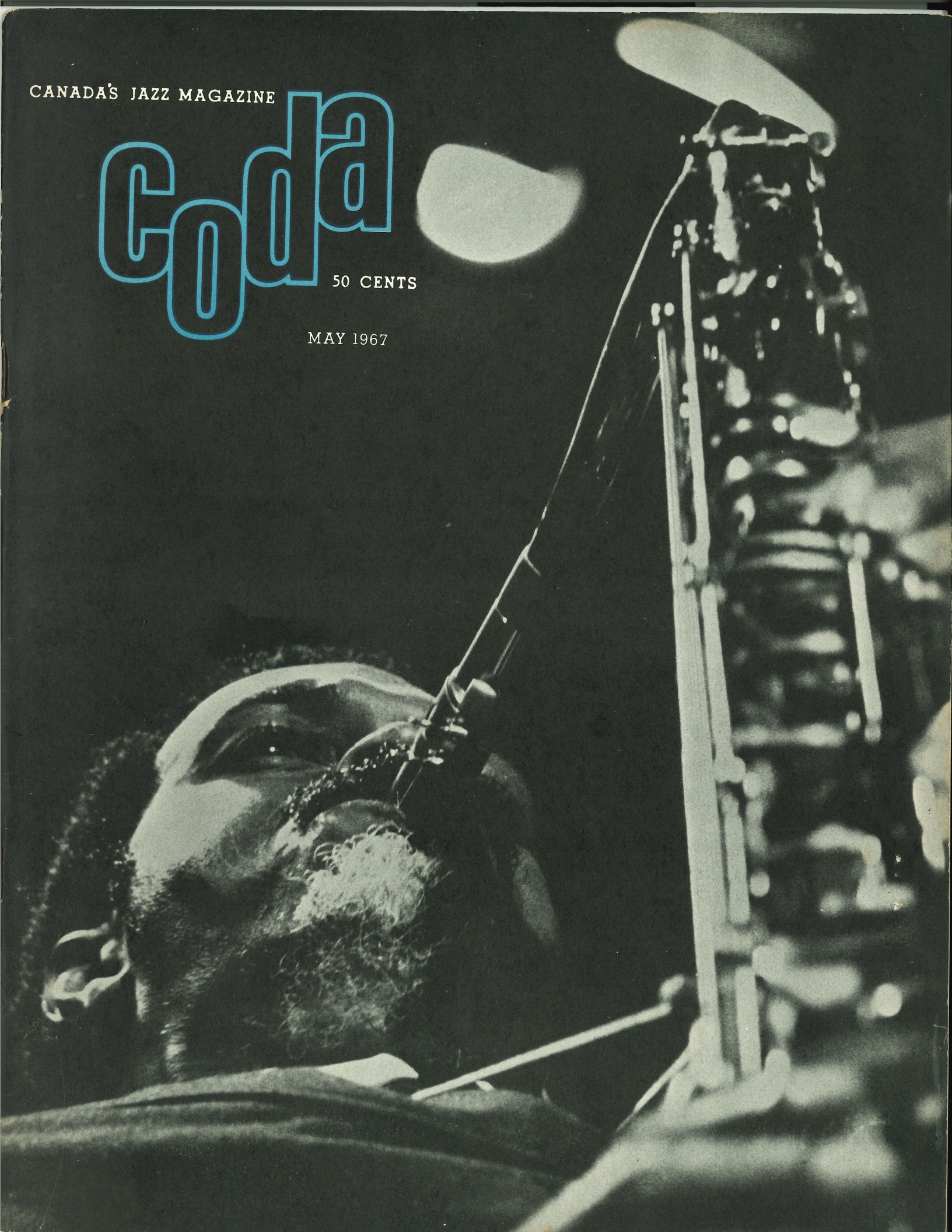


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# albert ayler on record

Free Spiritual Music - Part 1  
by Stu Broomer

Let us begin with a few statements that will suggest and clarify the possibilities, usefulness and existence of what has been called by Albert Ayler "free spiritual music", or, as I would have it, freely spiritual music, that is, a music that does nothing to prohibit its entry into the realm of the spirit, for want of a more appropriate term within the confines of the English language.

If one blows into a saxophone, he may at first find it difficult to produce a sound. When this is achieved, a combining of primary technique (that is, producing a sound, arbitrarily altered) with physical energy will produce sounds of wide timbral and pitch variety, dizziness, and headaches. If this form of practice is continued for a long period of time, without imposing consciousness on the gradual cataloging of mechanical properties, a music will eventually form that incorporates only infinitely variable essentials, humanity, which is indeterminate, and musical instruments, all rich in unexplored possibilities.

The inadequacy of modern bio-chemistry, the nature of world religions, the total originality of the musics of Albert Ayler's "imitators" suggest that we may all be within the range of the infinite. The continuing efforts of the U.S. government within the vague confines of the known universe suggest that man's capacity for self-expression is expanding daily, and that this may conflict with basic energizing sources.

The natural order of any improvised music diminishes as structural material increases. The revolution that took place in jazz around 1960 has given music a possibility for a state of permanent change,

a possibility of becoming simply god-inhabited.

The musics of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Sunny Murray, and Albert Ayler, taken together, sufficiently alter the traditions and conventions of black American music that a post-jazz expression becomes available to us. Through a rapid elimination of the historical and geographical aspects of style, Ayler has evolved from the working methods of Taylor and Coleman a music of universal implications that appears to be the last link in the transition from jazz, a music of closed cultural references, to a freely spiritual music that is of equal relevance to all who are exposed to it.

Ayler's first recording to receive distribution (an earlier record made in Sweden in 1962 with Swedish musicians is evidently impossible to find) was recorded in Denmark in 1963 with accompaniment provided by a trio of conventional jazz musicians. The choice of compositions, so unimaginative that it could have been used ten years ago by Miles Davis, include Summertime, On Green Dolphin Street, Bye Bye Blackbird, and Billie's Bounce, surely reflecting more on the repertoire of European musicians of an extremely dated hipness than on Ayler's. Albert Ayler has said of bop: "For me, 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?" On Billie's Bounce, a blues written by Charlie Parker, Ayler's music is completely removed from the conventional sense of continuity that one would expect. He plays a moving commentary on the senseless nature of the rhythm section; his mood is one of amused tenderness, that of a father whose knowledge is greater. On Summertime Ayler's expressive powers are fully evident, and his statement about boys is illuminated. It is obvious here that musics of artifice have little relevance to musics of content, Ayler's music having nothing of essential value in common with what bebop had become by 1963. This is the only recording that indicates Ayler's years of apprenticeship in jazz, an education of increasing irrelevance as his music grew. The only attempt here at a freely collective music is C.T., presumably named for Cecil Taylor, with whom Ayler had been playing in Scandinavia, and it is a failure because of the accompanist's failure to comprehend liberated motion. Ayler successfully parodies the bassist's approximation of Spanish music, mocking such artificial considerations and manages to incorporate scraps of folk melodies that later assumed an essential role in his organizational procedures.

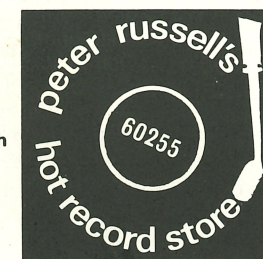
Ayler's next opportunity to record came a year later in New York for the same European label and circumstances were much more favourable. With musicians experienced in the new idiom, the directions of Ayler's music are much more apparent; the accompanists were capable of providing the wide frame of reference that the music demanded. Though a second horn is present it is not used in pre-determined ensembles, permitting the fluidly ornamental thematic statements to be made with complete ease. With a proper sense of motion established, the fast music makes its superiority evident in its ability to lead us to other planes, as heard here on "Holy Holy", a composition that uses a single very fast figure to build momentum. "Witches And Devils"



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is in the mold of the funeral dirges played by New Orleans marching bands. Ayler says, "that the truth is marching in, as it once marched back in New Orleans." This performance specifically recalls the Eureka Brass Band's recording of "Eternity".

On this recording Ayler is still involved in relatively traditional methods of improvisation, playing solos of conservative structure, logically evolving from thematic variation methods common in jazz since its inception. Though the materials are more unusual, indicating a fundamental disregard for the value of any specified pitches of European convention, the uses Ayler makes of them are actually more conservative than those of Eric Dolphy.

Already it is evident that Ayler's music has two fundamental tempos, extremely fast and extremely slow, though occasionally the senses of them overlap at this point. The slow performances, particularly the most successful one that Ayler has recorded, Witches And Devils, have an internal, "sensed", pace that is very fast. While about the fast material, there is ultimately a sense of increasing coolness. Zen Buddhist priests explain a similar contrast in their chanting by pointing out that the faster you chant the more you forget what you are not supposed to have on your mind, while the slower you chant the more you must concentrate on what you are doing, or you will forget the next word.

At this point Ayler had become a voice of sufficient strength in the New York underground to have played a concert with Cecil Taylor and established members of the jazz avant-garde were being drawn to his music. When I first heard Ayler's recordings with Gary Peacock and Don Cherry, I was favourably impressed by their collective work, but having heard earlier and later recordings of Ayler with musicians from his own Cleveland milieu I now regard the record with Cherry as the lowest point in Ayler's recording career, excepting of course the initial album of bebop material. Ayler's first recording to be issued in America, Spiritual Unity, with bassist Peacock and percussionist Sunny Murray, is still Ayler's greatest achievement on record as an improvisational musician, his greatest contribution to new saxophone music. On it he displays brilliantly, the expressive reservoir of the instrument, easily surpassing the earlier music of John Coltrane, and demonstrating the spiritual energies required of a new musician. He extends the basic ideals of the traditional jazz improvisational mode as far as they can be stretched, in an effort to reach new planes of consciousness.

His recordings from this period in the company of other horn players are much less successful, having abandoned the comparatively delicate interplay of "Spirits". Rather than destroying the self, "New York Eye And Ear Control", and "Ghosts" serve to rebuild it. At both sessions, Ayler's music was confronted by players lacking a conception of the fundamental necessity of energy, an element that gained in importance through the work of Cecil Taylor, then took precedence over European thought in the evolving musics of Murray and Ayler. "New York" included Ayler, Murray, Peacock, alto saxophonist John Tchicai, trombonist Roswell Rudd, and cornetist Don Cherry, and, apart from Murray and Ayler, all had considerable experience in a music that depended for its effectiveness on a cautious responsive-



ness to individual nuances, a method of collective improvisation employed by the New York Art Quartet the Jimmy Giuffre Three, and the Sonny Rollins band with Don Cherry. The band's power is diminished by a variety of conflicts in which the musicians individually or collectively attempt to impose their wills on the group music. Cherry, Rudd, Tchicai, and Peacock are all decidedly note-oriented which conflicts with Ayler's sound-orientation, that is, his fostering of a pure organic music. (Ayler has said that you have to really play your instrument to escape from notes to sounds, and I would add that once a musician has involved himself in sound, thinking in terms of notes, "thinking" becomes absurd.

"Ghosts" was recorded during a brief tour of Europe with Cherry, Peacock and Murray and here the clarity of the sound quality and the comparative simplicity make this an even more disastrous occasion. Cherry and Peacock play almost totally artificial music, their effect being melodramatic as they attempt to emphasize Ayler's grace, simplifying at every opportunity the natural complexity of the music. It is also the only recording of an Ayler band in which unisons have been attempted on his more ornate compositions, the sense of which is destroyed in the process. The method of improvising employed here by Cherry is characterized by an innate "cuteness" while Peacock's is highly manneristic.

The band that Ayler presented at Town Hall in May 1965 shows great progress in terms of a unified conception of group music. With Ayler at this concert were trumpeter Don Ayler, alto saxophonist Charles Tyler, bassist Lewis Worrell, and Murray, and unlike earlier co-workers their musics are energy-based, of an organic nature, moving towards a complete freedom from artificial considerations. Ayler's structuring materials are more distinctly useful than those of the earlier records, less baroque or ornamental, and closer to the essential grace of song tradition available in the diatonic scale. With "Spiritual Bells" Ayler's music enters more fully into the realm of the ritual. Individual statements emerge from intense repeated figures, the sense of which recalls mantras rather than riffs, which utilize the strongest intervals of Western music, natural overtones, the fourth, fifth, and octave, to get in touch with an hereditary unconscious, not to refresh the memory but to open the mind to the new stimuli being offered. Ayler's own performance here seems less important than that of "Spiritual Unity", but the music here is ultimately larger for its collectivity, its vision of a universe we must inevitably realize together. In the improvisations, particularly those of Tyler and Donald Ayler, there is a sense of a "musically" fragmented organic unity. The context of a phrase is no longer dependent upon the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic values spontaneously established by any preceding unit of expression but rather achieves a sense of cohesion from the union of psyche, physiology and musical instrument.

"Holy Ghost", from the same period, has cellist Joel Freedman in place of Charles Tyler, and though Freedman's music is of considerably less significance than Tyler's, the vastly superior recording quality gives the listener a better sense of the spiritual unity of the players. No amount of mere rehearsing enables musicians to play this kind of unison.

The only example of Ayler's music released since

"Bells" is "Spirits Rejoice" which similarly suffers from a very bad recording job. Spirits Rejoice was recorded in an empty concert hall and the element of ritual present in "Bells" and "Holy Ghost" is slightly diminished. The personnel is almost the same as that of "Bells" for most of the recording with Peacock and Henry Grimes replacing Lewis Worrell and providing a combination of energy and musical detail that was formerly impossible. "Spirits Rejoice" is music of an expanding love, like "Spiritual Bells" a carefully structured composition incorporating contrasting levels of expression. Much of it is pre-determined, incorporating folk-like melodies and the scope of it gradually expands to a series of intense solos.

While Ayler's music has evolved from an approach to form and group organization that can be seen as a natural amplification of properties apparent in the early music of Ornette Coleman (that is, Coleman's music up to and including 1961) to an expression of unique formal values, certain tendencies have remained. Ayler's slow music, when not an aspect of a larger structural unit, has a tendency to degenerate into posturing self-indulgence ("Saints" on the "Spirits" album, "Mothers" on "Ghosts", "Angels" on "Spirits Rejoice") that is I think a result of its source. Ayler is evidently striving in his slow music to invest with substance the diatonic American ballad tradition without altering its essential qualities, and to transform sentimentality into reality, thus encountering problems not confronting his significant contemporaries who borrow freely from other cultural sources in their slow music.

Generally, Ayler's formal materials contrast sharply with those of his contemporaries. He seldom relinquishes the major scale, using it to communicate levels of joy supposedly of another time. his approach to rhythm too, is unusual, and perhaps a reflection of Sunny Murray's drumming. Many of Ayler's thematic statements are played in a relaxed rubato manner that, however, in no way detracts from the ultimate expressive precision of his music but that further contributes to the impression of a multi-faceted peace that he is trying to convey.

When Ayler's compositions deviate from their diatonic roots, they do not move towards chromaticism but towards modality. "Holy Spirits", a highly evocative dirge is written in the phrygian mode. "Spirits" employs the two whole tone scales which would normally have the potential to destroy diatonic references, establishing a uniformity of reference to each of the twelve tones of the European tonal system but in his ordering of the two scales Ayler chooses to relate the second scale to the first by beginning its statement on the dominant tone of the diatonic scale based on the immediately preceding emphasized tone, thereby arresting the potential harmonic breadth of the whole tone scale's natural implication and leaving as reference the familiar diatonic scale.

Apart from the rare instances in which pre-determined materials clarify and amplify realization ("Spiritual Bells", "Spirits Rejoice") Ayler's music is most successful when the compositional nature is purely energizing, without imposing specific materials on the music ("Holy, Holy", "Holy Ghost", "The Prophet" on "Spirits Rejoice", "The Wizard" on "Spiritual Unity").

## Notes On Recordings

My Name Is Albert Ayler, the least essential recording of his music, is also the only one to have been released on a major American label, omitting a spoken introduction that is heard on European releases. It was originally issued as Debut 140 in Denmark, is available in Europe as Fontana 688 603 ZL, and in America on Fantasy 6014. Its value is primarily historical, if that is any value at all, but, if necessary, it can instruct.

"Spirits" is the album title of a recording made in New York in February 1964 for the European market. It has been released in Denmark as Debut 148, in England as Transatlantic 130 and as Fontana 688 608 ZL. It includes "Witches And Devils" and "Holy, Holy" and has, in addition to the best recorded sound of any Ayler recording, trumpeter Norman Howard's sole appearance on record with Ayler.

"Ghosts" was the last recording made by Ayler for a European label and was made during a visit to Denmark with Cherry, Peacock, and Murray in 1964 after the initial recordings for ESP. Performances of note are "Holy Spirit" and "Children". It has been released as Danish Debut 144 and as Fontana 688 606 ZL.

None of the European recordings of importance are readily available in North America, nor have they been released in stereo. The ESP releases, Spiritual Unity 1002 with Peacock and Murray; Bells 1010, from the Town Hall concert; Spirits Rejoice 1020, suffer from poor distribution, short duration, and terrible recording quality. The failure of major recording companies to show any interest in new music has resulted in numerous unrepresentative recordings being released. The best single Ayler

performance on record is "Holy Ghost" on an Impulse sampler A-90 aided by comparatively excellent recording that allows the listener to appreciate the important roles played by the accompanying musicians.

"New York Eye And Ear Control", ESP 1016, is made up from material recorded for Michael Snow's film of the same name. It was recorded a week after Spiritual Unity and was intended as an all star unit composed of musicians from the new wave. At the time of selection Snow did not know that Peacock and Murray were Ayler's regular accompanists.

To avoid confusion here, it would probably be useful to mention instances in which Ayler has recorded the same material under different titles and contrasting compositions under the same title. The pentatonically based Spirits is heard only on the first issue of "Spiritual Unity", but is also heard in a modified up-tempo version on "Ghosts" as Vibrations. Later editions of "Spiritual Unity" include a similar pentatonically based composition that is structured in units of three notes rather than four, which can also be heard on "Spirits" as Saints. The composition Spirits heard on the album "Spirits" is completely unrelated to the pentatonically based themes. "Holy, Holy" heard on the album "Spirits" has also been recorded on "New York Eye And Ear Control" as ITT. Holy, Holy also incorporates one of the themes from Ghosts, which Ayler has recorded four times, twice on "Ghosts" and twice on "Spiritual Unity."

Sunny Murray and Charles Tyler can be heard on their own ESP albums, 1032 and 1029 respectively.

(The quotations from Albert Ayler are taken from Down Beat, November 17, 1966.)



Don Ayler

BILL SMITH