

NOVEMBER 17, 1966 35c

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THE BI-WEEKLY MUSIC MAGAZINE

THE TRUTH IS MARCHING IN

An Interview with
the Ayler Brothers,
by Nat Hentoff

MEMORIES OF BIG SID

By Rex Stewart

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Albert Ayler

the truth is marching in

by nat hentoff



IN A RESTAURANT-BAR IN Greenwich Village, tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler was ruminating on the disparity between renown and income. In his case, anyway. Covers of his albums are prominent in the windows of more and more jazz record stores; references to him are increasingly frequent in jazz magazines, here and abroad; a growing number of players are trying to sound like him.

"I'm a new star, according to a magazine in England," Ayler said, "and I don't even have fare to England. Record royalties? I never see any. Oh, maybe I'll get \$50 this year. One of my albums, *Ghosts*, won an award in Europe. And the company didn't even tell me about that. I had to find out another way."

All this is said in a soft voice and with a smile but not without controlled exasperation. Bitterness would be too strong a term for the Ayler speaking style. He is concerned with inner peace and tries to avoid letting the economic frustrations of the jazz life corrode him emotionally. It's not easy to remain calm, but Ayler so far appears to be.

In manner, he is reminiscent of John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet—a gentle exterior with a will of steel, a shy laugh, and a constant measuring of who you are and what you want. Ayler's younger brother, trumpeter Don, is taller, equally serious, and somewhat less given to smiling.

"I went for a long time without work," Albert said. "Then George Wein asked me to come to Europe with a group of other people for 11 days starting Nov. 3. I hope to be able to add five or six days on my own after I'm there. Henry Grimes and Sonny Murray will be with Don and me. But before I heard from Wein, I'd

an interview with albert & don ayler

stopped practicing for three weeks. I was going through a thing. Here I am in *Time*, in *Vogue*, in other places. But no work. My spirits were very low."

"That's what they call the testing period," Don volunteered. "First you get exploited while the music is being examined to see if it has any value. Then when they find there's an ideology behind it, that there's substance to it, they'll accept it as a new form."

"What is its ideology?" I asked.

"To begin with," Albert answered, "we are the music we play. And our commitment is to peace, to understanding of life. And we keep trying to purify our music, to purify ourselves, so that we can move ourselves—and those who hear us—to higher levels of peace and understanding. You have to purify and crystallize your sound in order to hypnotize. I'm convinced, you see, that through music, life can be given more meaning. And every kind of music has an influence—either direct or indirect—on the world around it so that after a while the sounds of different types of music go around and bring about psychological changes. And we're trying to bring about peace. In his way, for example, that's what Coltrane, too, is trying to do.

"To accomplish this, I must have spiritual men playing with me. Since we are the music we play, our way of life has to be clean or else the music can't be kept pure."

This meant, he continued, that he couldn't work with someone addicted to narcotics or who otherwise is emotionally unstable.

"I couldn't use a man hung up with drugs, because he'd draw from the energy we need to concentrate on the music," Ayler said. "Fortunately, I've never had that problem. I need people who are clear in their minds as well as in their music, people whose thought waves are positive. You must know peace to give peace."

"You can hear what we're talking about," Don emphasized, "in the sound of the musicians we've worked with. It's a pure sound, like crystal."

"Like Gary Peacock," Albert said.

"That is," he said, smiling thinly, "if you can hear it on the kind of recordings we make. Except maybe for *Ghosts*, we have yet to be recorded right. So far, they've just run us into a studio and out again with never time to get a real balance. That's the worst way to exploit an artist. When I hear how well Coltrane is recorded on Impulse, I feel all the more keenly what is lost of us when we record."

"We're still in the position," Don added, "of the guy blowing a harp on a corner years ago, and some record man comes up to him and says, 'We'll give you something to drink while you play into this tape recorder, and we'll see what you can do.'"

The image of the harmonica player on the corner stirred Albert to a reminiscent smile, and he said, "I

used to blow footstool when I was 2. My mother told me how I'd hold it up to my mouth and blow, as if it were a horn."

THE ELDER AYLER brother was born in Cleveland, Ohio, July 13, 1936.

"My father played violin, and he also played tenor somewhat like Dexter Gordon," he said. "He played locally and traveled, but he never was where he wanted to be musically. He thought I might get to where he wanted to be; so when I was young, he insisted I practice, sometimes beating me to play when I'd rather be out on the street with the other kids.

"On Sundays I'd play duets with him at church. I started on alto, and gradually I began to work with various rhythm-and-blues combos, including Little Walter's. As for training, my father taught me until I was 10, and from 10 to 18, I studied at the Academy of Music with Benny Miller, who had played in Cleveland with Bird and Diz and who had also spent about four years in Africa. My technique grew to the point that in high school, I always played first chair."

For three years, Albert was in the Army. "It was at that time," he said, "that I switched to tenor. It seemed to me that on the tenor you could get out all the feelings of the ghetto. On that horn you can shout and really tell the truth. After all, this music comes from the heart of America, the soul of the ghetto."

"Do you feel, then, that only black men can play this kind of music?" I asked.

Ayler laughed and said, "There are ghettos everywhere, including in everybody's head."

"What this music is," Don added, "is one individual's suffering—through his imagination—to find peace."

"In the Army," Albert said, returning to autobiography, "we'd have to play concert music six and seven hours a day. But after that, we'd always practice to find new forms. The C.O. in the band would say about my playing during those times, 'He's insane. Don't talk to him. Stay away from him.' But all the guys—and Lewis Worrell was one of them—were just as interested as I was in getting deeper into ourselves musically."

Two years of that Army service were spent in France, and in off-base hours, Ayler played at the Blue Note and other Paris clubs. On being discharged in 1961, he stayed in Europe for a time. There were eight months in Sweden during which he traveled through the country in a commercial unit that included a singer.

"I remember one night in Stockholm," he said, "I started to play what was in my soul. The promoter pulled me off the stage. So I went to play for little Swedish kids in the subway. They heard my cry. That was in 1962. Two years later I was back with my own group—Don Cherry, Sonny Murray, Gary Peacock. The promoter woke up. He didn't pull me off the stage that time."

By 1963 Ayler was back in the United States. He

was heard in New York with pianist Cecil Taylor, and the word began to spread that whatever was going to happen in the music in the years ahead, Albert Ayler would be an important force. But lack of work at the time sent him back to Cleveland.

"Our parents are very understanding," he said. "When the economics get to be too much, we've always been able to go back home, work out new tunes, and keep the music going."

In 1964 Albert was back in Europe with bassist Peacock and drummer Murray, picking up trumpeter Cherry who was already there. Their tour included Sweden and Holland. Since then, records Ayler made in Europe and albums he recorded here for ESP have strengthened his reputation and have intensified curiosity about his work. But club and concert work remains exceedingly rare.

DON AYLER, born in Cleveland Oct. 5, 1942, was taught alto saxophone by his father. While studying at the Cleveland Settlement, he switched to trumpet when he was about 13.

"I enjoyed the trumpet more," Don explained, "because for me, it was possible to deliver a more personal feeling and explore a greater range on that instrument."

In 1963 the younger Ayler went to Sweden. "I wanted to free my mind from America," he said, "and I wanted to find my own form—not only in music but in thought and in the way I used my imagination. After four months in Stockholm, I felt my imagination wasn't being stimulated any more. And I wanted to be a free body, moving. So I went up to the North Pole. I hitchhiked three or four thousand miles to a place called Jokkmokk."

"With a big pack on his back," Albert added admiringly.

"In 1964," Don continued, "I came back home to Cleveland, and for three months, I just stayed in the house, practicing nine and 10 hours a day."

I asked the brothers about the primary influence on their music.

"Lester Young," Albert answered. "The way he connected his phrases. The freedom with which he flowed. And his warm tone. When he and Billie Holiday got together, there was so much beauty. These are the kind of people who produce a spiritual truth beyond this civilization. And Bird, of course. I met him in 1955 in Cleveland, where they were calling me 'Little Bird.' I saw the spiritual quality in the man. He looked at me, smiled, and shook my hand. It was a warm feeling. I was impressed by the way he—and later, Trane—played the changes.

"There was also Sidney Bechet. I was crazy about him. His tone was unbelievable. It helped me a lot to learn that a man could get that kind of tone. It was hypnotizing—the strength of it, the strength of the vibrato. For me, he represented the true spirit, the full force of life, that many of the older musicians had—like in New Orleans jazz—and which many musicians today don't have. I hope to bring that spirit

back into the music we're playing."

"The thing about New Orleans jazz," Don broke in, "is the feeling it communicated that something was about to happen, and it was going to be good."

"Yes," Albert said, "and we're trying to do for now what people like Louis Armstrong did at the beginning. Their music was a rejoicing. And it was *beauty* that was going to happen. As it was at the beginning, so will it be at the end."

As for Don's influences, they were John Coltrane, Parker, Eric Dolphy, and, later, Clifford Brown and Booker Little.

"Also Freddie Webster," he emphasized. "One of the best trumpet players there ever was."

I asked the brothers how they would advise people to listen to their music.

"One way not to," Don said, "is to focus on the notes and stuff like that. Instead, try to move your imagination toward the sound. It's a matter of following the sound."

"You have to relate sound to sound inside the music," Albert said. "I mean you have to try to listen to everything together."

"Follow the sound," Don repeated, "the pitches, the colors. You have to watch them move."

"This music is good for the mind," Albert continued. "It frees the mind. If you just listen, you find out more about yourself."

"It will educate people," Don said, "to another level of peace."

"It's really free, spiritual music, not just free music," Albert said. "And as for playing it, other musicians worry about what *they're* playing. But we're listening

to *each other*. Many of the others are not playing together, and so they produce noise. It's screaming, it's neo-avant-garde music. But we are trying to rejuvenate that old New Orleans feeling that music can be played *collectively* and with free form. Each person finds his own form. Like Cecil Taylor has beautiful form. And listen to Ornette Coleman—rhythmic form.

"When I say free form, I don't mean everybody does what he wants to. You have to listen to each other, you have to improvise collectively."

"You have to hear the relationship of a free sound when it happens," Don said, "and know it's right and then know what the next one will be."

"I'm using modes now," Albert said, "because I'm trying to get more form in the free form. Furthermore, I'd like to play something—like the beginning of *Ghosts*—that people can hum. And I want to play songs like I used to sing when I was real small. Folk melodies that all the people would understand. I'd use those melodies as a start and have different simple melodies going in and out of a piece. From simple melody to complicated textures to simplicity again and then back to the more dense, the more complex sounds. I'm trying to communicate to as many people as I can. It's late now for the world. And if I can help raise people to new plateaus of peace and understanding, I'll feel my life has been worth living as a spiritual (Continued on page 40)



It is OBVIOUS that the new jazz is here to stay. Few young musicians who feel drawn to jazz will be attracted to anything other than today's avant-garde. In light of this, it is the critic's central task to try to determine the viable directions the music is taking. It is not the critic's proper job to engage in partisan tactics on the behalf of some style to which he is personally attached and consign all other methods to the rubbish bin.

The current devotion to "political" and pejorative ranting on the part of both critics and musicians has, perhaps, its own value. But in the meantime, the tasks of explication and evaluation remain.

The development, then, of the new jazz probably depends on the emergence of some dominant figures who will determine its course, as such figures have in the past. Without the presence of such players, the new jazz may well founder in a sea of competing alternatives, none of which may achieve realization if there is no one to pull them together and realize some common style that can be consolidated by the talents of lesser musicians.

The strongest contender for this position seems to be tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler. With this in mind it is worthwhile to consider where he comes from and to attempt to discern where he may be going. With someone who has recorded as seldom as Ayler, and whose public appearances have been so few, the difficulties of assessing his work are considerable.

However, his recording of *Summertime* provides a good starting point.

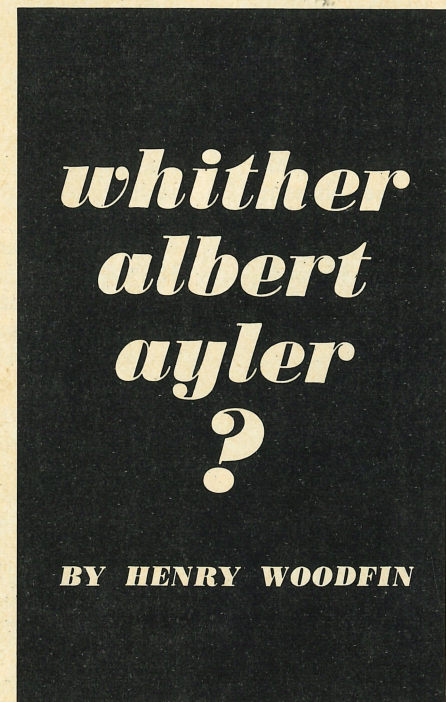
It is clear that his technique of melodic development comes, stylistically, directly from the work of Sonny Rollins and Thelonious Monk. Ayler carefully restructures the George Gershwin melody into a plaintive statement of exacerbated lyricism. He never really leaves the melody; rather he concentrates on a shaping of its contours that amounts to an exploration of its rhythmic and lyric possibilities.

Nevertheless, the presence of a conventional post-bop rhythm section hampers his efforts. The pianist tries to guide him harmonically in irrelevant directions, and the drums only accent futilely, for the obvious fact is that Ayler's rhythmic manner comes from John Coltrane. He requires a non-timekeeping rhythm section that will provide a thick backdrop of percussion around which he can weave a line that sings with his vibrato and cellolike timbres.

On his ESP trio date drummer Sonny Murray and bassist Gary Peacock

give him the type of accompaniment he needs—Peacock plays contrarhythmically and contramelodically to Ayler's line while Murray's drums lay down an independent quasi-melodic pattern with which Ayler interlaces his improvisation.

With this sort of sympathetic backdrop, Ayler displays his full talent. The almost hypnotic quality of his harsh, brooding tone and line sets up an emotional ambience of deep, nearly shattering desolation. *Spirits* and the second version of *Ghosts* are ad-



mirable exhibitions of his skill.

However, it is also apparent that Ayler does have certain problems.

The highly tense emotional atmosphere of the improvisations seems to incline him to rather gratuitous howls and snorts that do not, as similar devices in the hands of Rollins do, further the consistent development of his variations. Rather, they seem like fill-ins to cover the momentary failure of inspiration or planning. They work as fillers, much as the fast runs of arpeggios to which the less skillful—and some of the more adept as well—bop players resorted.

Similar problems of full articulation are to be found in the concert recording *Bells*. Ayler's work here seems again fragmentary, although this is offset by those fragments that succeed

RECORD REFERENCES:
Fantasy 6016: *My Name Is Albert Ayler—Summertime*
ESP 1002: *Spiritual Unity—Spirits and Ghosts*
ESP 1010: *Bells*

in consistency and lyricism.

Certainly the merely emotion-charged howls and shrieks Ayler contributes can be considered as errors of the still-maturing musician playing in an atmosphere thick with intense feeling. Nevertheless, one must ask of any performer that his performance be clearly expressed and worked out. The only alternative is John Cage, and I don't think that is Ayler's way.

The direction that seems more promising for him—and it demands talent and control—is to work further with the technique of "free" improvisation.

Such a procedure requires that both Ayler and his fellow performers achieve the highest sensitivity to each other and their respective styles. It has been the failure of stylistic congruity that has damaged the attempts at "free" jazz from Ornette Coleman to Coltrane. However, considering the relative novelty of the method, it is still too soon to expect any but the most halting of successes. But it does seem that this sort of approach is the only one that can save the jazz musician from the pitfalls of the repetition of the past and the inarticulate grunt.

Of course, an examination as cursory as this cannot take account of many of the major problems facing both Ayler and the other new jazzmen. For instance, without its traditional audience-base in the Negro community, will the new jazz end as only an imitation of modern concert music? Already its audience is now, in the main, made up of disaffiliated intellectuals and their various hangers-on, and this trend is probably not reversible in any creative manner. Also, the despair and anguish of the music may, in the long run, lead to a deadly narrowness of expression.

But Ayler seems to have a better chance than many of his contemporaries to avoid these perils.

His sense of form has already been well displayed, and it is doubtful that any musician with this feeling for structure can be content with formlessness. His rhythmic skills are not yet fully developed, but the rhythmic deftness of his playing and the ways in which he moves, like Coltrane, through and around an implicit time lead one to think he may be able to go beyond the facile, often arrhythmic, work of so many of Coltrane's followers. The lyricism of his work shows he can do more than echo the agitated emotions of his contemporaries.

Ayler may achieve an art which contains love and hate, despair and fulfillment, tragedy and comedy. If he succeeds, he will, indeed, be an artist to reckon with.

