encompasses many sub-genres, ranging from ignorable and sedate smooth jazz to noisy and seemingly chaotic free jazz. The experimental avant-garde jazz of the Sixties and Seventies falls closest to the turbulent end of the jazz spectrum.

Throughout the Fifties, jazz enjoyed an increasing popularity among a highbrow audience, including readers of *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *The Saturday Review* and *The New Yorker* (Anderson 2007: 34). The cool jazz popularized by players on America's west coast had a trendy sound that was suited for the cocktail lounge lifestyle of the Playboy set. In nearly any form of popular music, commercial success of this nature brings industry pressure to temper experimentation. In reaction to the state of jazz in the Fifties, musicians like Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor sought to expand the artistic boundaries of jazz without paying much regard to popular acceptance. These two musicians are pioneers in the style of free jazz, which places complete musical emphasis on collective improvisation rather than pre-composed songs. Many mainstream critics of the time insulted the rasp and scrape of Coleman's plastic saxophone and Taylor's rhythmic atonal piano attack, but their unconventional sounds were a huge inspiration for the following generation of jazz musicians (Anderson 2007: 58-65).

Simultaneously invoking black power and artistic experimentation, the vanguard of underground jazz artists in the Sixties steadfastly positioned themselves as "artists rather than entertainers" (Baker 2009: 6). This music took many different directions, but the various by-products all reached the same destination: a new sonic vocabulary for the art form known as jazz. Albert Ayler invoked the underlying theme of struggle in black gospel music through his free saxophone playing. Pharoah Sanders created a transcendent pan-cultural groove with his spiritual music. John Coltrane recorded deliberately challenging albums such as *Ascension* and *Interstellar Space* (see Figure 2), causing many critics and fans to assume that he had lost his finesse. Their ears and minds were simply not open to the deep spiritual convictions that Coltrane and his band were laying down on tape.

[Figure 2 about here]

These musicians were making music that is enthralling to a receptive listener in 2013 but would have likely cleared many rooms in 1965. The complex, challenging and ultimately rewarding nature of this music is important to remember as we discuss its relationship to fashion and popular culture.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM TO AVANT-GARDE JAZZ**

The ideas associated with black power have several overlapping designations, and we shall discuss Black Nationalism as it relates to avant-garde jazz music. Pinkney (1976: 4) briefly describes Black Nationalism as the collaborative efforts among African-Americans to “achieve self-determination and ultimate liberation.” One of the components of the Black Nationalist ideology is cultural nationalism, the idea that “black people throughout the world possess a distinct culture and that before black liberation can be achieved in the United States, blacks must reassert their cultural heritage, which is fundamentally different from that of the larger society” (Pinkney 1976: 13). Cultural nationalism encourages African Americans to explore the background of their culture, presuming that by knowing one’s past, one will better understand his or her self. Cultural nationalism seeks to incorporate African-derived traditions into the daily life of African Americans. For cultural nationalists in the Sixties, “Black power became a revolution of culture which utilized all available forms of folk, literary, and dramatic expression to forward (their) message of actualization” (Van DeBurg 1992: 192). These Afrocentric folk expressions were seen through clothing, music, hairstyles, vocabulary, culinary traditions, and other cultural preferences.

Hardline revolutionary Black Nationalist groups like the Black Panthers frequently disparaged cultural nationalism. They felt that overt expressions of cultural nationalism were superficial and distracted from the realities of African American life. These revolutionary Black Nationalists viewed the social implications of cultural nationalism as unnecessary in the pursuit of their more radical political goals. To the Black Panthers, the popular phrase “Black is Beautiful” amounted to “an attempt to undermine the more threatening revolutionary nationalism that tried to mobilize the oppressed to challenge the political, social and economic order of the United States” (Ogbar 2004: 116).

Despite the attitude of the Black Panthers and other revolutionary Black Nationalists, cultural nationalism held a widespread popular appeal in the African American community. Individuals without the political convictions to become diehard Black Nationalists could demonstrate black pride through expressions of cultural nationalism. Van DeBurg (1992: 198) observes that the “soulfully attired” of this generation expressed a “self-affirming, self-referential spirit” by wearing items like “bubas, caftans, agbadas, djellabas, and geles.” Retailers such as New Breed in Harlem began to market specifically to culturally conscious black consumers by offering dashikis and other African-inspired clothing items (Geracimos 1969). To this day, the dashiki is one of the most prevalent African garments to have ever crossed over into the American fashion market. These stylish expressions of black pride were influential on American popular fashion and were directly influenced by the cultural nationalist movement.

Pinkney (1976: 128) identifies Amiri Baraka as one of the most prominent cultural nationalist leaders of the Sixties and Seventies. Baraka’s Black Arts Movement was a collective of writers and artists who envisioned their group as a “spiritual sister” of the Black Power movement and strove for “a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic” (Van Deburg 1992: 181). Prior to founding the Black Arts Movement, Baraka had analyzed the cultural importance and social impact of black music in his book *Blues People*, a history spanning from the days of slavery to the contemporary jazz of the Sixties. The Black Arts Movement had a close association with the avant-garde jazz

scene of America's east coast through concerts held at the group's event center. Baraka was also a friend to many prominent jazz musicians of the time, including John Coltrane.

Pinkney (1976: 128) also recognizes Maulana Ron Karenga as an important cultural nationalist leader of the time. Karenga's US Organization was a west coast group with strong cultural nationalist leanings. Karenga is acknowledged as the inventor of the Kwanza holiday. Upon joining, members of US were encouraged to rename themselves in the Kiswahili language and wear traditional African clothing. These cultural expressions "powerfully captured and conveyed the group's sense of aesthetic to those outside of the organization" (Brown 2003: 132). Like Baraka and the Black Arts Movement, Karenga and the US Organization had close ties to avant-garde jazz. The aforementioned Baraka wrote a poem titled "For Maulana & Pharoah Sanders" comparing Karenga's oratory to that of the avant-garde saxophone player's sound. The musician James Mtume was a prominent and dedicated young follower of the US Organization and the group's adopted philosophy of culture, Kawaiida, Mtume was a close friend of the Herbie Hancock sextet in the late Sixties, a group who reached a large audience due to the notoriety of their leader while retaining a very experimental jazz fusion style. The group was so impressed by Mtume and the principles of US that Hancock, several members of his group and the free jazz pioneer Don Cherry recorded an album titled *Kawaiida* in 1969. The influence of cultural nationalism can also be seen on Hancock's album covers of the period; *Crossings*, *Sextant* and *Headhunters* all feature distinctively African imagery (see Figure 3).

[Figure 3 about here]

James Mtume was primarily a percussionist, and he played with many other prominent jazz musicians of the time, including Miles Davis. It is likely that he shared his cultural convictions with these musicians, as well. Mtume was the bandleader on several Afrocentric avant-garde jazz albums in the Seventies, including *Alkebu-Lan: Land of the Blacks*. He later achieved major commercial success with his R&B group's 1983 hit "Juicy Fruit."

The relationship between avant-garde jazz and Black Nationalism prevailed for a variety of reasons; some musicians strove to use their art to enact social change, and some Black Nationalist leaders viewed the new form of jazz as a channel through which to publicize their cause. Practitioners of "The New Thing" in jazz often found their artistic aspirations in line with the principles of Black Nationalism.

For many of these avant-garde jazz musicians, art and social action were one and the same. Archie Shepp stated that his music and that of his peers was "an extension of that entire civil rights-Black Muslims-black nationalist movement that is taking place in America" (Kofsky 1970: 63). The roots of this integration of art and social action lie partially in Malcolm X's influence upon many jazz musicians in the Sixties. Kofsky (1970: 64) summarizes Malcolm X's impact on this generation of jazz musicians when he writes, "His words come the closest to articulating their needs, their frustrations, their hopes, their problems." John Coltrane attended one of Malcolm X's final speeches before the leader's assassination and noted in an interview that he was "quite impressed" with the Muslim minister (Kofsky 1970: 225). Malcolm X's inspiration to the avant-garde jazz scene in the Sixties and Seventies indicates the political nature of this music.

Pinkney (1976: 80) writes, “Black musicians today, more than in any previous period, are sharing a sense of community with their fellow blacks and are attempting to unify the black community in its pursuit of self-determination”. Black jazz musicians participated in this sort of community support by teaching lessons at cultural centers, playing benefit concerts for local organizations and composing music dedicated to the American black experience. These activities exhibit the importance of a collective spirit to this type of jazz music. Also, it is worth noting that live performances of improvisational music are predicated on the ideas of spontaneity and ephemerality, giving the audience a sense of communal participation that might be entirely absent in other forms of musical performance.

### **AFROCENTRIC CLOTHING IN AVANT-GARDE JAZZ**

Examples of Afrocentric clothing were heavily present in the avant-garde jazz scene of the Sixties and Seventies. This was a significant change from the clothing typically worn by jazz artists in the decades leading up to the Sixties. The attire commonly associated with male jazz artists of the period was the fashionable yet traditional tailored suit. The common fashions of the period of jazz immediately preceding the black power era can be seen in *Blue Note Jazz Photography of Francis Wolff*, a volume compiled by Cuscuna, Lourie and Schnider (2000).

[Figure 4]

Blue Note is one of the most important record labels in the history of jazz, and a large number of great artists recorded for the label. Artists like Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, Horace Silver, Jimmy Smith, Bud Powell and Lee Morgan can be seen in the book of Wolff’s photography, and the button-down suit appears to be the uniform of a Blue Note recording session. This conventional mode of fashion would soon be challenged by a group of young jazz musicians with a passion for experimental music and rebellious cultural politics.

Archival video footage of the avant-garde jazz musicians of the Sixties and Seventies is unfortunately rare, but many photographs and album covers exist to preserve the visual elements of this particular music scene. A representative sample of the avant-garde jazz album art of this time period can be found in *Freedom, Rhythm & Sound: Revolutionary Jazz. Original Cover Art 1965-83*, a visual companion to the music masterfully compiled by Gilles Peterson and Stuart Baker (2009). Colors, patterns, illustrations, garments and jewelry paying homage to African design abound in this book. The musicians working in this art form were clearly influenced by cultural nationalist ideas and the political climate in America at the time. Many (but not all) of the subsequently discussed album covers can be found in Peterson and Baker’s book (2009).

After his death, the musicians who had played in John Coltrane’s group during the Sixties embarked upon creatively illuminating solo careers. Their music typically retained the experimental edge that Coltrane acquired late in his career. Coltrane is consistently seen in photographs wearing a white shirt with a suit jacket, but the members of his band developed more Afrocentric fashion tastes. On the cover of her 1971 album *Journey Into Satchidananda*, Alice Coltrane is seen wearing a flowing blue and silver robe, beads and large ornamental earrings. Pharoah Sanders wears African clothing on

nearly all of his album covers, most notably on *Summun Bukmun Umyun – Deaf Dumb and Blind* (1970). On this album cover, his band poses in front of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City wearing a mix of African garments and contemporary urban fashion. McCoy Tyner, another member of Coltrane's group, did not pose wearing African clothing on his album covers but instead frequently used images of the people of Africa. Examples of this can be seen on his albums *Extensions* (1972) and *Asante* (1974).

[Figure 5]

Another strong example of African clothing in avant-garde jazz is featured on the Mtume Umoja Ensemble's 1972 album *Alkebu-Lan: Land of the Blacks*. This large group was led by James Mtume and featured such notable players as Gary Bartz and Stanley Cowell. On the back cover of this album, James Mtume is standing inside of an illustrated pyramid wearing loose fitting, matching top and bottom pieces with a vertical, African-styled pattern. The front of the album is filled with the image of a large ankh, and the title of the album is a tribute to the pre-Greco-Roman name for the continent of Africa.

[Figure 6]

The Pyramids were another group who used African costume extensively on their album covers. They can be seen wearing a variety of African fashions on their albums *Lalibela* (1973) and *King of Kings* (1974). The leader of the Pyramids, Idris Ackamoor, played in groups on the south side of Chicago before travelling to Europe with the aid of a college grant. He formed the Pyramids in France, and the group subsequently travelled to Ghana, Kenya, and Ethiopia (Peterson et al 2009: 128). This contact with the African continent likely exposed the group to authentic African fashions that the group shared with the contemporary avant-garde jazz audience through their album covers and performances.

An avant-garde jazz group of the period that extensively used African costume was The Art Ensemble of Chicago. Their vibrant fashions are prominently featured on the covers of *The Art Ensemble of Chicago with Fontella Bass* (1971) and *Chi Congo* (1973). The group used African garments, tribal-themed face paint and even decorative musical instruments in their performances. There is no direct evidence to support this claim, but it would not be unreasonable to imagine George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic collective having taken visual inspiration from the Art Ensemble of Chicago's fashion statements. The Art Ensemble of Chicago had very close ties to the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), an avant-garde jazz collective formed in the Sixties that is still in existence.

A final example of Afrocentric fashion in avant-garde jazz music is the cover of Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell's album "*Mu*" *Second Part* (1970). On the cover of this album, Cherry can be seen playing a cornet wearing a loose fitting, tiger print robe. This album cover's particular significance comes from the fact that earlier in his musical career, Cherry was frequently seen wearing a traditional suit. For example, on the cover of Ornette Coleman's 1961 album *This Is Our Music*, all members of his group

(including Cherry) can be seen wearing suit jackets and ties. Comparing the cover of these two albums shows how influential cultural nationalism was on jazz music during this period and how the musicians used their positions as cultural ambassadors to promote its ideals.

[Figure 7]

### **IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE**

The impact of Afrocentric fashion in the Sixties and Seventies is widespread in popular culture but has been absorbed to a greater extent than replicated. The heritage fashions of this period live on in ideological spirit. Afrocentric fashion in the Sixties and Seventies refused to abide by the European clothing traditions that had previously dominated American culture. The bold fashion statements of African identity during this period laid the foundation for today's African American clothing market. By intentionally redefining clothing traditions within their community, culturally conscious African Americans effectively invented a new fashion market. The influence of African heritage fashions can be seen in today's urban wear for men, which also favors a much looser fit than that of a tailored suit.

There are many direct examples of Afrocentric fashion in popular culture supplementing its underlying aesthetic influence. The popular R&B group Earth, Wind and Fire has partial roots in the Chicago avant-garde jazz group The Artistic Heritage Ensemble. The former group played a style of improvisational jazz that featured its leader (and AACM co-founder) Phillip Cohran on the electric thumb piano. This group placed enough emphasis on their African clothing styles as to record a song titled "The African Look." The concise lyrics of this song are sung in a repetitive chant style:

The African look is wholesome,  
The African look is beautiful.  
The African look is all things good to you,  
Get yourself a robe and golden braided slippers, too.

Donald Myrick and Louis Satterfield were part of the horn section in the Artistic Heritage Ensemble, and both later joined Earth, Wind and Fire. Myrick and Satterfield were previously acquainted with Maurice White (Earth, Wind and Fire's bandleader) as session musicians working for the well-known Chess Records label in Chicago. The African-inspired fashion statements of Cohran's group carried over to White's. Earth, Wind and Fire rode to the top of the pop charts wearing costumes equally inspired by African traditions and a concept of the glimmering neon future. Earth, Wind and Fire's impact on popular fashion should not be underestimated. They exposed a large audience to the contemporary use of African heritage fashions, and their origins exist in the socially conscious expressions of black pride from jazz's avant-garde in the Sixties.

Afrika Bambaataa is a seminal popular culture icon who also promoted Afrocentric fashion. Bambaataa is one of the chief architects of rap music and hip hop culture. As a late Seventies DJ and event organizer in the Bronx area of New York City, Bambaataa was the master of ceremonies at the block parties that came to form the

foundation of hip hop. Bambaataa can be seen in music videos, album covers, and promotional photographs wearing a m lange of African fashions, including turbans and ankh medallions. As a New York City resident throughout the Seventies, it is likely that Bambaataa was exposed to the same Afrocentric fashions worn by jazz musicians and cultural activists. In fact, Bambaataa also shared the jazz musicians' inclination to organize; he is the leader of the Zulu Nation, a cultural association with the aims of celebrating Afrocentricity and erasing gang violence in the inner city. Bambaataa is an important cultural figure in the areas of popular music and popular fashion who deserves recognition for his innovations. He is one of the inventors of hip hop, a musical style and aesthetic philosophy that started from humble beginnings and yet reached a massive audience throughout the globe.

In the Nineties, artists like Maxwell, D'Angelo, and Lauryn Hill contributed to the creation of a musical genre known as neo soul. A prominent way in which neo soul is differentiated from contemporary R&B is through its emphasis on songwriting and production influences taken from the soul music of the Seventies. Erykah Badu, one of the genre's most well known artists, used Afrocentric fashion extensively in her early career and was frequently seen wearing items such as head wraps and African-styled jewelry. Examples of this can be seen on the covers of her 1997 albums *Baduizm* and *Live*. Badu is not the only neo soul artist to incorporate African fashions into her look. The clothing styles associated with the neo soul sound seem to be a blend of modern urban trends and the Afrocentric look that came of age in the Sixties and Seventies.

Afrocentric fashions and social customs have permeated mainstream American culture to such an extent that they are publicized on the children's educational television program Sesame Street (Sesame Street n.d.). Kwanzaa is now included in the cultural and religious events that the program highlights during the holiday season. In a vignette from an episode aired in recent seasons, a child narrator describes how and why his family celebrates Kwanzaa. Sesame Street frequently implements child narrators in order to create a sense of shared experience among its young viewers. All members of the family in this vignette are wearing traditional African garments that would have also been worn by members of Maulana Karenga's US Organization in the Sixties and Seventies.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural nationalists and black power advocates used Afrocentric garments in the Sixties and Seventies in order to reclaim a part of their heritage and redefine the role of African Americans within American society at large. The avant-garde jazz scene of this period was the most significant organized collective of individuals to utilize these fashions. As self-proclaimed artists and cultural ambassadors, these jazz musicians deliberately communicated their artistic expressions to an adventurous and receptive audience. These expressions included audible manifestations like music and visible manifestations such as album art and clothing. Much like the music they created, these artists were willing to make radical fashion statements that were out of step with the popular culture of the time. Their radical clothing and radical music might have been incomprehensible to audiences of the time, but the bold and collective spirit with which they made their cultural proclamations influenced several subsequent generations of creative individuals. If Kwanzaa's appearance on such a massively adored show as Sesame Street is an

indication, the aspirations of the African American cultural activists of the Sixties and Seventies have been met to an impressive extent.

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a message from mozambique

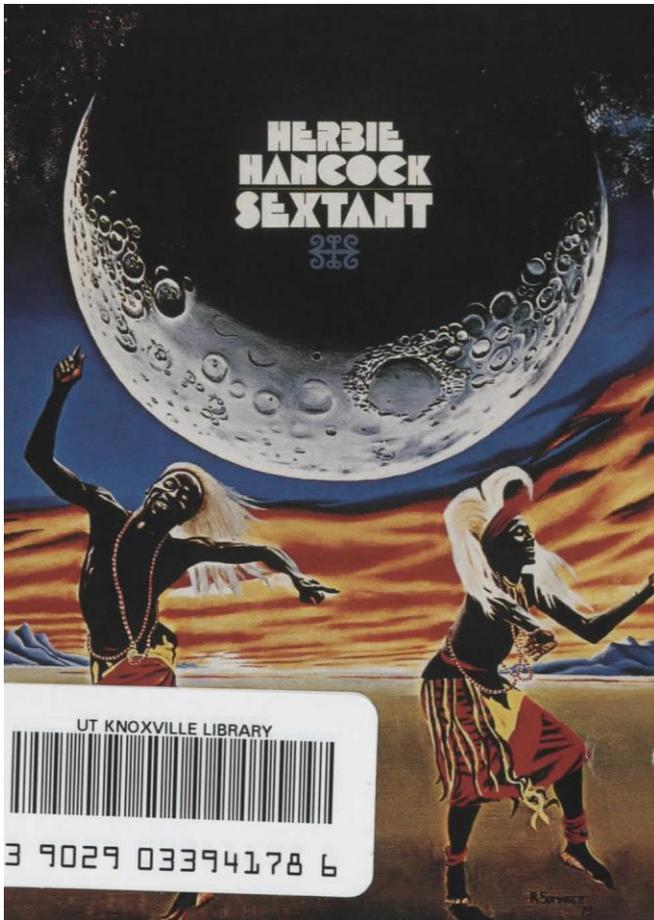
JuJu



*Figure 1: Cover art from (The Oneness of) Juju's 1973 album A Message from Mozambique. Image courtesy of Peterson and Baker (2009).*



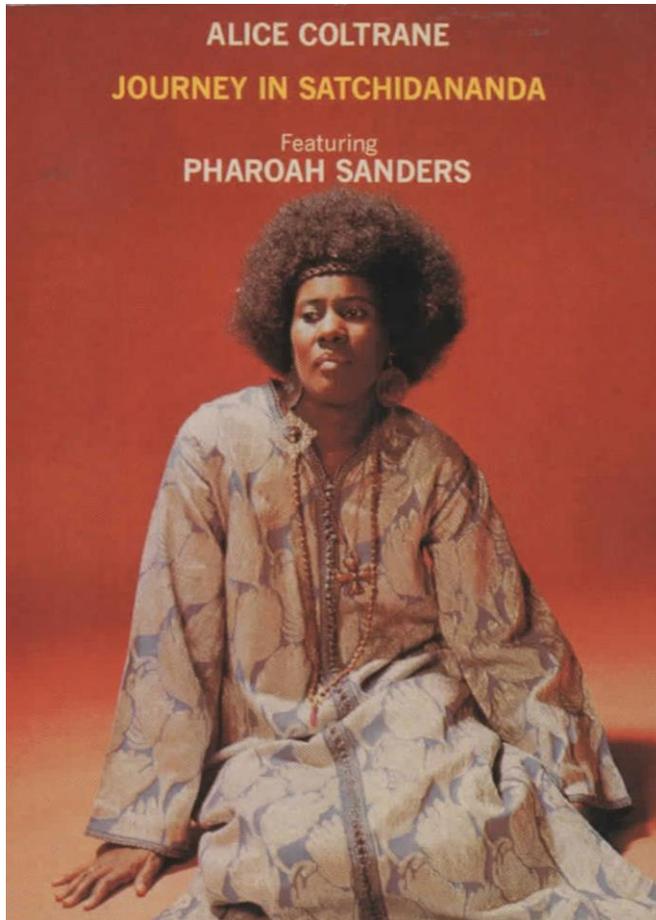
*Figure 2: Cover image from John Coltrane's 1966 free jazz album Ascension. Image courtesy of Peterson and Baker (2009).*



*Figure 3: Cover art from Herbie Hancock's 1973 album Sextant. This album is from Hancock's "Mwandishi" period. During this time, the members of Hancock's group gave themselves Kiswahili names, much like the members of Karenga's US Organization. Image courtesy of George F. Devine Music Library, University of Tennessee.*



*Figure 4: Clifford Brown live at Birdland, 1954. Note Brown's traditional attire. Image courtesy of Cuscuna, Lourie and Schneider (2000).*



*Figure 5: Alice Coltrane on the cover of her 1971 album Journey into Satchidananda. Note her various accent pieces. Image from author's private collection.*



Figure 6: James Mtume on the back cover of his 1972 album *Alkeb-Lan: Land of the Blacks*. Note the pattern on Mtume's clothing and the pyramid backdrop. Image courtesy of Peterson and Baker (2009).



*Figure 7: Don Cherry on the cover of 1970's "Mu" Second Part. Image courtesy of Peterson and Baker (2009).*