Escaping from Notes to Sounds

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Spirits Rejoice!: Albert Ayler and His Message by Peter Niklas Wilson, translated from the German by Jane White.

Hofheim am Taunus: Wolke, 176 pp., €24.00 (paper)

Holy Ghost: The Life and Death of Free Jazz Pioneer Albert Ayler

by Richard Koloda. London: Jawbone, 302 pp., \$24.95 (paper)

Revelations: The Complete ORTF 1970 Fondation Maeght Recordings

an album by Albert Ayler. INA/Elemental Music, 4 CDs, €49.99

"It was like the wind sometimes, moving fast.... It hovered,...oscillated back and forth with sounds that would strike the earth to its center, or soar until the penetration of the sound would clear the sky of clouds." "Wide, irregular ribbons, fragmented, prismatic, wind-blown, undetermined, and filled with fury." "Crying, soaring..., very earthy and sexy if you hear it one way, but it could be called 'ethereal' or 'searching' if you had to describe it." "A cacophony of howling voices"; "a henhouse gone berserk"; "a baby crying for candy"; "an electronic foghorn"; "a train coming down the line." "Beautiful and ferocious"; "harsh and guttural"; "harsh and coarse"; "harsh and brutal." "A sound that scared the shit out of everyone who heard him."

When the saxophonist Albert Ayler arrived in New York in 1963, after years of obscurity abroad, he revolutionized the avant-garde jazz scene almost immediately, drastically altering notions of what noises qualified as music. He was not the first to exploit the saxophone's capacity for nontraditional sonorities-squeaks, shrieks, bleats, whinnies, growls, and multiphonics (the playing of two or more notes at once) had long been used for exclamatory effect, especially in rhythm and blues-but he was the first to create a robust, coherent musical language from them alone. As he put it, he "escape[d] from notes to sounds."

"For some he was a prophet, for others a charlatan," Peter Niklas Wilson writes in Spirits Rejoice!: Albert Ayler and His Message, which was first published in German in 1996, Wilson, who died in 2003, lamented that "Avler has been denied...timeless classic status. which avant-gardists like John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy and Ornette Coleman finally achieved." The recent translation into English of Spirits Rejoice! and the publication of Richard Koloda's Holy Ghost, the first book-length English-language biography of Ayler-along with the positive reception of Revelations, a recording released last spring of two complete concerts from July 1970, just months before Ayler killed himself-may indicate that he has finally secured the renown Wilson desired for him.1

¹Another milestone for Ayler's posthumous reputation was the release in 2004 of a box



Albert Ayler (right) and Donald Ayler, Harlem, 1966

Defining Ayler's place in the history of music, however, remains difficult. The folksy melodic introductions and interludes with which he framed his radical improvisations sounded little like the usual cerebral abstractions of progressive jazz. Driven by religious visions and a desire to communicate a message of "spiritual unity" to audiences, he changed his style nearly every year, shedding bandmates like unfashionable clothes; his late, largely unsuccessful attempts at R&B and psychedelic rock continue to baffle critics. Although he inspired younger saxophonists of both lyrical and noisemaking persuasions, his influence may have been greatest among rock guitarists—especially Lou Reed, Tom Verlaine, Thurston Moore, and Marc Ribot-who were drawn to his mix of Romantic sentimentality and experimental grunginess.

Ayler exemplified the thrilling possibilities of an idiosyncratic style freed from tradition: he made the sort of music William Blake might have heard in his dreams. Whether it strikes listeners as invigorating or cacophonous, many will agree with a musician who heard Ayler for the first time nearly sixty years ago: "I've never been as shocked by anyone as by Albert—just an electrifying experience."

Born in Cleveland in 1936, Ayler was raised in a tight-knit family by religious, middle-class parents who

set of rare and unreleased recordings, also called $Holy\ Ghost$, that received critical praise and a Grammy nomination.

had migrated from the South as teenagers. Ayler's father, Edward, played violin and alto saxophone and also wrote songs that he hoped would be recorded by contemporary pop bands; he passed on his musical knowledge and thwarted ambitions to his son. In high school Albert started learning iazz, performed with local R&B groups. and for two summers toured with the revolutionary harmonica player Little Walter, who established the distorted sound that became common in electric blues. Besides music and girls, Ayler's other teenage passion was golf; the first Black student at his integrated school to win a tournament, he later bragged that he could have become a wealthy professional golfer, "but music was in my heart."

In 1957, in part to avoid paying child support for a son he had with his girlfriend, Ayler signed up for the army, a common destination for aspiring Black musicians, Stationed in Orléans, France, with the Seventy-Sixth Army Band, he played conventionally during the day; in the barracks at night he developed a new technique inspired by Coltrane and Coleman. (It was also around this time that he switched from alto to tenor sax and first experienced mystical visions.) Ayler claimed that the technically demanding bebop style, still the dominant form of jazz at the time, had become too "simple" for him: like many in his generation, he viewed it as infertile ground for personal expression, and he began improvising with barely any regard for a song's underlying harmonic structure, at times eschewing melody altogether in favor of the new sounds he was discovering. While on leave he traveled to jazz clubs throughout Europe, often sitting in with bands uninvited and, Koloda writes, "lack[ing] the musical etiquette to wait for his solo, much less attempt to fit his playing within the context of the group's style." It was assumed by some listeners that this saxophonist, despite possessing a powerful tone that drowned out the other musicians, couldn't play his instrument properly. At one performance in front of fellow GIs, "the audience broke into laughter."

Discharged in September 1961, Ayler returned to Cleveland, where his playing was met with bafflement. He was tossed out of jam sessions and banned by clubs; musicians who had known him years earlier thought he had gone crazy or lost his ability to play. He further called attention to himself with his unusual sartorial sensibility: tailored green leather suits purchased in Spain, shoes "with an extended tongue that bent back toward the toe," a Russian fur hat. By then he was also wearing a distinctive goatee that was naturally half black and half white. (The discoloration was likely caused by the skin condition vitiligo.)

After less than a year in his hometown he flew to Sweden, the one European country where he felt his music had been met with respect. Koloda suggests that Swedes may have simply been "too tolerant to openly boo a musician." This time they proved as hostile as Ohioans. In Stockholm, Ayler recounted in an interview, a promoter pulled him offstage during a performance: "So I went to play for little Swedish kids in the subway. They heard my cry." He reluctantly took a steady gig with a dance band and eventually made a few recordings with local musicians. On these early tapes, Ayler follows his own cadences and sound ideas—including atonal honking, stuttering, and braying-with only minimal reference to the tunes his more conventional accompanists are playing. The result is a strange juxtaposition of the old and the new, like an Abstract Expressionist painter slashing at an Impressionist landscape with a palette knife.

A yler is often said to have been ahead of his time, but he was in fact "one of those rare visionary artists who appear at exactly the right time," John Litweiler wrote in The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958 (1984). He emerged professionally at a moment when avant-garde musicians were looking to advance Ornette Coleman's "free jazz" innovations, which abandoned repeating harmonic forms and fixed meters in favor of open-ended improvisations. The pianist Cecil Taylor got rid of a stable pulse altogether, replacing it with unmetrical bursts of notes that were generated and responded to spontaneously. Ayler introduced a new point of departure: as Koloda puts it, he substituted "sound as the basis of musical structure" in lieu of "white (or Western) intonation."

Ayler saw Taylor perform in Stockholm in November 1962, and between sets he approached Taylor's drummer,

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Sunny Murray, and saxophonist, Jimmy Lyons: "My name is Albert Ayler... I've been waiting for you. Spiritually I heard you before you came." Early the next year he moved to New York, where Murray introduced him to the avant-garde scene. He attracted admiration from established musicians like Coltrane, who later referred to himself as the Father and Ayler as the Holy Ghost. (The saxophonist Pharoah Sanders was the Son.) When Coltrane died in 1967 he asked that Ayler and Coleman—the two saxophonists who most deeply influenced him in the last years of his life-play at his funeral.

Coltrane said that Ayler "seems to be moving music into even higher frequencies...he filled an area that it seems I hadn't gotten to." This was meant literally and metaphorically: Ayler extended the tenor saxophone's upper range in the so-called altissimo register, and he commanded a greater variety of noises out of his instrument: he could grind away at a repeated pattern low on his horn as overtones slowly emerged, move quickly between the highest and lowest ranges, and make rough metallic sounds transform into the slightest squeaks, as if a buzzsaw had somehow turned into a leaking balloon. These effects produced a rawer, more direct form of emotional expression than had existed in jazz. The saxophonist Archie Shepp recalled, "Ayler did not say, 'We are going to play this or that piece.' Rather, he said things like, 'Let's play sadness. Let's play hunger."

Yet Ayler's musicality—his wit and clarity of thought along with his technical mastery—made his playing more than "merely freakish sounds," Litweiler wrote: "There is a flow and contrast to phrase shape, even thematic improvisation... Albert Ayler really does think and move that fast." Solos from his early years in New York can be as sonically and rhythmically inventive as anything by greats like Lester Young and Dizzy Gillespie.

Although many interpreted Ayler's work as a rebellion against all forms of authority and received opinion, his artistic goals were stranger and more imaginative than mere protest. In New York he found musicians who



responded to him with understanding and surprising delicacy. Murray established the atmosphere with sparse taps on his snare and washes of cymbals, evoking rain, wind blowing through trees, and crashing waves. He was among the first drummers in the jazz tradition to play entirely without fixed tempos, adopting instead a rumbling, abstract approach that was sometimes achieved with knitting needles rather than drumsticks. (He also moaned audibly while drumming, adding another

texture to his already dense sound.) The virtuosic bassists Gary Peacock and Henry Grimes, sometimes playing together, provided an undercurrent of lyricism and a sense of rhythmic propulsion, albeit an elastic one that shifted frequently. Trumpeter Don Cherry, who had played with Coleman's breakthrough bands, responded to Ayler's guttural noises with sweeps of notes drawn from the tonal system the saxophonist was trying to leave behind.

These consorts accentuated the subtlety, intelligence, and expressive range of Ayler's new language. "We weren't playing," he later said of them, "we were listening to each other." Together they created a musical fairy-tale world that was part Northern European forest, part Greenwich Village café, and part revival meeting. Songs would begin with the statement of Ayler's folklike compositions, as familiar-sounding and emotionally direct as campfire tunes or hymns. Their titles—"Ghosts," "The Wizard," "Holy, Holy," "Saints"—suggested a haunted, corrupt world and the desire for salvation from it. Then Ayler's solos would follow, blasts of glossolalia in which scraps of bebop melodies might appear, like clichéd phrases given dark new meaning by the ravings of a madman or a sibyl.

Spirituality became more explicit in Ayler's music throughout 1964. In February of that year he recorded Swing Low Sweet Spiritual (also sold as Goin' Home), a selection of eight gospel songs. The album, which was only released in 1981, is shockingly straightforward, a persuasive rejoinder to critics who have argued that his work was "the jazz equivalent of the chimpanzee paintings that are said to have fooled some art critics many years ago." Ayler renders the melodies with utter sincerity, using none of his experimental techniques. His evocative control of traditional tone, phrasing, and inflection—present to varying degrees in all of his music—is foregrounded in this work of aching beauty.

In mid-1964 Ayler began conceiving a music that would bring performers and audiences "to higher levels of peace and understanding." Just what he meant remains elusive—one associate derided his "pseudo-religious and would-be philosophical bullshit."—but he knew that "to accomplish [it], I must have spiritual men playing with me." His first recruit was his younger brother, Donald, an amateur trumpeter whom Albert told to quickly improve his playing. By New Year's Eve the two were performing together publicly.

Albert said he was "trying to bring back...the true spiritual feeling or jubilation" of New Orleans jazz from the early twentieth century, which he heard as "a prayer to God." Apparently it was Don's idea to use march music, one of the many components that had shaped the initial development of jazz, as the medium for their message of uplift. Albert-drawing on his army experience and memories of European marching bands (Koloda claims he had perfect recall of melodies)-wove together suites of martial themes. Don. who had a powerful sound but limited technical facility, would take the melody while Albert offered composed or extemporized counterpoint, and the other musicians (drums, often two basses, and violin or cello) created dramatic settings for the horns, everyone playing in rhythmic lockstep and at top volume. The entire group would then plunge into gleeful chaos before reassembling for another rousing melody.

This form was a superb vehicle for the emphatic if vague statements conveyed by song titles like "Truth Is Marching In" and "Spirits Rejoice." Yet it sanded away the nuance of Albert's earlier improvisations and left less room for the sensitive interplay that had been so crucial to them. Still, these rollicking groups transformed their ostensibly passé material into ecstatic expressions of the transgressive, utopian



Albert Ayler performing at the Fondation Maeght arts festival, Saint-Paul de Vence, France, July 1970

power of music, much as Jimi Hendrix did with "The Star-Spangled Banner" a few years later. The *DownBeat* editor Dan Morgenstern, a skeptic of the Ayler brothers, complained that their march style sounded like "a Salvation Army band on LSD," a description that has been taken up as a badge of honor by Ayler fans.

"If I can help raise people to new plateaus of peace and understanding, I'll feel my life has been worth living, Ayler said. "I'm trying to communicate to as many people as I can." These bold claims by a would-be prophet are fittingly corroborated by his conversion of Bernard Stollman, a lawyer who represented several jazz artists but had never even purchased an album before he heard Ayler play a solo concert in Harlem in late 1963. Stollman had just started the label ESP-Disk' to release Esperanto-language material. and after the show he asked Ayler to be his first artist. This chance encounter between two believers in universal communication led to ESP becoming an important documenter of the 1960s jazz, rock, and literary avant-garde in New York, though the label had little financial success and was notoriously dysfunctional.² Ayler complained in

²Alan Silva, a bassist who played with Ayler and worked for a time in ESP's sales department, recalled his struggles in the mid-1960s to get record stores to stock the label's albums: "I got on the phone and started calling all these places around college areas—this was white America, all these small shops. Wisconsin. 'You know

1966, "Record royalties? I never see any. One of my albums, *Ghosts*, won an award in Europe. And the company didn't even tell me."

While Koloda's and Wilson's books both provide excellent explanations of Ayler's innovations and the controversies surrounding them, Holy Ghost is the more substantial of the two. Koloda (who worked on it for nearly twenty-five years and cites just about every piece of writing on Ayler3) offers an especially illuminating discussion of the saxophonist's fraught relationship with the poet Amiri Baraka. Baraka was an early and enthusiastic fan who wrote that Ayler's music was capable of "destroying whole civilizations" and came "closest to the actual soul-juice, cultural genius of the new black feeling." Ayler in turn expressed measured respect for Baraka and used his admiration to gain opportunities to play publicly, including in the festivities surrounding the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in 1965, when Ayler, Sun Ra, Coltrane, Taylor, and others performed in the streets of Harlem on flatbed trucks dubbed "iazzmobiles." Yet Avler found racial politics at odds with his transcendent message. "We have to love the infinite spirit first," he maintained. "Then, when we can love the infinite spirit, we can talk to each other, be truthful to each other."

Baraka, for his part, lost faith in Ayler by the end of the decade. One cause of the falling out was Don, who had developed a drinking problem and began behaving erratically. (Albert, sensing his brother's instability, fired him simply by failing to tell him about a gig, which Don learned of from another musician.) More important was the turn in Ayler's music: his new records, Baraka wrote, "describe bullshit so are bullshit." He was referring to New Grass (1968), a widely denounced attempt at Motown-style R&B that featured electric bass, overdubbed horns and backup singers, and sugary, quasi-romantic lyrics about Christ, as in "Heart Love":

Heart that is full of love Love that comes from above Heart full of tenderness Brings about togetherness Heart that is kind and true Brings eternal life to you

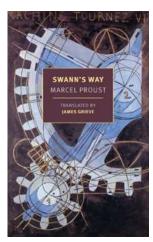
Ayler's solo on this song alternates between R&B sax clichés and his more typical noises, including thirty-four bars of squealing over a groove that would not be out of place on a single by the Supremes.

As fun as this bizarre defacement of pop music can be, *New Grass* never rises above pastiche. When the album flopped, Ayler blamed his producers at Impulse! Records, which had signed him in 1966 on Coltrane's

about Sun Ra?' 'Oh no, where's that?'' For more, see Jason Weiss, Alvays in Trouble: An Oral History of ESP-Disk; the Most Outrageous Record Label in America (Wesleyan University Press, 2012).

³Most of these reviews and essays can be found at ayler.co.uk, an invaluable resource maintained by Patrick Regan that also includes discographies, liner notes, remembrances, and images.

James Grieve's translation, now available from NYRB Classics



Swann's Way, the first of the seven volumes that constitute Marcel Proust's lifework, In Search of Lost Time, introduces the larger themes of the whole sequence while standing on its own as a brilliant evocation of the French Belle Époque.

Here we encounter Proust's narrator, restless and unfulfilled in middle age, his life weighing on him as a burden of things forgotten and things undone, until quite by chance he is brought to remember the world of his childhood, his clinging attachment to his mother, his dread of his father, summers in the country and the two walks his family regularly took, one by a great aristocratic estate, the other by the house of a certain Charles Swann, to whom a mystery was attached.

The novel then takes a further step into the past to tell of the goings-on at the Parisian salon of the bourgeois Verdurins and of Swann's infatuation with the courtesan Odette. Swann, man about town and familiar of royalty, is soon reduced to walking after midnight, unrecognizable to himself and to his friends, forlorn as a child awaiting a goodnight kiss, no thought in his head but love—and in Proust's universe there is no more terrible affliction.

James Grieve began his career as a translator of Proust in the early 1970s, driven by his dismay at how many readers deemed In Search of Lost Time to be too difficult for them to take on. Grieve's artful and celebrated version of Swann's Way shows that this is hardly the case. Proust's great narrative covers the whole gamut of human experiences and emotions, but to read it is to know joy.

SWANN'S WAY

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recommendation. But New Grass was almost certainly a project initiated by Ayler along with Mary Parks (aka Mary Maria), his manager, second wife, and songwriter during the final years of his life. They viewed pop as a means to spread a message of universal peace, showcase Parks's singing and lyrics (which she seems never to have presented publicly before), and finally make some money. He and Parks were hoping, Ayler later said, for their chance to "make it big, It's either big or nothing." They wanted to be—or thought they already were—stars.

Parks has often been held responsible for Ayler's personal and musical decline, with his musician friends accusing her of capitalizing on his renown and cosseting him in an apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, "away from everyone else and monopoli[zing] him," as Don complained to Wilson. The English photographer and writer Val Wilmer, one of the keenest chroniclers of the 1960s and 1970s jazz avant-garde, has objected to this "demonizing" of Parks, noting that she and Ayler had an intimate creative relationship and were mutually influential. Parks said that Ayler awakened a latent ambition in her, and he called her the "smartest woman I ever could meet, or anybody else could

Ayler may have believed that hitmaking would come naturally to him, as the technical discoveries he had made in the army barracks in Orléans seem to have. He couldn't hold a band together for long and felt that workaday gigging was beneath him; tellingly, Wilson and Koloda don't mention pop musicians whose work might have inspired him. (By contrast, Miles Davis deeply admired Hendrix, James Brown, and Sly Stone, and listened closely to their recordings during his transition to rock and funk.) Like much of Ayler's work, his late albums with Parks were rooted in an immense confidence in his genius. He was trying to repackage for the Age of Aquarius his experiences playing dance music in the 1950s and early 1960s, without bothering to understand the profound changes in popular taste that had taken place since

The results are by and large not great art, but they're worthwhile curiosities for listeners interested in the music of the era. Parks had a fine voice, and though some of her work drips with sham profundity ("A man is like a tree," she sings on the song of that name, "a tree is like a man"), her less inane lyrics can be moving: in "Island Harvest," for example, she adopts the persona and Caribbean accent of an older woman (perhaps her own mother or an aunt) lecturing a younger one about how to make her plans bear fruit.

Ayler could still play convincingly, though he often sounds like he's trying on different personas to see which one gets the best response. At his final studio session—released as Music Is the Healing Force of the Universe (1969) and The Last Album (1971)—he experimented in unexpected ways, taking up bagpipes and adopting the mannerisms and melodic language of his idol Coltrane's late style. By many accounts, Ayler had a talent for mimicking other saxophonists too. Yet when he plays his characteristic way over a well-worn calypso or blues rhythm, it

can be hard to avoid the conclusion that he's doing his best Albert Ayler impersonation.

In July 1970 Ayler and Parks traveled to the Fondation Maeght, a museum and sculpture garden outside Nice, to play two concerts as part of an arts festival there. Ayler hadn't performed live in two years; friends later recalled that during this period he seemed depressed by commercial failure, listlessly wandering through his and Parks's apartment, talking to himself amid plumes of incense smoke, and not practicing for long periods. The foundation was a safe venue for a wounded ego: it could afford to treat Ayler and his bandmates respectfully, inviting them to receptions with wellheeled visitors. What's more, French audiences at the time saw Black avantgarde jazz musicians as representatives of "the revolution taking place in America," Wilmer wrote, and "their arrival so soon after the Left Bank student revolts consolidated their heroic position." As many as 1,500 people came to see Ayler, easily his largest audience since 1966.

Although recordings of parts of the Maeght shows have long been available. Revelations captures them in full and on recently discovered highquality tapes. They offer a tantalizing hint of what might have been if Ayler had become a hit. But they leave much to be desired. The musicians he brought to France had never played together before the first show, and they respond shakily to his lead, never quite agreeing on what sort of music they're playing. When Ayler solos, he either noodles through banal, étude-like material or shrieks manically, with little transition between the two styles. He simply hasn't figured out how to build a solo along an identifiable emotional arc, which would have helped engage listeners and guide his tentative band-



mates. These slapdash performances are held together by what Litweiler called Ayler's "charismatic...ego as vast as [Louis] Armstrong's or [Charlie] Parker's." The crowd went wild for him and mobbed the musicians' car as they tried to leave the final night.

It was his last triumph. Around that time Impulse! declined to renew Ayler's contract, and he became increasingly detached from reality. Later that summer he was seen walking in hot weather wearing a velvet suit and a beaver hat, his face covered in Vaseline "to protect myself." He boasted to an interviewer that he had made "the best possible music they could ever dream of in America," and accused Frank Sinatra and Tom Jones of stealing ideas from him. An obsession with

apocalypse turned all-consuming. The previous year he'd published an essay in *The Cricket*, Baraka and Larry Neal's short-lived Black Arts magazine, recounting various mystical visions, including a widely reported UFO incident in Ohio in 1966 that the Ayler brothers had witnessed (and that later inspired *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*):

Fear God and give glory to him for the hour of his judgement is come.... Respect God's laws, so you won't receive the devil's mark in your forehead or your right hand... We must move this [message] by chain letters and get it in the papers.... This is very important. The time is now.⁴

"My blood has got to be shed to save my mother and my brother," Parks recalled Ayler telling her. She said that he felt guilt over firing Don, who had left New York and had a mental breakdown, the first of many hospitalizations before his death in 2007. Ayler came to believe that his white chin hair, which he'd previously described as a blessing from God, marked the sin of betraying his brother.

On November 5, 1970, Avler disappeared from his and Parks's apartment. On the twenty-fifth, his body was found in the East River. The coast guard determined that he had jumped off a ferry near the Statue of Liberty and drowned; Koloda calls it "a symbolic end for the creator of free jazz who couldn't free himself from his own demons." His waterlogged body was identified by the white patch of skin on his chin. Musician friends refused to believe he had killed himself, and for years outlandish rumors circulated that he had been shot in the head by the police or drug dealers, or tied to a jukebox and drowned by a Mafia boss whose mistress he was supposedly sleeping with.

It's easy to imagine that if Ayler had lived longer, he might have eventually received moderate commercial success and invitations to collaborate with adventurous stars like the Rolling Stones, David Bowie, or Tom Waits. (Who wouldn't want to listen to that?) He would have embraced the role of an avant-garde emissary bringing Sixtiesstyle idealism and aesthetic radicalism to the masses, much as Sonny Rollins became an ambassador of sorts representing an earlier generation of jazz musicians.

In the weeks before he disappeared, Ayler bragged to acquaintances that he was about to depart on a quartermillion-dollar tour of Japan; although the figure seems too high (he was paid \$4,000 for the Maeght concerts), sources confirmed the tour to Wilson and Koloda, and one even said that the powerful producer John Hammond Jr. of Columbia Records told him he was going to turn Ayler into "the next Miles Davis." Ayler himself had been telling friends that he was booked for that most mainstream American TV program, The Ed Sullivan Show. He had come so close to making it big.

⁴Albert Ayler, "To Mr. Jones—I Had a Vision," *The Cricket*, No. 4 (1969). The issue in which the essay appeared also carried a review of *New Grass* by Neal calling the album "shitty." All four issues of *The Cricket* were recently republished in an omnibus edition by Blank Forms.

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