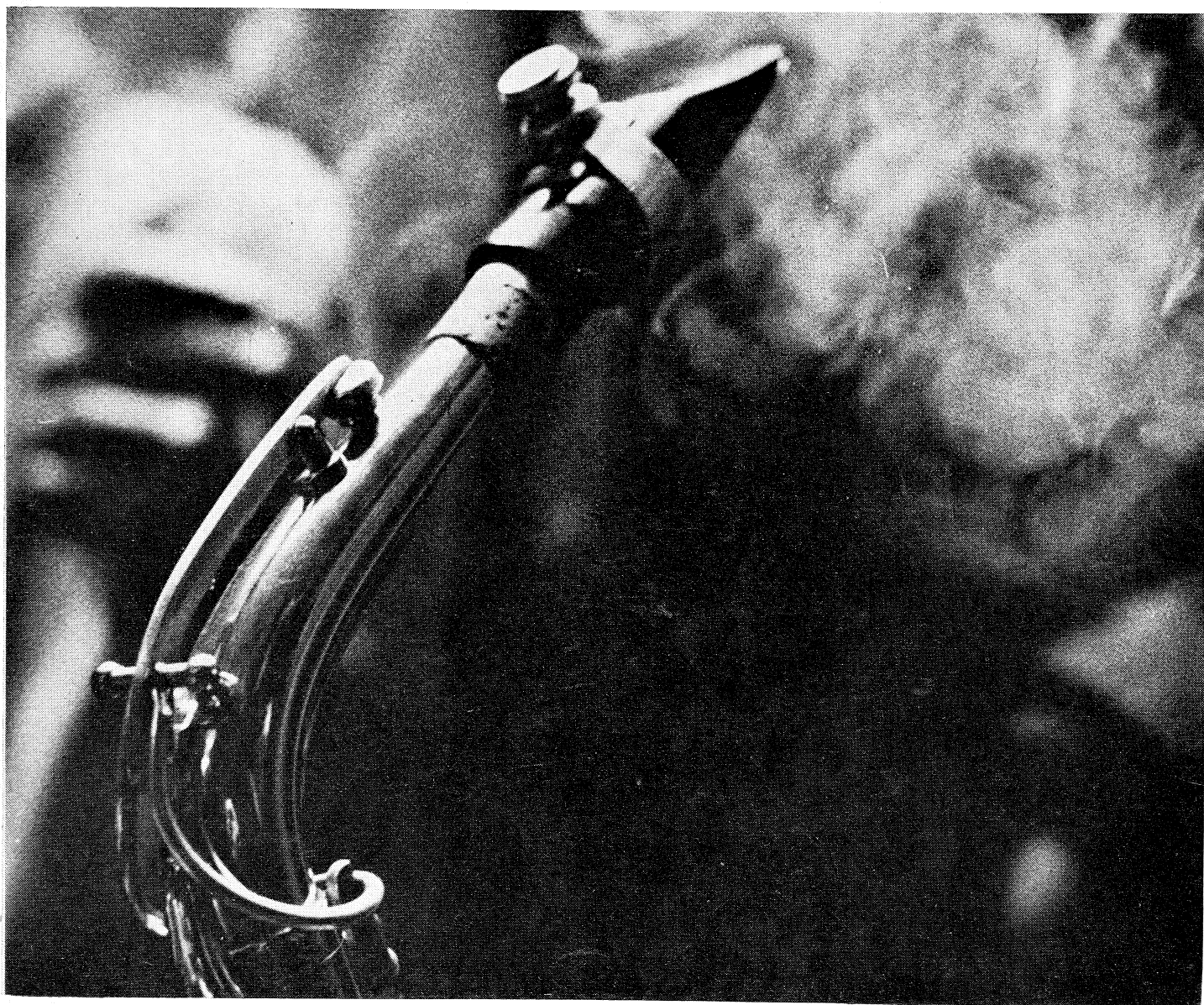


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THREE SHILLINGS





# Albert Ayler—conservative revolution? (5)

W. A. BALDWIN

IT is when we come to the work of the rhythm section that we find a little more in the way of real innovation. Even here however there has been considerable exaggeration of the amount of innovation which has actually taken place. One cannot help suspecting that some critics regard it as their obligation to find new developments even where none exists: how else are we to explain all these references to the elimination of the distinction between the rhythm section and the front line? We are assured that it is now difficult to say who is accompanying whom, that the rhythm section now occupies a position of equality with the horns. Now one can think of examples where the rhythm section dominates the proceedings, but this is invariably when the horns are extremely weak. (Or perhaps the horns are so weak because of the dominance of the rhythm section.) Perhaps I might refer the reader to the review in this magazine of "Barrage" by the Paul Bley Quintet; Max Harrison (in the June 1966 issue) opens with some comments on collective improvisation in the New Thing, and manages to include the inevitable remark that "... it becomes absurd to speak of 'front line' and 'rhythm section' as separate entities". He goes on however to admit that "the horns ... actually say very little"; then he concludes by saying that "... this record is more attractive for its manner (i.e. the collective improvising) than its matter". Whilst agreeing entirely with this assessment of the quality of the music, I should like to suggest that it is the manner which is responsible for the low standard of the actual content.

It seems to this listener that on all the most musically worthwhile of the New Thing recordings there is no doubt whatsoever about who is being accompanied and who is doing the accompanying. This is most certainly the case with Ayler, whose solos show a formal perfection which would be impossible if Ayler were prepared to change the course of his solos in order to accommodate every whim of his accompanist.

During the course of this article I have, as I am well aware, tended to avoid discussing in very much depth the work of the rhythm sections on Ayler's records. This is because quite frankly I find it difficult to discern the underlying principle behind their work. Most of the figures played by Sonny Murray on drums are clearly related to the beat, but do not actually seem to give much consistent rhythmic support. This does not detract as seriously from the records as one might imagine, because Ayler's rhythmic control is such that he seems quite assured even in passages where he gets no rhythmic support at all. And it is not really so

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VALERIE WILMER

wildly revolutionary either, because the accompaniments that country blues singers give themselves can often amount to a sort of free commentary rather than a rhythmic backing. From my own point of view I should like to hear Ayler with a more positive accompaniment. It can however be said of Murray and the various bassists that their contribution never actually clashes with Ayler's soloing, which may seem faint praise indeed, but which is really saying quite a lot in view of some of the rhythm sections to be heard today. Murray in particular shows a considerable awareness of dynamics and his frequently simple and repetitive but powerful figures can heighten the effect of a climax. Of the bassists, Lewis Worrell gives the most consistent rhythmic support on *Holy Ghost* from the "New Wave in Jazz" album. Peacock is the most individual of Ayler's accompanists, and the one whose ideas can at times seem most independent of Ayler's soloing, although some of the most memorable moments on Ayler's records occur when Peacock plays strongly rhythmic but imaginative figures behind him. There is no doubt that today's rhythm sections have become tired of the stereotyped but efficient devices which constitute standard practice in Modern and Mainstream jazz. There might be some reason for maintaining that in throwing away the rule-book today's players have made way for some inefficient and even downright unhelpful rhythm section work. This is true enough but to talk about throwing away the rules is rather misleading. The standardised conventions of rhythm section playing have no really universal application. They do not, for example, apply in New Orleans jazz, which might be compared to the New Thing in that the absence of any real accepted practice gives plenty of latitude to an individualist such as Baby Dodds but also allows lesser musicians to get away with some very poor work. It also means that individually fine musicians may prove incompatible. In the dispute surrounding the New Orleans All-Stars, for example, the evidence of the record suggests that Max Harrison was right to criticise the rhythm section. This does not alter the fact that both Frazier and Purnell have been outstanding in other contexts. The danger of incompatibility is very real in free jazz but this is not an insurmountable difficulty, for two reasons. First of all, groups within the new style tend to be organised on a less casual basis than in standard Modern Jazz, so that there is not the same immediate necessity of musicians being able to play together. Secondly, if a leader feels that he is not getting very helpful accompaniment he can always get rid of his accompanists. Critics who speak of anarchy when rules are broken tend to ignore such essentially practical considerations. Rhythm section men today have at least one discipline on their work—they want to keep their jobs.





IT has to be admitted that the work of rhythm sections in the New Thing reveals some innovation, although not as much as many commentators seem disposed to claim. There is in this writer's view only one innovation of importance to be found in the New Thing, and that is the abandonment of the repeated chord sequence as a basis for improvisation. This does not mean, as has been suggested, a complete abandonment of harmony as a structural force; there seems to me to be no doubt that the "call-and-response" patterns to be found in Ayler's work have a harmonic basis.

I have already stated the case, in dealing with Ayler's 1965 recordings, for regarding the change from the repeated chord sequence to motivic development as being motivated not by a hankering for musical anarchy but by a desire on the contrary for greater true formal control. In this respect I am very much inclined to welcome Miles Kington's well-argued article in *Jazz Journal* entitled "Form in Jazz—if any". Mr. Kington provides convincing evidence to support the view that as chord sequences have become more "advanced" they have offered less and less formal guidance to the improviser. Seen in this context the abandonment of the chord sequence altogether is, as Mr. Kington points out, merely the next logical step. I cannot altogether agree however with his conclusions. Mr. Kington admits the complete lack of overall shape in modern improvising, but seems to me at least to dismiss in an excessively facile manner the idea that this lack of form might be regarded as legitimate grounds for criticism. Jazz critics, most especially in this magazine, have a tendency to regard the increasing formal looseness found in the development of jazz as a matter of increasing the possibilities of musical surprise. I am of the opinion that this idea is founded upon a misconception. It seems to this listener that a genuine musical surprise comes, not when one has not the slightest idea of what is going to be played next, but when one thinks that one knows what is going to be played next and instead hears something better and more truly appropriate. Perhaps the best example of this might be found in the singing of Billie Holiday. Here, according to the ideas of some critics, might be found the perfect formula for a total absence of surprise. The singer is tied by the words, and cannot make startling departures from the melodic line. Even the phrasing and timing are restricted if the meaning of the words is to be retained (and recordings in which the meaning of the words is sacrificed are comparatively rare). All the evidence is that the very restrictions on the style contribute to her power to really surprise us. It is to some extent because we know that she must sing "I'll never be the same, since we're apart" that we are so surprised and delighted when she sings "I'll never *be* the same, *Since* we're apart". In the case of much Modern Jazz, we cannot predict what is going to be played next with any degree of certainty, but what has already been played often adds up to so little that it can become rather difficult to care.

This writer is firmly of the opinion that the real importance of the New Thing is that in spite of its complete abandonment of the repeated chord sequence, an increasingly less effective formal device, it does not represent a further formal loosening of jazz improvisation. Indeed the brevity and coherence of Ayler's best work represent the most effective refutation of the idea that long-winded ramblings are the ultimate logical development of the jazz tradition. In putting forward this idea I presented Ayler's solo on the first part of *Bells* as being the most powerful piece of evidence

for this point of view. In fact although this solo remains the most remarkable for the brilliant, six-phrase "exposition", all of Ayler's solos recorded in 1965, including those on the record "Sonny's Time Now", which has become available too late for inclusion in this survey of Ayler's work, show the most remarkable consistency in terms of development and overall form.

Even this is not in fact the whole answer: freedom from a strict repeated form is found in some examples of country blues, without the suggestion ever having been made that this results in musical anarchy. Furthermore, I cannot help feeling that even New Orleans jazz is less concerned with the European "rules" of musical correctness than many critics have tended to assume. It is true that the music conforms to a regular repeated form, but this is easily explained in view of the origins of the music as an increasingly "free" variant of the standard brass band and dance music. I should like to question whether New Orleans musicians are really absorbed in exploring the simple chord sequences which they make use of, and if so, why they are prepared, by means of off-pitch notes, to introduce discords more startling than any to be found in the New Thing. If New Orleans musicians really set out to play variations on a theme, then it must be said that they do rather badly, for this writer can think of many New Orleans performances which contain nothing very much at all in the way of melodic variations. Modernists will reply that this is because they are not very inventive, but I cannot help feeling that this idea is based on a lack of understanding of the whole point of the style. Many New Orleans musicians, especially those of later generations than the Oliver band, simply do not set out to improvise the maximum number of variations in the course of a performance. Indeed it seems fairly clear that striking melodic variations are deliberately rationed in the course of a performance so that they can be used as a surprise effect, perhaps in combination with another device such as an unusual effect of intonation or an increase in volume, in order to raise the tension at a climactic point. I would like to suggest that if it is true of any jazz style that it is concerned with sounds rather than with notes, it is true of latter-day New Orleans jazz (it is certainly not true of the New Thing). The sound of the band, the sound of the individual musician, these are the things which concern New Orleans musicians much more than any melodic development. By their phrasing, timing, and accenting, the musicians are able to transform the nature of the tunes which they play, the object of the performance being an interplay of tensions brought about by all these means, such melodic variations as there are being just another of these devices, to be used when appropriate.

I AM trying to suggest that in abandoning the idea that a jazz performance consists of a set of variations, today's musicians are not really being so iconoclastic as it might at first appear. The reader may not be inclined to accept my reasoning on this point, but I think that all but the most unreasonable critic of the New Thing must admit that when we take all the innovations with which these musicians have been credited and consider them carefully they do not really amount to very much. I cannot help feeling that it says rather little for the perceptiveness of many jazz commentators that they have been able to regard this movement as related in any way to the self-consciously "different" art-forms which have been dreamed up by the so-called avant-garde in Europe and the United States.

I think that to get the real measure of the conservatism of this movement it is perhaps not sufficient to consider how relatively



minor their innovations have been; it is just as instructive to bear in mind some of the innovations which they might have indulged in. An avant-garde, after all, might reasonably have been expected to have introduced some new instruments to jazz. Instead we find that all the musicians of any real standing within the movement play traditional jazz instruments in traditional combinations (there is plenty of precedent for the absence of a piano). There are exceptions to this rule, but, say in the case of Ayler's use of a harpsichord on *Angels*, there is little evidence of serious innovation. Not only do the New Thing musicians play traditional instruments, but they are not even concerned with playing them in self-consciously novel ways, such as playing three at a time, or plucking the strings of a piano instead of using the keys. In fact the New Thing musicians can offer no competition in this respect to such fundamentally conventional modernists as Roland Kirk or Charles Lloyd. (Modernists are getting desperate for ideas.)

I think that many critics tend to assume that anything which seems difficult to understand merits the description avant-garde. In fact, contrary to the general belief, avant-garde art is not at all

difficult to understand, consisting as it does of little more than a set of standardised gestures. Hence the fact that the Kirks are able to introduce such effects without endangering their popularity in the least. It is not easy to say what makes music difficult or easy to understand. Simple New Orleans jazz or country blues have never enjoyed, and, it is safe to say, never will enjoy, the popularity that supposedly more complex forms have found. I cannot help suspecting that what makes the music of an Albert Ayler difficult to grasp is that it is powerful and meaningful music which requires a strong emotional response. If we ever discover what it is in music that people find easy or difficult, I suspect that the answer will be that most people find something very comforting in mediocrity. Modern Jazz has been able to offer such mediocrity performed at a very high level of competence. It may seem absurd to the reader to make a blanket condemnation of a whole style, and indeed it is. Great art is produced by great individuals, not by conforming to a set of stylistic requirements. It does seem a valid point to this writer, however, that modern Jazz seems to have been a little short of those great individuals.

ONE particular myth which surrounds the fact that the New Thing is generally found difficult to understand, is that jazz has become a less happy and for that reason less acceptable music. Everyone must have read those little pieces on the theme "Why isn't jazz happy any more?"; a recent example would be Leonard Feather's fatuous contribution to the most recent *Down Beat* year book. In this piece Feather is reduced to claiming that country blues only express sadness or anger in their lyrics, never in the actual music. If we were not already aware of Feather's lack of appreciation of early jazz and blues, this should be enough to leave us in no doubt. Frankly I am of the opinion that to suggest, as many critics do, that early jazz musicians were unable to offer anything more than a sort of "Good Timey" jollity is insulting in the extreme. Jazz has always struck a balance between the different emotions (it is very rare for a successful jazz performance to be either completely happy or completely sad). I for my part have never noticed that the balance is significantly different as between the very earliest recordings and those of Coleman or Ayler. I am inclined to suspect that those critics who claim otherwise are merely displaying their insensitivity to the work of the New Thing musicians—and in some cases their insensitivity to early jazz as well.

It may be worthwhile to point out, in this respect, that the most vociferous opponents of the New Thing tend to be those whose tastes are most exclusively modernist—the above-mentioned Feather, Ira Gitler, our own Benny Green. It seems fairly clear that for these gentlemen jazz only really began (I mean *really* began) with Charlie Parker, and perhaps one should not be unduly surprised that it has now ended with Miles Davis. Readers may draw their own conclusions on the qualifications of these self-appointed guardians of the true jazz spirit.

I digress, however, and I wanted, while dealing with this story about how jazz has stopped being happy, to deal with this other one about how jazz these days expresses nothing but race hatred. Readers who have noticed that out of the eight sets of recordings that I have been dealing with in this article six have at least one white musician involved might be surprised to learn that these musicians are merely expressing their hatred for the white man. I must confess that this is one point that I don't have the

# EARL 'FATHA' HINES

## Solo

Deep Forest; Everything depends on you; Am I too late; Blues for Tatum; In San Francisco; Ann; You can depend on me; When I dream of you; R.R. Blues; Straight to love; Piano Man; My Monday Date.

Ⓜ LAE 548 *Vocalion*

## The Grand Terrace Band

Piano Man; Father steps in; G.T. Stomp; Ridin' an' Jivin'; Indiana; After all I've been to you; 'Gator Swing; Grand Terrace Shuffle; Deep forest; XYZ; Riff medley; Boogie Woogie St. Louis blues; Number 19; You can depend on me; Tantalizing a Cuban; Call me happy.

Ⓜ RD 7720 *RCA Victor*

## The Jazz Piano

Earl Hines plays *House of Lords*; *Sweet Lorraine*; *Somehow*; *Rosetta* also featuring *Duke Ellington*, *Billy Taylor*, *Charles Bell*, *Mary Lou Williams* and *Willy "The Lion" Smith*.

The second portrait of the lion; 45° Angle; Biddy's Beat; Contrary Motion; Joycie; Whisper Not.

Ⓜ SF 7830 Ⓜ RD 7830 *RCA Victor*

## Great Jazz Pianists

Earl Hines plays *Grand Piano Blues* also featuring *Oscar Peterson*, *Meade Lux Lewis*, *Jelly Roll Morton*, *Albert Ammons & Pete Johnson*, *Fats Waller*, *Art Tatum*, *Jess Stacy*, *Errol Garner*, *Duke Ellington*, *James P. Johnson*, *Mary Lou Williams*.

The Sheik of Araby; Honky Tonk Train Blues; Tank Town Bump; Boogie Woogie Jump; Squeeze Me; Ain't misbehavin'; Daybreak Serenade; Erroll's Bounce; Rockin' in Rhythm; Thou Swell; Humoresque.

Ⓜ CDN 118 *RCA Camden*

## Earl "Fatha" Hines Plays "Fats" Waller

Jitterbug Waltz; Darktown Strutters; Black and Blue; Blue turning grey over you; Honeysuckle Rose; Squeeze me; Ain't misbehavin'; Keepin' out of mischief now; I can't give you anything but love; I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter; Lulu's back in town; Two sleepy people.

Ⓜ LAE 12067 *Vocalion*

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answer to, and those doubtful readers would probably do best to write to Stanley Dance, who must have the answer. So one would assume, at least, from his not infrequent remarks on the subject in his *Jazz Journal* column. Take for example his thoughts for 1966 from the edition of February of that year, where he gives us all the usual stuff about musicians who express "hate and contempt in their music", and for our further edification goes on to speculate as to whether jazz musicians of the past could ever have harboured any nasty angry feelings. According to Mr. Dance "... it is hard to tell how angry Earl Hines, Coleman Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Johnny Hodges, and Harry Carney were in the 1920's". This doesn't prevent Stanley from indulging in a little speculation on their behalf:

"Perhaps they were not too angry then. Perhaps they saw doors opening and a golden future ahead."

At this stage Mr. Dance is evidently becoming a little carried away with their golden future, so perhaps we ought to interrupt him to make one or two points of our own. First of all, it is quite true that it is hard to tell how angry Earl Hines etc., etc., ... but I cannot help feeling that Mr. Dance has been, well, rather fortunate in his choice of examples. We do know how angry Billie Holiday was, because we have her Autobiography, which leaves us in little doubt.

We also have some insight into how Roy Eldridge felt. Eldridge of course was always sure that he could tell a white musician from a negro, which we could always regard as a pretty racist sort of attitude if we had Mr. Dance's talent for simplifying anything. As it is, we are prepared to suppose that Eldridge's attitude was more a matter of the reasonable indignation at the insults heaped upon him due to his colour which we find in his piece in "Hear me talkin' to ya", a piece which opens with the memorable sentence:

"One thing you can be sure of, as long as I'm in America, I'll never in my life work with a white band again!"

Anyone who imagines that the further you go back into jazz history the more of an "Uncle Tom" attitude you will find might be surprised at the following quote attributed to Bunk Johnson:

"... I've played music for white people all over the world and many of my best friends are white. But there's always somebody who'll come up and say to you, 'Hey, nigger, play this'."

Well, I should think that even Stanley Dance will have got the point by now. Because some (and only some) of today's musicians are rightly angry about their situation is no reason for them to be caricatured as racist fanatics, or for their music to be dismissed as outbursts of hatred.

IN the course of this article I have offered a view of the New Thing which differs substantially from the usual picture which readers are given of the nature of the movement. I cannot help feeling that this is not so much because my listening experience has been different but because many other critics have been excessively influenced in their attitude towards the New Thing by preconceived ideas. It must be admitted that many remarkably perceptive comments have been made on the music without their authors having been prepared to grasp their full significance. Thus a commentator such as Charles Fox can say of Ornette Coleman that his music is far less adventurous rhythmically than that of Charlie Parker without realising that this represents the best possible justification of his art; Ornette Coleman is not interested in performing any elaborate

rhythmic exercises, but in phrasing his ideas in the most expressive and meaningful way. Similarly Max Harrison remarked of a set of New Thing recordings that they almost seemed at times like exercises in "anti-modernist dicta" while remaining apparently oblivious to the implications of this remark. Maybe those "anti-modernist dicta" were not so misguided after all! I have spent some time discussing Ayler's use of the system of motivic evolution but this is what Michael James must have been referring to when he complained of the Ayler brothers' failure to vary the content of their phrases. This is true enough: one can only quarrel with the assumption that a jazz performance should consist of the maximum number of ideas strung together, a point of view which seems fairly current in modernist circles, and certainly seems to be the guiding principle behind most modern improvising.

It does appear that many critics find it remarkably easy to confuse the mechanics of a style with its real musical essence.

## RE-ISSUE *issues*

### DON LOCKE

THE more jazz there is, the more reissues there will be. We have long ago passed the point where reissues became more important than the new releases. And the reissue situation has never looked better than it does now—although some companies should be doing better than they are.

Still, you can't satisfy everyone all of the time, and in view of the dusty response from many critics you sometimes wonder why the companies bother at all. There is of course the basic difficulty with all anthologies, that everyone—expert or not—has his own idea as to what should have been put in and what should have been left out. There is also the extra problem that today's critics were more-than-yesterday's novices, and seem to have difficulty in appreciating the position of today's novices. In November last year G. E. Lambert was complaining about the Capitol Duke Ellington LP: "Ellington reissues are in a gigantic muddle and this new album only adds to the chaos. Six titles come from one LP, three from another, two from a third, one track is from a 78 which has only been reissued in a World Record Club album and another from a 78 never reissued on LP at all before. Many Ellington collectors like to obtain complete sets of this period or that and one can imagine the frustration of having about half the contents of an LP like this. The only excuse for changing the original LP issue patterns would be a collector's reissue with complete sessions in order of recordings; the sooner someone adopts this sensible policy with Ellington reissues the better."

There speaks the true collector, but of course there is another excellent reason for changing the original LP issue patterns: that it enables the new collector to get the best of three or four records, all for the price of one. Personally I wouldn't be very excited by a complete set of the Ellington Capitols—scarcely his

### BLUES BROADCASTS

√ Paul Oliver is presenting three programmes on the blues, as follows:

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2. Blues In Negro Society Thursday, February 15th.
3. Blues As An Art Form Wednesday, February 28th.

All programmes 7.30-8.30 p.m. on B.B.C. Third Programme.

The "soul" movement, in offering up those work-song and gospel clichés merely offered a travesty of those forms, as is generally recognized. Even today however a musician such as Shepp can be absurdly over-praised because of one or two rather obvious references to Ben Webster, while the melodic originality of an Ayler can lead very easily to accusations of deserting the jazz tradition, as if it consisted of a set of familiar phrases.

There may of course be even more sinister implications behind the failure of many critics to appreciate the quality of this music. It is difficult at times not to suspect that critics have become so accustomed to the improvised background music so often offered as jazz that they now find it difficult to recognise the real thing when they hear it. Far from being any sort of avant-garde manifestation, the music of Albert Ayler reaffirms so clearly the most fundamental jazz values that it enables us to raise the question of whether much post-bop jazz does not represent a dilution of those values.

greatest period—and Morgan's selection is an excellent one, no matter how much one regrets certain omissions. In the golden days of Clef and Verve I can remember leafing through all those fantastically variable LPs and thinking "I'll wait until someone reissues the best tracks". This is now known as Waiting for Morgan—who defended himself (a coincidence?) in the same *Jazz Monthly*: "Simply because one critic feels strongly about a new reissue which cuts across three LPs issued six years ago it does not mean that most of his readers will have those three LPs ... Jazz being what it is, a fresh generation of collectors comes along every twelve months eager to buy new compilations of material which had been unavailable for years".

Reissues seem to operate at three levels. First the broad anthologies, covering a wide range of musicians or even styles, for those with a peripheral interest in the music. But these people deserve nothing but the best. Most reissues in this category seem to have been selected by the blindfold-and-pin method, probably with a committee of tired executives trying to wield the pin—the "Jazz in the Making" set is a notable exception. Second, there are the more specialised reissues, like Morgan's Clef-Verve and Capitol compilations, giving us the pick of a particular period in a musician's development. Everyone will have marginal disagreements about the particular pick, but this is unavoidable since the whole point is that they *are* selections—The Best of Whoever-it-is, or Several LPs for the Cost of One. Finally there is the dedicated collector's dream, complete sessions in order to recording. The difficulty here is that the potential market is bound to be small, even by jazz standards, and infinitesimal by some other standards of comparison.

Obviously the most popular level should be, and is, the second. This in itself causes problems. It may be frustrating to have a reissue cut across several original LPs, but it is downright thrombosogenic to have reissues cutting across one another. It's even worse when we take into account reissues in other countries. The pattern seems to be that a company issues a selection of A, B or C, deletes it after a couple of years, and then later brings out another selection, partially overlapping the first one