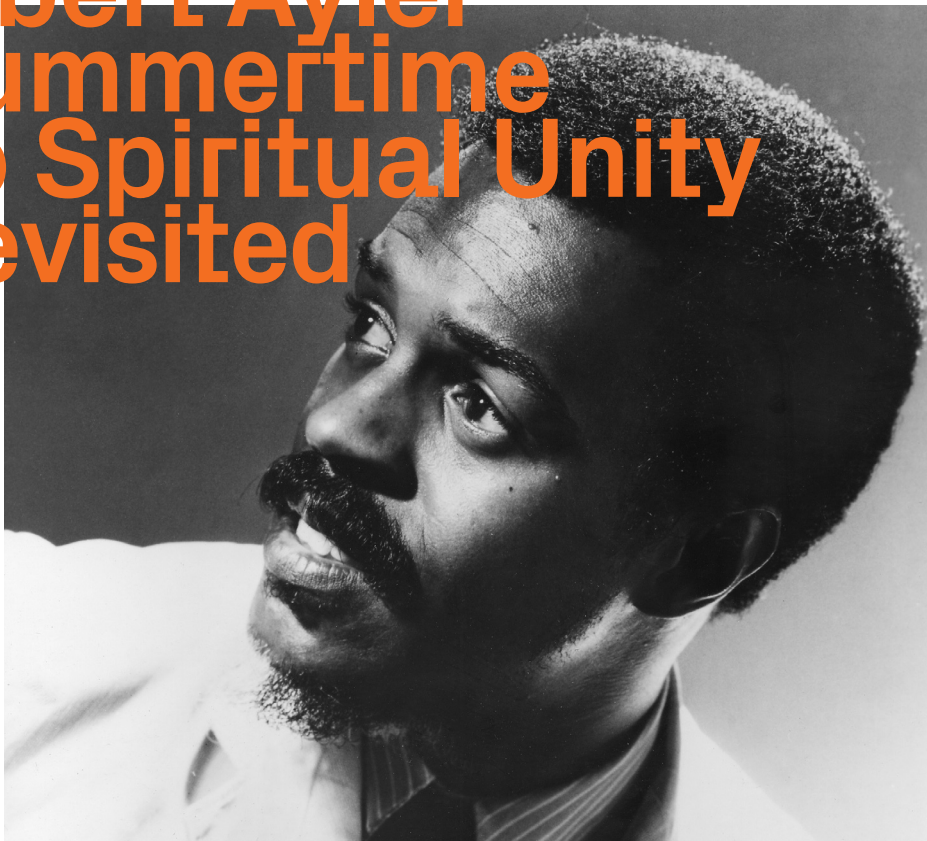


# Albert Ayler Summertime To Spiritual Unity Revisited



## Albert Ayler Summertime To Spiritual Unity Revisited

With his death in 1970 at the age of just 34, the vessel that was Albert Ayler was smashed into a thousand pieces. Critics and, even more paramount, musicians have been trying to glue the pieces of that vessel back together for more than 50 years. He was an iconoclast and a true phenomenon. An outsider artist and in that sense a prophet. Albert Ayler was, as he described himself, "the Holy Ghost." His recording career lasted just eight years from 1962-1970, but within that short period, he turned the music world on its head. Besides a few critics, a handful musicians, and even fewer listeners, the revolution that was Ayler's sound passed below the radar for most of us. We have been playing catch up ever since.

If there was no Albert Ayler, it can be argued, there would not have been a total revolution in free jazz. Consider how different the careers of David Murray, Peter Brötzmann, Joe McPhee, Charles Gayle, and Mats Gustafsson would be if there was no Ayler. Plus there would be no musicians to keep his repertory alive such as Mars Williams, Marc Ribot, and Jeff Lederer. Lastly, in all probability, the final iterations of John Coltrane's sound from Ascension to Meditations would not have happened in the same manner.

The defining session in Ayler's discography is the July 10, 1964 trio recording that gave us Spiritual Unity. The entrepreneur, lawyer, and Esperanto enthusiast Bernard Stollman encountered the saxophonist at The Baby Grand nightclub in

Harlem. In an instant, he decided to start a new record label, ESP-disk, with Ayler as his first artist. The engineer at Valley Arts facility believed it was just a test and recorded it only in mono. The session was a trio outing with bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Sunny Murray. The three had previously recorded a live date Prophecy a month earlier at the Cellar Cafe, but that recording wasn't released until after Ayler's death.

Spiritual Unity is the fusion of music and pure emotion.

It is as if Ayler, Peacock, and Murray were devising their own periodic table of elements by atomizing the components of sound, substituting chords for emotions and eschewing any concept of dimensional time. Ayler's compositions, like those of Thelonious Monk, were to be covered many times in upcoming performances and recordings. Unlike Monk who continually reworked his compositions, polishing and refining them, Ayler would do the inverse, deconstructing his compositions and expanding them in multiple directions. Ayler shunned traditional forms, yet paradoxically had a penchant to perform melodies one could hum. This self-contradiction is also heard in Peacock and Murray's performances, where they abandoned conventional roles. Time keeping is replaced by energy pulses, and expression is paramount.

Many a scholar has searched for the genesis of Ayler's sound in an attempt to explain his music. They cite his early love of Charlie Parker which led to Ayler's nickname 'little bird,' his families roots in the American South, his blue collar upbringing in Cleveland, Ohio, the influence of hymns from the sanctified church and the practice of "speaking in tongues," plus his time

in the military in Europe which taught him marching band music and exposed him to "La Marseillaise." None of these influences can account for the music Ayler produced throughout his very brief career.

If we put on our detective hats and follow a trail back to an earlier recording for Danish radio from January 14, 1963, *My Name Is Albert Ayler* (also released with the alternative title *Free Jazz*) reveals some of the puzzle pieces. Previously in Denmark, Ayler had become an unofficial member of Cecil Taylor's ensemble, but unfortunately the pianist returned to New York before this session took place. Ayler found himself in the company of the expat American drummer Ronnie Gardiner and two Danes, pianist Niels Brønsted and the 16 year old

harmony, meter, and arrangement. The music is a preview of things to come and even with the inexperience of his bandmates, that incendiary free sound escapes from this recording.

Mark Corroto, February, 2023

Excerpts from the liner notes on the LP *My Name Is Albert Ayler* by Erik Wiedemann, 1964:

Summertime was the most extraordinary recording of this session, with Ayler's tenor at its most pathetic, gentle and caressing, so different from anything that has been heard from other tenors playing ballads. Brønsted shows traces

soon to be in demand bassist, Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen. The two tracks selected here, "Summertime" by George Gershwin and Ayler's original composition "C.T.," most likely titled for Cecil Taylor, bridge Ayler's past and point directly toward his future. "Summertime" was a jazz standard having been covered by everyone from Billie Holiday to Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and maybe more significant for Ayler, Sidney Bechet. It is apparent Brønsted's chordal instrument, his piano, tethers Ayler to the melody despite his every attempt to break free. Not so with "C.T." where the saxophonist dispatches with Brønsted and for that matter

of Bud Powell and Bill Evans in his solo and Orsted is heard pizzicato... Finally *C.T.* is a free improvisation for tenor saxophone, bass and drums, without any pre-set tempo, metre and chord sequence and thus totally based upon the intuitive response of each musician to the playing of the others. This is probably the direction which Ayler's playing will eventually take, but at the time of this session he was still using traditional forms as well... It is to be hoped that its publication will further the recognition of Albert Ayler at one of the most originally gifted soloists of the new jazz of the 'sixties.

The two tracks selected here, from the recording *My Name Is Albert Ayler*: "Summertime" by George Gershwin and Ayler's original composition "C.T.," most likely titled for Cecil Taylor, bridge Ayler's past and point directly toward his future. *Spiritual Unity* is the fusion of music and pure emotion. It is as if Ayler, Peacock, and Murray were devising their own periodic table of elements by atomizing the components of sound, substituting chords for emotions and eschewing any concept of dimensional time. Ayler's compositions, like those of Thelonious Monk, were to be covered many times in upcoming performances and recordings.

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### Summertime

Albert Ayler tenor saxophone  
Nils Bronsted piano on 1 only  
Nils-Henning Orsted Pedersen double bass

Ronnie Gardiner drums

1 **Summertime** 8:46

by George Gershwin

2 **C.T.** 12:03

by Albert Ayler

Recorded January 14, 1963 in Copenhagen.

### Spiritual Unity

Albert Ayler tenor saxophone

Gary Peacock double bass

Sunny Murray drums

3 **Ghosts: First Variation** 5:17

4 **The Wizard** 7:28

5 **Spirits** 6:53

6 **Ghosts: Second Variation** 10:10

7 **Variations** 7:48

All compositions by Albert Ayler.

Recorded July 10, 1964 New York City.

Total Time ADD  $\frac{2}{3}$ Bit 58:29

ISRC coded CD

Sonic Restoration & Mastering by Michael Brändli, Hardsudios AG; Liner notes by Mark Corroto; graphic concept by fuhrer vienna; Associate producer: Christian C. Dalucas; Executive producer: Werner X. Uehlinger.

Honorary producer: Bernhard "Benne" Vischer.

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Generous contribution by Mario DaRugna made the production of this CD possible.

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Producers notes:

Summertime from the LP *My Name Is Albert Ayler* made me discover Albert Ayler. His unique interpretation of Summertime motivated me to go to Lörrach crossing the border from Switzerland to Germany to listen to the concert of the Albert Ayler Quintet in Lörrach on November 7, 1966.

This experience has indoctrinated me forever for the music of Albert Ayler. In 1975 I created the label Hat Hut Records and in 1978 I had the chance, thanks to the support of Joachim Ernst Berendt of South Western German Radio Network (SWR), who had produced the recording of the November 7, 1966 performance by the Albert Ayler Quintet, to get the recording for release on Hat Hut Records. The Albert Ayler Estate, represented 1978 by the mother of Desiree Ayler-Fellows, gave the permission for the release.

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