

Church of John Coltrane forced out of historic jazz district in San Francisco

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue

The altar is set with a drum kit, a keyboard, a saxophone, and—most importantly—a much-loved vinyl rendering of a jazz classic, complete with liner notes.

This is St. John Coltrane Church, a 48-year-old San Francisco institution, where Sunday masses are built on a live performance of *A Love Supreme*, a 33-minute opus that saxophonist Coltrane wrote to express the awesomeness of God.

“St. John Coltrane referred to this music as being an expression of higher ideals,” said Wanika Stephens, the church’s pastor, who played the electric bass guitar during a recent Sunday mass, one of the last in the church’s former storefront location in the Fillmore District. A standing-room-only crowd of about 80 people moved to the beat, some from the neighborhood and some from as far away as Germany, Spain, and Australia.

“The music has a power to unify us, to bring us together,” she said. “Because of that, he felt that a brotherhood was there in the music, and if you had that brotherhood, you would have no more poverty, no more war. The music has that power.”

This belief is reflected in an oversized icon of the musician that dominates one wall of the church. His penetrating eyes stare straight out, his left hand clasping a saxophone spewing flames, his right hand clutching a banner that reads, “Let us sing all songs to God to whom all praise is due.”

Prices are rising in the Fillmore, once home to numerous jazz clubs. Church officials say the landlord stopped accepting their monthly \$1,600 rent checks two years ago and attempted eviction last September. That was averted with a petition of 4,000 signatures, far above the church’s membership of 700.

Landlord Floyd Trammell—himself a pastor at another church—agreed to withdraw eviction proceedings if the church would vacate by the end of April. Trammell has repeatedly declined to discuss the eviction, issuing a statement that reads, in part, that he “operates in the same ruthless economy that has engulfed the entire

Fillmore District.”

The church’s last Sunday on Fillmore Street was April 24. Church officials raised more than \$11,000 for moving costs—including for its altar, instruments, and multiple eight-foot-tall Byzantine-style icons—through crowdsourcing. A few weeks later [the church announced that it had found a new location](#) in a different neighborhood nearby.

“The ruling principle of God’s love is a love supreme,” said Franzo W. King, the church’s founder, archbishop, and sax player. “The saxophone is like a surgical instrument that is capable of cutting away fear, of cutting away evil. . . . And John Coltrane is the supreme surgeon.”

King and his wife, Marina, attended a Coltrane show in 1965 and “had what they call a ‘sound baptism,’” said Nicholas Baham III, author of *The Coltrane Church: Apostles of Sound, Agents of Social Justice*. “They saw the Holy Ghost walk out on stage with John Coltrane, and the movement started from there.”

The Kings started the church in their San Francisco living room after Coltrane’s death in 1967. Three daughters and a son are all ordained clergy in the church and play instruments or sing in the liturgy. Grandchildren play the drums and keyboards and dot the chairs.

While church members revere Coltrane, they do not worship him. And while other churches have incorporated jazz into their worship services, the St. John Coltrane Church is different in that its members see the music as a vehicle to “Coltrane consciousness,” a higher state of mind achieved through the music and through living Coltrane’s antipoverty, antiwar, social justice beliefs.

“They use the music as a meditation, and they glean everything they can about living from Coltrane’s life and writing and music,” Baham said.

The church aligned itself with the African Orthodox Church, a denomination with Episcopal roots, in 1981. It moved from the King living room to other places in the Fillmore District.

When it departed, the area lost “a very important social justice player that has fought environmental racism, economic racism,” Baham said.

Stephens, the pastor, said there is an “energy of love, of truth, and of light that is compelling” the church forward.

“It is really larger than myself or any of the clergy there, but it is certainly something we all feel, and we are all a part of it,” she said. “It is a labor born out of love, and it is a service of love that we hunger for.” —Religion News Service

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