



THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN INVOLUNTARY GENIUS, by Andrei Codrescu (George Braziller, Inc.) 1975

THE CHILDLIKE LIFE OF KATHY ACKER (Viper's Tongue Books) 1975

Loren Means

George Braziller, Inc., the folks who publish Andrei Codrescu's books, call him "one of this country's best known and most powerful young poets."

But if you haven't heard of him, don't feel too deprived--that's just publisher's hype. Braziller would love Andrei to become a Poet Star, and have given him a lot of advance bread and his own West Coast Under

Assistant Promo Person to that end. But the proof of stardom is in the product, and Andrei's new book, *The Life & Times of an Involuntary Genius*, doesn't quite have what it takes.

At the same time Andrei's book was getting its big promo push, his friend Kathy Acker had her first book published by the very obscure Viper's Tongue Books of New York. Kathy has been doing radio shows for KPOO and KPFA under the pseudonym of the Black Tarantula, and her book is called *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. The book was written in the middle of 1973 and originally issued in six chapbooks in a very limited edition. It's the most exciting book by a new

Kathy's Genius

writer this far into the seventies, and it's too strong to ever be popular.

Kathy's publisher sent me her book with only one promotional quote, by Fielding Dawson. "There is a young woman writing on the West Coast who has received no attention at all. Her name is Kathy Acker....She is, literally, the wildest writer going...Her prose is direct, fast, sexy, hot, horny, furiously honest, tender and very, very funny... Insofar as I can see, she's the dark horse in American Lit. Not for fame, but for influence. Originality. Sheer voice. Guts."

Only one voice for Kathy, but a particularly important one. Fielding Dawson is the author of *Franz Kline: An Emotional Memoir* (Pantheon), which combines personal reminiscences of his fellow artist and teacher with painfully honest, almost confessional, revelations about himself and the milieu he and Kline and Jackson Pollock shared. The result is a picture of Kline much truer and deeper than a conventional biography could get.

The essence of where contemporary writing finds itself right now is in this exploration of the essential nature of "truth" and of fabrication. Dawson writes poetry and biography and autobiography, and the three are indistinguishable from each other. Andrei's new book is his autobiography, but he writes about himself in the third person, and there's always a feeling of fabrication overriding. Bukowski calls his character Chinaski, but he admits, "Like Chinaski, my shorts were hanging down in the rain, I screamed at old women, I was a mess out there."

Kathy addresses herself to the problem of truth and fabrication in the most direct and challenging way I've come across. She takes a character created by another writer, and retells the story imagining herself as the main character, until the line separating her life and the character's becomes blurred virtually beyond recognition.

In Andrei's book, he is ostensibly presenting us with an edited version of his memory. Consequently, every thing he presents comes to the reader with a built-in question of credibility. (Could his first wife, Kira, really have been as fabulous a person as she's portrayed? Then how could he leave her, even to get out of the draft?)

Kathy doesn't present memory, she uses it as a creative tool, plays with it, experiments with it. So what he says doesn't have to be true, but when it is there's an added resonance. Here's what Kathy says about her memory experiments: "Divide my remembering, for functional purposes, into three processes: learning, retention, recall. Can only test retention through recall. Experiment: simultaneously (1) recall memories about myself. I base my identity, my sense of myself, on these memories. I am myself, not other people."

"(2) Learn by copying someone else's memories. Change the third person (third person in relation to myself) of the book to first person: therefore, learn new facts about myself. My identity is also based on these memories. Are all my identities valid? Are all these memories valid? How can I tell which memories/identities of myself are valid, and which aren't?"

"Experiment suggests to me

that schizophrenia is a more valid way for me to reach another person, than the rigidity of identity, the rigid mind-identity structures, I have somewhat non-consciously been dealing with and through."

Contemporary writing is in a stage of upheaval, and writers must be judged by how well they destroy and reinvent language, character, and reality itself.

In *Life & Times*, Andrei's language is straightforward and unambiguous, with an occasional ejaculation in upper case. In *Childlike Life*, Kathy's language is often incredibly free and inventive, as in section #6, where she confuses herself with the Marquis De Sade: "Squish out the gushy stuff out of my ass yum roll around o yes I can orgasm o yes. Goo goo goo goo. I'm remaking myself proud."

Andrei's use of character tends to be rigid, even when he writes as characters other than himself, as in his book *License to Carry a Gun*. Kathy's characters are extremely fluid, sometimes even changing sex in mid-sentence, giving rise to the kind of dynamic confusion Burroughs generates.

Andrei's approach to reality is fundamentally conventional, and he preserves the unities of space and time. Kathy fractures the space/time continuum constantly, destroying the essential ground of being, so you never know where you are with her, the essential location is constantly knocked out from under, and you grope careening into the void.

So Andrei will probably be a star -- his work is fun, and doesn't threaten. And Kathy will probably remain as she is -- pissed off and brilliant, and so scary.

Ayler's Apocalyptic Sound

by Duck Baker

Albert Ayler is one of the pivotal figures of twentieth century music. His music represents the final stage in the development of "jazz" into an all-inclusive, universal folk music. As of 1975, for all the expansions of contemporary music achieved by The Art Ensemble, Anthony Braxton, and the British school, nothing has come forth to compare in intensity to the apocalyptic outpourings of Ayler during his peak period ten years ago. *VIBRATIONS*, formerly *GHOSTS* on the hard-to-find Dutch Fontana label, is one of Ayler's greatest records, and the most important release on the newly-formed Arista-Freedom label.

A listen to *VIBRATIONS* will give an idea why discussion of Ayler's contributions so often read like exercises in hyperbole. It is not an easy record to listen to, a fact which may make it sound a little dated in light of the current search for the ultimate in superficiality, a la Corea, Hancock or Jarrett. But for anyone still interested in the deepest and most catalytic expressions of the human condition, it is a vital and life-giving creation.

Ayler's first two records are strange, abortive dates owing to attempts by record companies to fit his music into pre-existing categories. On Albert Ayler, on First Recordings, on GNP, the results of this meddling are somewhat comical, and his playing is often very good, despite the total incongruity of the straight rhythm sections. Later, when Impulse Records was calling the shots, the results were much worse. On the currently hard-to-find *Witches and Devils*

(Lydor), Ayler was able, for the first time, to record his own music. His colleagues on this 1964 date were trumpeter Norman Howard, bassists Henry Grimes and Earle Henderson and drummer Sunny Murray. Although not as overwhelmingly convincing as the two records to follow it,

WITCHES AND DEVILS is a fully-realized creation, demonstrating dramatically what a strong and unique conception Ayler possessed.

In many ways, Ayler's music was the most extreme to come out of the revolution fostered primarily by the work of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor in the late fifties (Sun Ra's unsubstantiated claims regardless). Ayler took the folk-like "primitive" approach of Ornette to its ultimate conclusion; even Ornette makes some use of chords in his improvising -- although it is the most basic kind of use. Ayler abandons chords and even notes altogether. His heads are the simplest possible folk melodies, things a child might hum. Yet in Ayler's music they serve as condensed kernels of energy, which explode into space in a way which is really indescribable; you have to hear it.

The effect of Ayler on other musicians was immediate and profound. Cecil Taylor, with whom Ayler worked during 1962-64, recently described Ayler, in *Bells* newsletter, as "the greatest virtuoso of the tenor saxophone." He influenced many players, including Coltrane. Coltrane himself said that he once had a dream in which he played like Ayler, but had never been able to do it. (Coltrane's last recordings, *Expression and Interstellar Space*, on Impulse, show that Trane was in the process of wedding his own unmatched harmonic sophistication with Ayler's wild energy at the time of his death.) And Paul Bley, in a *Downbeat* interview last year, expressed his belief that Ayler was the last great acoustic virtuoso, and that only by going into electronics could the music go beyond the plateau to which Ayler had taken it.

Ayler's two greatest records by most counts are *VIBRATIONS*, which is finally easily available in the U.S., and *Spiritual Unity*, the first record he made for ESP-Disc. Unity was made in

the company of Murray and bassist Gary Peacock, and the same group plus trumpeter Don Cherry made *VIBRATIONS* a few months later. The music on these particular records are beyond criticism, in my mind. There is no way in the world anyone can add to the perfectly articulate sounds on these records; they are comparable to whatever summit of musical expression you might refer -- Parker's *Dials*, Oliver's *Gennets*, Sun Ra's *Heliocentric Worlds*, Boulez's *Marteau Sans Maitre*, Beethoven's last quartets, whatever.

The other two ESP records under Ayler's name, *Spirits Rejoice* and *Bells*, are nearly as great. On these records, Ayler shares a free front line with his brother, Donald, a wild blower on trumpet who lacked the great subtlety of Don Cherry but fit into the fiery ensembles well; and altoist Charles Tyler, who plays beautifully with Ayler, especially on *BELLS*. Another record of ESP, *NEW YORK EYE AND EAR CONTROL*, was a film sound track which brought together Ayler, Cherry, Murray, and Peacock with trombonist Rudd and altoist John Tchicai. Ayler is the dominating force on the record, and he (and everyone else) plays beautifully, but it is not as cohesive as the other Ayler ESP's, principally because of the clash between Ayler's extroverted style and the introspective playing of Tchicai. Rudd, and especially Cherry, react to both sides, but Ayler and Tchicai remain inflexible. Nevertheless, *NEW YORK EYE AND EAR CONTROL* is a fascinating record with many beautiful moments, and is very underrated. I personally think it's much better than either Coltrane's *Ascension* or Ornette's *Free Jazz*.

The last record which is indicative of Ayler's greatness is *LIVE IN THE GREENWICH VILLAGE*, his first Impulse date and one fully as jubilantly beautiful as *Bells* and *Spirits Rejoice*. The next Impulse, *Love Cry*,

is a disaster but not nearly as grotesque as what followed -- *NEW GRASS, MUSIC IS THE HEALING FORCE OF THE UNIVERSE*, and *LAST ALBUM*. I still remember my shock (shared by others) when I first saw *Love Cry* in a record store, grabbed it, took it home and put it on. I think that that record, along with Pharoah Sauder's anemic *Karma*, made me aware of the change in the jazz world following Coltrane's death in 1967.

Whether, as has been alleged, Impulse's determination to make pop stars out of their artists was responsible for the change in the output of Ayler, Shepp and Saunders, or the absence of Coltrane as a guiding influence, or the sincere desire of these men to reach more people was responsible, virtually nothing that these three, once considered the obvious keepers of the flame, have done since Trane's demise has been worth hearing. Exceptions to this gloomy truism are Shepp's spectacular *Life at the Dohausingen on Saba*, his *The Way Ahead*, on Impulse, and the two records of Ayler live on Shandar, a French label with unlimited distribution.

These records, recorded in 1970 (after *THE LAST ALBUM*) show that Ayler was still capable of playing beautifully, but the supporting band, to my mind, is much weaker than those of the earlier days. Like the first two records, the last two provide only a glimmer of the brilliance of Ayler's genius.

In November 1970, Ayler's body was found floating in New York City's East River, a bullet in his head. This shocking end

for one of the great creators of our times has never been explained to anyone's remote satisfaction. Some say his death was suicide, motivated by depression over various personal problems, among them his inability to reconcile the beautiful world his music spoke of so vividly with the "realities" of the Great Society. Others, who cannot reconcile the idea of suicide by such an incredibly vital purveyor of the life force as Albert Ayler, have been inclined to accept the possibility that Ayler was murdered.

As a Washington D.C. musician, Bishop Brock, told me, "Man, you know who killed Albert Ayler. He was a revolutionary force, and the people on the other side knew it." Maybe they did. One way or the other, the circumstances of his death froze the blood of a lot of people in 1970 when it was obvious that his death had a symbolic implication even beyond the fact that another of America's great artists had, like Bessie Smith, Fats Waller, Charlie Parker, Clifford Brown, and Eric Dolphy (all of them happen to have been black) died a tragic, premature death. That implication, of course, was that the "new thing," as it was called, the beautifully free and liberating music of the sixties, died with Ayler.

Nowadays, unless you catch Cecil Taylor or Ornette or Sam Rivers at their best, you won't hear music anymore. True, the Art Ensemble, Braxton and the English players are taking the music in beautiful new directions, but compared to *BELLS*, it's all as "cool" as Al and Zoot.



RAYMOND FOSS