

John Coltrane and The Jazz Revolution:

THE CASE OF ALBERT AYLER

PART TWO

by FRANK KOFSKY

Given the paucity of his recordings and the surely minute number of people who have ever seen him perform, the quantity of sheer nonsense that has been written about Albert Ayler is awesome to contemplate. Critics have been eager to read into his music all sorts of metaphysical implications: a manifesto of total freedom (with that entity being left conveniently undefined), a philosophy of anarchic nihilism, and so on. I certainly have no objections to interpreting the music; if anything, my constant lament has been that the Establishment writers are indecently eager to bury its social overtones. And for all I know, the critics who have reviewed Ayler with such virulent negativism really do hear all the unpleasant things in his playing that they claim to find. But at the very least our suspicions should be aroused by the fact that the anti-Ayler polemics have been devoid of any musical analysis. If, after all, Ayler is a fraud, shouldn't there be some more persuasive way of demonstrating this than mere name-calling?

My own belief is that the absence of any musical analysis on the part of the saxophonist's opponents is not simply accidental; that, in actuality, the results of such an examination lead to conclusions just the opposite of those favored by the anti-Ayler faction. As I hope the following discussion will suggest, Ayler's music is not structureless, anarchic, or any of those things. It is, on the contrary, highly organized and gives every evidence of having been carefully thought out. But to appreciate this fact one needs to have kept abreast of recent developments in jazz—which is just where the critics have failed us. Similar situations in the other arts spring readily to mind. James Joyce was condemned by the literary critics of his day for the same alleged "defects" that permeate Ayler's work, even though, in retrospect, it has become embarrassingly obvious that form and structure was the one thing which Joyce did not lack. What happened with Joyce is the same thing that is happening today

with Albert Ayler and the other practitioners of the jazz revolution: the reigning critics, who have cut their teeth on other styles, are being out-paced by developments in the arts that are their supposed province.

On the other hand, though few in number, there are some critics who have refused to go toe the line in denouncing Albert Ayler; two writers whom I have found particularly helpful in appreciating his music are LeRoi Jones and Frank Smith, whose remarks form the jumping-off point for my own discussion. To begin with, I quote Jones' observation that "Albert Ayler has heard Trane and Ornette Coleman and has still taken the music another way" (notes to *The New Wave in Jazz*, Impulse 90). If Jones is correct—and I have no doubts on this score—it follows that if one hasn't come to grips with Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, it will be impossible to grasp the mercurial essence of Albert Ayler.

Let us rephrase Jones' statement about Albert Ayler, Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman in a somewhat different way. Supposing that one were to try and devise a symbolic "equation" that expresses the rudiments of Ayler's playing, I think it would appear something like this:

Albert Ayler = 50% John Coltrane + 20% Ornette Coleman + 30% X; where X represents Ayler's own unique contributions to the foundations which Coltrane and Coleman have already laid down. Although these contributions have been the source of much controversy, I will have relatively little to say about them in this essay. The reason for this choice is my belief that many listeners—and in any event, most critics—have yet to comprehend the bases on which Ayler's music rests, and that until this elementary comprehension has been attained, it is clearly pointless to attempt to go beyond. Thus my primary focus will be on Ayler as he relates to the music that preceded him, particularly that of Coltrane and Coleman. In electing this approach, it should be apparent that I mean no slur at Ayler's "originality." I have already tried to explain why I be-

lieve that every artist possesses roots in the tradition of his art. If I concentrate on these roots in the case of Ayler, I do so not to belittle his own stature as an innovator—the howls of bewilderment arising from critical circles should be ample evidence for that stature—but to give the listener a bridge to the new music.

Of the saxophonists Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, the effect of the former on Ayler's thinking is the more obvious, but, in my opinion, the less profound. Echoes of Coleman are heard chiefly in Ayler's writing, much less in his playing. Ayler's composition *Ghosts* (ESP 1002), for example, is reminiscent of such Coleman songs as *Ramblin'* (Atlantic 1327)—both evoke a perennial blues-folk vein in jazz stemming from the Southwest. Similarly, the intricate tenor-trumpet contours of Ayler's *Holy Ghost*, performed with his brother Donald on trumpet and issued as one track on *The New Wave in Jazz*, is a direct offshoot from any number of Coleman's early works recorded by him and Don Cherry.

To anyone who has had a more than incidental encounter with the music of Coleman, his impact on Ayler will more than likely be apparent at once. This ought equally to be so in the case of Coltrane, especially if, as I hold, Coltrane's artistry looms larger in Ayler's playing than that of Coleman. Be that as it may, Coltrane's significance in this connection has gone largely unperceived, aside from the writings of LeRoi Jones. There are reasons for this, of course, just as there are for everything else under the sun. The aspects of Coltrane's work most relevant to Ayler are those first unveiled to the public on *Chasin' The Trane* (Coltrane "Live" at the Village Vanguard, Impulse 10). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to assert that the breath-taking devices which Ayler employs in such compositions as *Ghosts*—the anguished screams, the ferocious belches, the electrifying shrieks, the rasping harmonics—all have their roots in this incomparable performance by Coltrane. It was here that Coltrane gave us some notion of the ex-

traordinary range of human passions which the tenor saxophone could convey; properly conceived, therefore, it forms a landmark in the history of the jazz revolution.

For all of that, *Chasin' the Trane* was unambiguously damned by the jazz Establishment when it initially appeared in 1962. One of the two men to whom *Down Beat*, for instance, assigned this record for review dismissed Coltrane's magnificent accomplishment as a collection of "yawps, squeaks, and countless repetitive runs. . . . It is monotonous, a treadmill to the Kingdom of Boredom." The other reviewer, generally more favorably disposed to the jazz revolution, was more eloquent but almost equally negative. "In the final analysis," ran his verdict, "the sputtering inconclusiveness" of *Chasin' the Trane* made it seem "more properly a piece of musical exorcism than anything else, a frenzied sort of soul-baring" (*Down Beat Record Reviews*, vol. VII, pp. 42-43).¹ And this, mind you, about what posterity will without doubt hail as one of the high-water marks of this epoch in jazz.

The wave of adverse criticism inspired by *Chasin' the Trane* and Coltrane's successive albums (e.g. *Coltrane*, Impulse 21) largely explains the oblivion in which this period of Coltrane's development has languished so far as the critics are concerned.² Whether by his own choice or under the dictates of Impulse records, Coltrane began appearing in a variety of more restrained, even sedate, contexts: first with Duke Ellington (Impulse 30), then in an album of *Ballads* (Impulse 32), and finally in a lovely joint venture with singer Johnny Hartman (Impulse 40). Without casting the slightest aspersion on the value of these performances, it is still clear that they represent something of a retreat for Coltrane from the artistic pinnacle that *Chasin' the Trane* established.³

But while *Chasin' the Trane* was being roundly condemned by the critics, this was not at all its fate with the jazz revolutionaries, who, as their music attests, were eager to benefit from the lessons which Coltrane had drawn. There is a certain amount of irony in this situation. Though the jazz revolution has

finally begun to gain a niche for itself, the artistic sources for that musical upheaval have yet to be completely understood and appreciated; hence one of my aims in this essay is to redress the historical imbalance by pointing to the formative role which Coltrane's music, most notably *Chasin' the Trane*, has played in the jazz revolution. Inasmuch as Albert Ayler is among the most adventurous of the revolutionaries, I take it that if the argument regarding Coltrane's influence is valid for him, it certainly will be equally applicable to Ayler's less iconoclastic peers.⁴

In a perceptive and enlightening essay on Ayler, Frank Smith notes that, "All of Albert's playing . . . follow[s] the same simple straightforward format: a very lyrical tune with an old timey feeling is set forth and then the playing gradually gets into something more and more intense and ferocious until the listener is practically overwhelmed" (*His Name is Albert Ayler*, *JAZZ*, December 1965, p. 12). Smith is absolutely correct in this discussion, and it is a continual source of amazement to me that no one before him has been able to discern this gradual heightening of complexity as the basis of Ayler's improvisations. But there is still another facet of Ayler's approach, one not mentioned by Smith, which complements this technique. Here I am thinking of what Gunther Schuller some years ago christened *thematic improvisation*—the construction of spontaneous variations which reflect the contours of the theme as well as its underlying harmony. This component of his music deserves at least as much stress as Smith has laid on the technique of increasing complexity, provided we bear in mind that an enormous gulf separates Ayler's thematic improvisation from that which is familiar to us from the work of, say, Thelonious Monk or Sonny Rollins. As for the missing link between Monk and Rollins on the one hand, and Ayler on the other—that is supplied by none other than John Coltrane.

The most direct way to hear the relationship between Coltrane and Ayler is by comparing one of Ayler's recent works with Coltrane's *Chasin' the Trane*; I have for this purpose selected the sec-



JOHN COLTRANE by Charles Shabacon

ond version of *Ghosts* from Ayler's *Spiritual Unity* album (ESP 1003). *Chasin' the Trane* is, of course, a blues, whereas *Ghosts* is a sixteen-measure piece with a Midwestern, almost folk-song lilt to it; yet in view of the profound similarities that connect the two, these differences are ephemeral. Beginning with the Coltrane selection and following it with the Ayler, the first thing that strikes the listener is the parallel between the two: the identical tonal devices which Coltrane introduces as a means of creating tension are, as I have remarked above, utilized and extended by Ayler. This is not to say that Ayler is a carbon copy of Coltrane, for such a statement is totally false; were it not, Ayler's path would have been much smoother than the obstacle course which the critics have erected for him to run. The point I wish to make by calling attention to his use of certain Coltrane devices is that the supposedly alien sounds emanating from Ayler's saxophone are, in reality, an integral part of the jazz vocabulary—unless, that is, one is prepared to banish Coltrane as well as Ayler beyond the gates of jazz' Garden of Eden.

Once the selections by Coltrane and Ayler have been heard in immediate succession, the similarities in timbre, in the use of the upper and lower register, mul-

1. As a further comment on the sad state of the critical art, note that one of the reviewers followed the album notes (by Nat Hentoff) in ascribing Coltrane's first solo on the track *Spiritual* to the soprano saxophone, but adding: "the soprano's timbre sounds much like his tenor's" (*ibid.*, p. 41). Small wonder for the "resemblance"—Coltrane was actually playing the tenor! Does it come as any surprise, given this all too typical incident, that the critical profession is not held in higher esteem?

2. Recall that this was also the time of Leonard Feather's holy crusade in *Down Beat* against what he denigrated as "anti-jazz"; see, for instance, his column in *Down Beat*, 15 February 1962, p. 40. It was only subsequently that Feather underwent his conversion to the point of view that "critical infighting," as he terms it, is an unmitigated evil (*Down Beat*, 16 December 1965). Having inadvertently unleashed the contents of Pandora's Box, Feather now wistfully stands beside it, hoping in vain that he can somehow stuff the revolutionary furies inside again. As an Englishman, his attention is properly directed to the legend of King Canute, whose enterprise Feather's suggests in its chances for success.

3. Since this "retreat" was not duplicated in Coltrane's personal appearances, my hunch is that the decision to make it came from Impulse rather than from Coltrane himself.

4. Actually, there is already a great deal of evidence that the more conventional jazz revolutionaries are deeply indebted to Coltrane—sometimes so much as to verge on outright plagiarism. Two instances come to mind. The first of these is Charles Lloyd's "composition," *How Can I Tell You?* (Columbia CL 2267), almost a note-for-note recapitulation of Coltrane's performance of *I Want to Talk About You* (observe the similarity even in titles) on *Soultrane* (Prestige 7142); the second is John Handy's *If Only We Knew* (Columbia CL 2462), which is constructed on the same scale as, and which incorporates many of the identical phrases from, Coltrane's *Spiritual*. That neither of these two borrowings have ever been mentioned in print in any jazz magazine that I know of only underlines my earlier comments on the failure of the critics to appreciate the role of Coltrane's leadership on the younger jazz revolutionaries.

tiple repetitions, harmonics, shrieks, screams, and so forth, should require no further commentary.⁵ But beneath the resemblances of tone and timbre there is an even more basic link between Coltrane and Ayler: *both men base their improvisations throughout the entire solo on the theme.* This is a very significant consideration which must not be lost sight of. Coltrane and Ayler possess a highly developed sense of structure (though as the more mature man, this intuition has been perfected to a higher degree by Coltrane). Contrary to what the critics have maintained in each case, it is anything but true that the music of either is sprawling, formless, chaotic. In point of fact, the pair of compositions at hand indicate that the two saxophonists are capable of devising a solo of several minutes' duration based on a single underlying theme, a procedure which imparts an impressive degree of continuity of their improvisations.

Conceivably, the continuity of thematic improvisation may be easier to detect in *Chasin' the Trane*—where the theme includes the first few solo choruses as well as the initial melody—because it is a blues, and as such is familiar to most jazz devotees. An intensive listening to this piece reveals that Coltrane develops his solo using the few basic phrases of the first half-dozen or so choruses as building blocks; and that these building blocks are repeatedly inserted as points of reference as the improvisation gains in complexity and fervor. Exactly the same principle can be used to dissect Ayler's performance on *Ghosts*, for *each one of his choruses is shaped as a variation on the theme of the composition.* To appreciate this, all one need do is hum that theme while listening to the solo. As the recognition dawns that Ayler ascends where the theme ascends, descends where it descends, breaks off his phrases where the melody shifts from one sequence to the next, and so on, whatever "mystery" one may have found in his playing should be dispelled.

Although it is always risky to try and plumb the motives of an artist, my guess is that Ayler has adopted the technique of spinning out a solo based on a simple theme because it allows him to create a series of sounds of extraordinary force and effectiveness, all the while keeping the overall work relatively direct and uncomplicated. In any case, it should be noted that Ayler's procedure is just the reverse of that of the neo-beboppers, who chose to utilize intricate chord sequences but are then forced to pay the price by restricting themselves to comparatively



ALBERT AYLER by Charles Stewart.

conservative sounds and melodies. Ayler appears to have elected to sacrifice something of the harmonic complexity of bebop in order to gain a greater freedom to evoke certain feelings and emotions in a very immediate fashion. But regardless of whether Ayler's reasoning has actually proceeded along these lines, if one listens to any of his compositions in the way I have suggested, it should be evident that there is a guiding logic to them. Indeed, the claim of some writers to discover nothing but raging anarchy in his work would be merely ludicrous, were it not for the fact that each one of these mistaken verdicts places new barriers between Ayler and his potentially large audience.

To be sure, if I may refer again to Frank Smith, with Ayler "there is even less heed paid to the tempered pitch of the piano keyboard than in Ornette Coleman's playing." Well, and what of it? Let us not forget that this is 1966, not 1956. Coltrane and Ornette Coleman have each in his own way shown us that jazz need not be forever chained to the keyboard of a piano. For that matter, as I have previously argued elsewhere (*The Avant Garde Revolution: Origins and Directions*, JAZZ, January 1966), one hallmark of the jazz revolution lies in the attempt to dispense with the framework of tempered pitch, which is now perceived by the new black musicians as an unnecessary restriction. It is only a question of time until this viewpoint becomes generally accepted, although it may never be the only one in jazz. Already one can hardly listen to Albert Ayler on *The New Wave in Jazz* album and then immediately turn, as does the record, to traditional styles of improvisation without feeling that there is something terribly constricting, even banal, about these repetitive chords and invariant rhythms of the fifties.

Perhaps an analogy to the present situation in jazz is to be found in the bebop revolution of the 1940s. Many men who had served abroad during World War II were completely disoriented by the startling changes that jazz had undergone in their absence. Much the same sense of dismay and non-comprehension now prevails even within the ranks of those critics convinced of the necessity for aesthetic—not to say social—change. While their good will is not open to question, their preparations seem sadly remiss; and this time there is no World War II on which these deficiencies can be blamed. Good will, in short, is insufficient; it will carry one only a very limited distance. Above all, the music emanating from the jazz revolution must be *listened to*, not only as it appears before us today, but as it evolved in its transitional stages since the late 1950s. Only in this way can we hope to remain in touch with the most vital developments. Faced with a schism between the aspirations of the musicians and the critical response to those aspirations, one must conclude that it is the critics who have fallen behind the times, rather than the musicians who have gotten "ahead" of theirs. When all of the critical bluster has long since been buried and forgotten, the musicians will still be there, and it will be their consciousness alone which determines what the jazz lovers of future years will be privileged to hear.

5. Even if one were denied the use of the recordings, it would be possible for a perceptive reader to infer the relationship between Ayler and Coltrane merely by observing the similarity of the complaints and the abusive language directed by the critics at each. On this score of the anti-Coltrane columns by Leonard Feather (cited in a previous note) and John Tynan (*Take Five, Down Beat*, 23 November 1961, p. 40). Incidentally, it is more than coincidental that, by virtue of also basing himself on *Chasin' the Trane*, Charles Lloyd's playing in *Ol' Five Spot* (Columbia CL 2267) takes on a decidedly Aylerish hue. Two men traversing the same road in the same direction are bound to wind up at the same destination.