

AYLER BROTHERS

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artist, that's what counts."

"Why," I asked, "did bop seem too constricting to you?"

"For me," he said, "it was like humming along with Mitch Miller. It was *too* simple. I'm an artist. I've lived more than I can express in bop terms. Why should I hold back the feeling of my life, of being raised in the ghetto of America? It's a new truth now. And there have to be new ways of expressing that truth. And as I said, I believe music can change people. When bop came, people acted differently than they had before. Our music should be able to remove frustration, to enable people to act more freely, to think more freely."

"You see, everyone is screaming 'Freedom,' but mentally, everyone is under a great strain. But now the truth is marching in, as it once marched back in New Orleans. And that truth is that there must be peace and joy on earth. Music really is the universal language, and that's why it can be such a force. Words, after all, are only music."

"Sure," Don said. "Music is everybody's middle name, but people don't know this. They don't know they live by music all the time. Their thoughts are dancing; their words are music. People don't realize that they are continually producing and reacting to sound vibrations. When you're connecting—in work, in talk, in thought—you're making music."

I still wasn't clear as to how music could bring peace.

"People talk about love," Albert explained, "but they don't *believe* in each other. They don't realize they can get strength from each other's lives. They don't extend their imaginations. And once a man's imagination dies, he dies."

"Everybody," Don said, "is afraid to find out the ultimate capacities of his imagination."

"And our music, we think, helps people do just that," Albert said firmly. "This music is our imagination put to sound to stimulate other people's imaginations. And if we affect somebody, he may in turn affect somebody else who never heard our music."

In an article on the new music by Robert Ostermann in *The National Observer* (June 7, 1965), Don Ayler had rejected jazz as a name for their music because, he said, "Jazz is Jim Crow. It belongs to another era, another time, another place. We're playing free music." But he had also said that their music was not exclusively an expression of their personal problems or those of the American black man. "We aren't selfish enough to limit it to that," Don had been quoted in the piece.

I asked him if he still felt that way.

"Yes," said Don, "people have to get beyond color."

"True," Albert added, "but I think it's a very good thing that black people in this country are becoming conscious of the strengths of being black. They are beginning to see who they are. They are acquir-

ing so much respect for themselves. And that's a beautiful development for me because I'm playing their suffering, whether they know it or not. I've lived that suffering. Beyond that, it all goes back to God. Nobody's superior, and nobody's inferior."

"All we're guilty of anyway," said Don, "is breathing."

"I'm encouraged about the music to

who was playing bebop but who can feel the spirit of what's happening now. He's trying to reach another peace level. This is a beautiful person, a highly spiritual brother. Imagine being able in one lifetime to move from the kind of peace he found in bebop to a new peace."

"The most important thing," Don said, "is to produce *your* sound and have no psychic frustrations. And that involves having enough to eat."

"Yes," Albert said. "Music has been a gift to me. All I expect is a chance to create without worrying about such basics as food."

"To give peace," Don said, "you have to have peace." **AS**

BIG SID

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lead, I ran into Sid. We got to talking about the state of the business. We thought that things were tough then (in 1950), but little did we know that it was going to get tougher.

Sid was in a good position, as far as I could see, because he could play with the swing groups as well as the bop groups. However, Sid was feeling uneasy, and we spoke about the evils existing in the business, agreeing on every point.

Right then we decided to get together an all-star band. I am sure that the idea sprang from Sid's telling me that one of the biggest bookers had assured him of steady bookings if he put together a good group. This we proceeded to do, with Ken Kersey, piano; Benny Morton, trombone; Buster Bailey, clarinet; Lloyd Trotman, bass; myself, cornet; and Catlett, drums.

After a bit of woodshedding to set the routines, we opened at the Hurricane at 49th and Broadway, and I led the group. We had a two-week engagement there, followed by a week at the Showboat in Philly. Then, we got a week in Boston, playing the Hi-Hat Club. By that time, the handwriting was on the wall.

Buster Bailey left and was replaced by Edmond Hall. Sid and I were becoming disenchanted, since we had promoted the gigs ourselves, and, after we closed Boston, Catlett started haunting Mr. Big's anteroom, hoping he would keep his promise about booking Sid's group. But he was never "in." Then, I got the idea of sending him telegrams (in Sid's name), and still nothing happened. So after a month, I returned to my farm, saying goodbye to the fellows.

It was then late fall, and I suppose that Sid went home to mom in Chicago for his usual Christmas visit. He never came back. Big Sid, only 41 years old, had a heart attack after the holidays and died early in 1951. If he were still around, he could show some of these modern drummers a thing or two about communication, both with his fellow musicians and the audience.

Fortunately, Sid did a lot of recording, and his easy style lives on, to be heard, studied, or just enjoyed by a new generation who have lost the opportunity to evaluate this great man in person. For my money, Sid Catlett was the greatest. **AS**

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come," Albert said. "There are musicians all over the States who are ready to play free spiritual music. You've got to get ready for the truth, because it's going to happen. And listen to Coltrane and Pharaoh Sanders. They're playing free now. We need all the help we can get. That *Ascension* is beautiful! Consider Coltrane. There's one of the older guys