
John Coltrane, “Alabama”



Source: Hugo van Gelderen / Anefo

On Sunday, September 15, 1963, a bomb exploded at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls and injuring 22 other worshippers. The incident had a profound effect on many Americans. One of them was John Coltrane, one of the leading jazz saxophonists in the 1950s and '60s, when American jazz was at its commercial peak.

Coltrane composed and performed “Alabama” that same year in response to the 16th Street bombing. The song is a jazz instrumental, and does not have any words. Music historian Craig Werner describes it this way:

“Coltrane patterned his saxophone lines on the cadences of Martin Luther King’s oration at the funeral of the four girls who died. Midway through the song, mirroring the part of the sermon where King transforms mourning into a statement of renewed determination, Elvin Jones’s drums rise up from a whisper to a tumult of directed anger. Propelled by the rhythms, Coltrane’s sax summons the people to what can only be understood as a unified assault on Pharaoh’s palace.”

Questions for Discussion

1. Why might a successful musician such as Coltrane have wanted to compose a song about this incident?
2. What kind of mood does the song create? Are you able to hear the connection between the church bombing and the mood Coltrane tries to create in the song?
3. How does the mood change as the song progresses? What does Werner mean by “a unified assault on Pharaoh’s palace”?
4. Does a song need lyrics to communicate an idea? Can an instrumental song be as influential as a song with lyrics?