

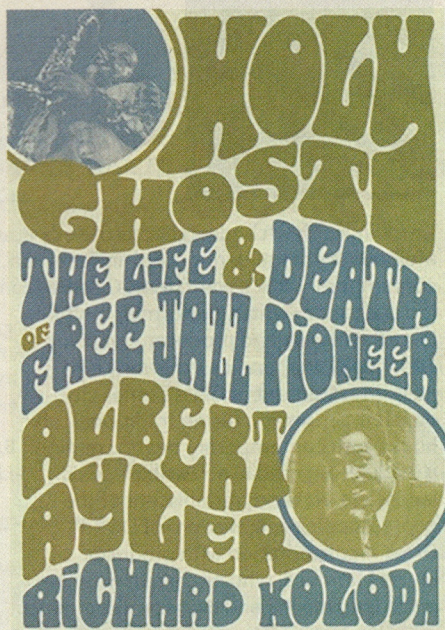
## HOLY GHOST: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF FREE JAZZ PIONEER ALBERT AYLER

By Richard Koloda (Jawbone Press, p/b)

I recall seeing Kaspar Collin's documentary on Albert Ayler at the Melbourne Film Festival some years back. A short way into the film, Ayler's voice could be heard on the soundtrack, saying something to the effect: "It will take another thirty years for people to understand my music." Immediately following, his music exploded from the cinema's loudspeakers, causing the young girl next to me to leap out of her seat, so frightening was the sound. Another thirty years? Think again. More than a half-century on, from when Ayler's body was found floating in New York's East River, we are still playing catch-up.

Ayler's music is linked to the first wave of free jazz players like Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp. Despite their ground-breaking efforts, along with critical acclaim, the music of these artists – aside from Coltrane – has too often been marginalised. In Ayler's case, this relegation has been further exacerbated by the scrappy nature of his discography (until recently, much of Ayler's best work was languishing on hard-to-find European labels, or with Bernard Stollman's now-you-see-it-now-you-don't ESP label). But it's equally the case that the overwhelming intensity of his music, its sheer other worldliness, which connects to little that came before or after, has made it a hard swallow for most listeners.

Unlike Coltrane, there has never been a 'school' of Ayler. His powerful reach, along with his idiosyncratic approach to melody, tempo, pitch, and rhythm, meant he was generally shunted to the too-hard basket by those who followed. Even early adopters like David Murray soon backed off. As Koloda argues, Ayler's influence is more likely to be heard in the music of The Stooges, Sonic Youth, Patti Smith, guitarist Marc Ribot, or in the extreme noise of players like Mats Gustafsson and Mars Williams. In any event, it's not so much Ayler's music these artists mimic, as his revolutionary spirit.



Given the short span of Ayler's life – he was dead at 34 – Koloda wisely chooses to position the music front and centre. He covers Ayler's early woodchopping days playing with R&B acts, including tours with bluesman Little Walter, in the early fifties. Ayler's three-year stint in the US army in the late fifties would take him to France, where he first heard the European folk melodies that later permeated his music. His subsequent visit to Sweden, in 1962-63, proved formative, fostering relationships with pianist Cecil Taylor – with whom he performed – and musicians like Don Cherry and Sunny Murray, who would subsequently appear on his recordings.

Koloda validly contends that listeners were more able to assimilate the advances made by Coltrane and Coleman because their music transitioned from standard jazz forms to avant-garde. With Ayler, there were no such baby steps. His earliest recording, *Something Different!!!!*, made for an obscure Swedish label in 1962, is utterly out of the box. It is barely possible to discern a whisper of melody throughout his 17-minute takedown of the standard 'I'll Remember April'.

If there was a watershed year, it was 1964, when Ayler recorded his masterpiece *Spiritual Unity*, with Gary Peacock and Sunny Murray, alongside a host of other recordings. In the same year, he toured Scandinavia, recording several further sessions there. There is a sense his life had speeded up, as if conscious time was running out. His music morphed rapidly. By 1965, he'd expanded his instrumental palette, adding brother Donald

on trumpet, along with sax player Charles Tyler, and various stringed instruments. The resulting music seemed cobbled together from snatches of marching bands, folk songs, bugle shouts and hymns, interspersed with furious ensemble wig-outs. Ayler's scorching solos, generally played in the upper register, were the musical equivalent of 'speaking in tongues'. With its emphasis on collective improvisation and group dynamics, Ayler's futuristic music touched upon jazz's most primordial roots.

While many critics and musicians were confounded by Ayler's music – trumpeter Kenny Dorham notoriously gave *Spiritual Unity* a zero-star review in *Downbeat* – he counted musicians like Coltrane amongst his strongest supporters. It was Coltrane who urged his own label Impulse! to sign Ayler in 1966, and it was one of his final wishes that Ayler play at his funeral. Ayler's six-minute medley, performed at St Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan on 21 July 1967, ended with Ayer screaming twice: "not with his horn, but with his voice, the first scream like a cry of pain, the other like a shout of joy that Coltrane, though dead, would live forever."

Sadly, Ayler's final years were mired in controversy. His final recordings for Impulse! saw his music shift in more commercial directions, with the addition of vocals, R&B and rock rhythms. It was as if he'd musically lost his way, defeated by his failure to build audiences for his music, his dire financial plight, his growing mental health issues. He'd been dumped by Impulse! His brother Donald suffered a nervous breakdown, which weighed heavily upon him. The last time pianist Annette Peacock saw him, she recalls: "I realized his spirit was broken".

While exact details of Ayler's death remain shrouded in mystery, Koloda puts to rest a range of bizarre conspiracy theories, including one that he'd been thrown in the river tied to a juke box. Most likely, it was suicide. Were there signs his music was about to enter a new phase? His final performances in France, just months before his death, pointed to a renewed sense of purpose. There was talk of a tour to Japan. It's a question without answer.

Richard Koloda stresses the profound significance of Ayler's musical achievements: "Ayler had substituted the notion of sound as the basis of musical structure. In doing so, he redefined the saxophone, as Louis Armstrong had done for the trumpet, achieving this through a series of screeches, sound scales, and rhythms." Koloda's biography, some twenty-years in the making, is as close to definitive as we are likely to get.