

John Coltrane and The Jazz Revolution:

THE CASE OF ALBERT AYLER

by FRANK KOFISKY

I. Introduction

In an earlier essay (*Coltrane, Revolution, and the Avant-Garde, JAZZ, July and September 1965*) I set forth the thesis that the innovations of John Coltrane, while neglected by most writers, were decisive for the thinking of younger jazz revolutionaries. The purpose of this article will be to document that claim for one particular revolutionary jazz artist, Albert Ayler. Before beginning that task, however, I want to clear up some misconceptions occasioned by my earlier piece.

First of all, there is the matter of "influences." If we say that one artist—or one scientist, or one writer—has been influenced by another, I do not see that this necessarily detracts from the reputation of the former. It is all very well to state, as one commentator has done, that the new jazz musicians are influenced "by their own individuality." But so far as that goes, what artist is not? More germane is the point that the artist's individuality is never the only root out of which his art grows. Every artist lives at a certain time, in a certain place, absorbs certain social and intellectual conventions—some implicit, some explicit—undergoes certain formative experiences, artistic and otherwise, and so on and so forth. All of these things, to a greater or lesser degree, are the "influences" that shape the man's art. It should be clear from this that there is nothing to be ashamed of in admitting to these influences; indeed they could be avoided only if one were to be reared, Crusoe-like, in total isolation from the rest of the human community. The question to ask about "influences," therefore, is not whether an artist has them; by the very fact that he has learned enough from his predecessors to deserve the title of artist, he most assuredly does. The question is, rather, what *use* he makes of these influences. The artist of genius transmutes these raw materials of his craft into artistic gold. The second-rater, on the other hand, re-

mains rigidly bound by his "influences" and is unable to rise above the stature of imitator. Both Paul Quinichette and Sonny Rollins have drawn on the ideas of Lester Young; but what a world of difference in the way two men have employed them!

There are countless other instances to be found in jazz of the process whereby a creative artist reworks ideas absorbed from the environment and presents them to us in a brilliant and radically unexpected form. It has frequently been noted, for example, that Charlie Parker was far from the first saxophonist to base his solos on the chord sequence of a song rather than its melody. But what saxophonist before him could duplicate the unflagging inventiveness and harmonic imagination of Parker's inventions?

What made Parker unique was not merely the ability to derive a solo from the chords of a piece; numerous swing-era musicians could do as much. Rather, Parker differentiated himself from his predecessors by employing the upper intervals of the chord as a basis for his solo and by executing the most demanding passages at phenomenal speeds—in sixteenths and thirty-seconds, where others were restricted to eighth-notes—with no loss in swing. Thus, simply by extending the accepted procedures of the day one or two steps further than they had previously been taken, Parker emerged with a wholly new style of music, different in kind from anything heard earlier. This is one more illustration of the validity of Hegel's mode of dialectical reasoning: beyond a certain point, a *quantitative* change (e.g. the use of the eleventh and thirteenth intervals of a chord instead of the seventh and ninth) produces a change in *quality* (the transition from swing to bebop). Similarly for John Coltrane. Many of the devices that we associate with him were in fact initially introduced by other musicians: in the case of utilizing mid-Eastern modes, Yusef Lateef; in the case of playing harmonics on the saxophone, a still-anonymous Phil-

adelphia musician. From this we conclude that there is much more to originality and creativity than mere artistic priority; what Coltrane does with harmonics is of vastly greater interest to us than whether he was the first saxophonist to play them. Still less can creativity be equated with complete freedom from "influences."

A second point concerns the relative importance of John Coltrane in the jazz revolution. It has been argued (see, for instance, a letter by Frank Smith in *JAZZ, November 1965*) that in calling attention to Coltrane's role in the jazz revolution, I have slighted the contributions of other artists. If so, my sole defense is that I have been guided by the aural evidence. I have always felt, and continue to do so now, that the practicing artist is the final arbiter of what is valuable and what is not in his art; and that the function of the critic is, accordingly, not to lecture the artist, but to explain what he is doing to his audience. Consequently, when I say that Coltrane's impact on the jazz revolution, particularly saxophonists, has been greater than that of, say, Ornette Coleman, I am merely transcribing into print what I detect in the playing of the jazz revolutionaries, not attempting to foist my own ideas off on either the musician or the listener.

To call attention to Coltrane's significance in the jazz revolution, of course, does not mean that other artists have not helped shape the course of that revolution. This disclaimer is especially necessary with regard to Ornette Coleman. I must confess that, with the exception of Coleman's wholly improvised *Free Jazz* album (Atlantic 1364), I do not hear in any of his recordings developments so earth-shaking as to justify some of the ambitious titles bestowed on this music (*The Shape of Jazz to Come, Change of the Century, Tomorrow is the Question*). Indeed, if one were to compare the rhythmic freedom of Coleman's group with that of Coltrane's, the only possible con-

clusion would be that Coltrane's approach liberates the soloist to a much greater degree. That this is so is a consequence of the more flexible rhythmic base of Coltrane's music, which in turn arises not from the absence of a fixed pulse—only a few drummers of the jazz revolution, namely Milford Graves and Sonny Murray, have been able to dispense with such a pulse—but from the juxtaposition of rhythms based on a beat of *four* against those based on a beat of *six*. Still, simply by bringing into the open the idea that neither the bass line nor the pulse have to be maintained unchanged throughout a performance, Coleman has had a profound effect on young black musicians; and this would be true if he had never recorded a note of music. For that reason it is impossible to estimate Coleman's importance to the jazz revolution down to the last decimal-place. Even if we don't find Coleman's phrases popping up in the work of the new saxophonists with the same frequency as those of Coltrane, we can nonetheless be certain that the thinking of the younger men has benefited from his ground-breaking efforts. For that matter, it is entirely possible that Coleman's ultimate significance for the jazz revolution will be primarily that of a theoretician, rather than that of a performer.*

*The above was written before I was able to obtain Coleman's most recent recordings, Blue Note 4224–4225; but there is nothing in them that would lead me to alter a single word. Both of Coleman's drummers, Charles Moffett and Edward Blackwell (the latter now to be heard with Don Cherry, e.g. Blue Note 4226), function in what is an essentially neobebop rhythmic framework. For completeness, I should add that inasmuch as my concern in this article is with saxophonists, I am omitting any effort to deal with the music of Cecil Taylor. Doubtless, however, his general ideas are no less crucial than those of Coleman for the development of the jazz revolution.

A final subject remains to be mentioned before passing on to consider Albert Ayler. My essay on John Coltrane and the jazz revolution was revised and completed in the winter of 1965, shortly before a whole host of new saxophonists burst upon the scene. If the argument of that essay regarding Coltrane's sway over the jazz revolution is not to be invalidated, it must now be shown that the more recent arrivals—including, besides Albert Ayler, Byron Allen, Marion Brown, Giuseppe Logan, Pharaoh Sanders, John Tchicai, and Charles Tyler—also mirror his influence. Although I will not take space here to go into great detail, I think it quite clear that Coltrane's innovations

can be heard in the playing of these men, with the single possible exception of Tchicai. Thus even in a composition titled *Decision for the Cole-man* (ESP 1005), Byron Allen inserts phrases that we have learned to recognize from Coltrane; and this is much more the case on the succeeding track, *Today's Blues Tomorrow*. For Giuseppe Logan, the imprint of Coltrane's mid-Eastern soprano saxophone ventures is plain in such compositions as *Tabala Suite* and *Dance of Satan* (ESP 1007). As of 1964, Pharaoh Sanders' descent from the Coltrane family tree was so marked (for instance, ESP 1003) that any further comment would be superfluous; his current work (e.g., on John Coltrane's *Ascension*, Impulse 95), shows him to be an independent thinker, but still broadly in the Coltrane mold. To date (June 1966), I have not been able to purchase a copy of Marion Brown's ESP album—such is the state of the arts in Pittsburgh—but his brief appearance on *Ascension* is sufficient to suggest that he too has integrated Coltrane's concepts into his art. I shall say nothing about Charles Tyler here, because what I have heard of his music (on Albert Ayler's *Bells*, ESP 1010) indicates a strong similarity between his playing on alto and that of Ayler's on tenor; hence my analysis of Ayler will stand as well for him.

The single apparent exception to the universality of Coltrane's appeal to the new wave of saxophonists is to be found in the music of John Tchicai. I say *apparent* exception, however, because Tchicai's origins are European rather than American and, in consequence his ideas have been shaped by different forces than those that have inspired American musicians. Once this is taken into account, it no longer comes as a surprise that Tchicai harkens back for a portion of his inspiration to the music of Lee Konitz, for Konitz, like numerous other musicians of the cool period, enjoyed much more sustained popularity in Europe, particularly Scandinavia, than in this country. This only goes to underline what I have above written on the subject of "influences"—that they are as inescapable for the artist as eating, drinking, and breathing are for the rest of us.

It also occurs to me that before launching into the discussion of Albert Ayler and John Coltrane, one additional remark may be in order. The jazz revolution, like life itself, is not a static phenomenon. Efforts to classify musicians, according to whether they are or are not revolutionary, are bound to err on the side of oversimplification. It was objected to my initial piece on Coltrane that some of the musicians I cited as being indebted to him were, in the words of one correspondent, "still playing bebop, advanced bebop maybe, but bebop nonetheless."

Among those mentioned in this connection was Wayne Shorter; yet I think it indisputable that Shorter's latest efforts with Anthony Williams (Blue Note 4216) demonstrate that he has progressed considerably beyond "advanced bebop." What this instance ought to remind us is that art is a matter of infinitely more complexity than can be encompassed by a series of rigid definitions, and that nothing is to be more militantly resisted than the notion that every artist must be thrust into a precisely measured pigeonhole. (*To be continued in the next issue*)



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