

A black and white photograph of a man in a white dress shirt and dark tie playing a saxophone. He is looking upwards and to the right. In the foreground, the profile of another man's head is visible, looking towards the saxophonist. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Albert Ayler Quartet
European Radio
Studio Recordings
1964**

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Albert Ayler (1936–1970) was a jazz genius, whose story has the status of tragic myth – myth which, as often happens, is informed by truth. He pioneered free jazz on tenor saxophone, creating generations of disciples, beginning with John Coltrane. In his ecstatic sound-world, he forged connections between the furthest reaches of 60s avantgardism, and the music's beginnings in New Orleans, re-igniting its creative impulses. But free jazz was never a commercially viable form: when Ayler died he had won some critical recognition, but none from the jazz public.

1964 was Ayler's *annus mirabilis*. The epochal *Spiritual Unity*, featuring a trio with bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Sunny Murray, instituted his connection with ESP-Disk, consolidated by *New York Eye and Ear Control*, *Spirits Rejoice*, and *Bells*. In summer 1964, trumpeter Don Cherry joined Ayler's group, and his dancing faux-naïve style provided an inspired contrast to the leader. In September, the new quartet was invited for a brief Scandinavian tour which extended to the Netherlands. It resulted in the two legendary sessions reissued here – *The Copenhagen Tapes* and *The Hilversum Session* – plus *Vibrations*. The Copenhagen tapes included a live recording from Café Montmartre, and studio recording from a Danish radio station. The Café Montmartre recordings will be issued later on hatOLOGY – it's the studio recordings that are heard here, together with the Hilversum recordings from the tour's end in November. The latter were made at a Netherlands radio studio before a small invited audience, and are the quartet's final recording. The flurry of performing activity then came to an end – Ayler's subsequent group seems to have had only three gigs in 1965.

Both Copenhagen and Hilversum recordings have excellent sound quality. Material is mostly well known Ayler creations – whose inconsistent, confusing titles have further obscured his artistic legacy. "Ghosts" was recorded many times in 1964; "Spirits" seems to have made its first appearance on *Witches & Devils*, and both appeared on *Spiritual Unity*. The almost cursory theme of "C.A.C" became *Spiritual Unity's* "The Wizard". Don Cherry's "Infant Happiness" is the sole non-Ayler composition from the Hilversum and Copenhagen sessions.

There's a striking contrast between Ayler's gentle voice in various interviews, and the forcefulness of his music. Ecstatic jazz involves total abandonment to sound, and in purely melodic terms, his squalling lines are essentially simple. But

his 1964 recordings show a new confidence, with no sense of straining for spiritual transcendence. His tenor tone is huge, facilitated apparently by a stiff plastic reed. It's a thick, grainy, highly vocal articulation that features squeaks, honks, and extreme penetration of high and low registers – listen to the majestic theme statement of “Spirits”, deeply affecting even though Ayler milks it for pathos, and contrasting with the timbral explosion that follows. In place of tempered melody are sweeping flourishes – what Ekkehard Jost, in his pioneering *Free Jazz* (1974), called “sound-spans”. The vibrato is massively broad and sentimental. Contemporary Aylerian John Dikeman comments that “the horn responds in certain ways when you put that much air into it – sonic similarities can be physical, as opposed to direct artistic influence”. He adds that Ayler “could express everything with just one note. Coltrane had that too by the end, but to me, he was Old Testament, where Ayler was the New Testament – ecstatic and rejoicing!”



Ayler's Scandinavian recordings from 1962–3 showed an unbridgeable stylistic gulf between non-tempered soloist and “intune” bop accompanists. In 1964, he at last found musicians who understood his music intuitively. As Barry Kernfeld argues in *New Grove*, in these recordings dense collective improvisation are juxtaposed with, and sometimes interpenetrate, Ayler's rhythmically square, frequently tonal themes. Only after 1965 does the frequent critical comparison with New Orleans marching bands become apt, as composition – frequently in march-form – became more important in Ayler's music.

Critics dispute the nature of Ayler's genius. But many writers now reject the idea of genius altogether – exploring their views helps us focus on his achievement. “The genius myth” needs debunking, claims Kevin Ashton in *How to Fly a Horse: The Secret History of Creation, Invention, and Discovery*. According to Nigel Barber from *Psychology Today*, psychologists have disproved the assumption that success in some disciplines requires a special innate talent – though he allows that innate genius is still found in the performing arts. There's a strong political dimension to these debates. A recent study in *Science* located greater gender inequality in fields like maths where a genius concept is popular, while Ashton comments that “That term [genius] was intended only for white men of European descent”.

This last objection clearly misfires in the case of jazz. But in general, these critics fail to recognise that there's no single "genius myth", no single concept of genius. The peerless Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant provided the deepest, most compelling of various alternative accounts. He was a great individualist, who regarded genius as solitary and innate – but otherwise he rejects the Romantic underpinnings of the so-called "genius myth". "Beautiful art is the art of a genius" who ignores "classical rules", and pursues an exemplary originality, Kant writes. The genius is a rule-giver, but not a rule-follower. For Kant, "Genius is a *talent* for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given...hence [its] foremost property...must be *originality*". The genius who follows a precursor who is also a genius, is aroused by a feeling of their own originality, and doesn't simply imitate. However, "for other clever minds his example gives rise to a school...a methodical instruction according to rules"; imitators produce derivative works.

The issue of innateness is largely spurious – the answer in "nature v. nurture" disputes is usually that each is required. Not every genius is a *Wunderkind*; for every Mozart there's a Beethoven or Brahms who worked hard, producing many drafts of material. There are genius late developers, sometimes very late. If Kant himself – or Janacek, or Michael Tippett to take three extreme cases – had died at the age of fifty, they'd largely be forgotten. Ayler – like other relatively late developers in jazz, Lester Young and John Coltrane – didn't produce mature work till his late 20s.

Likewise, solitariness is not essential – Ayler was collaborating with other highly creative musicians. What Kant's account rightly stresses is that unlike lesser artists, someone of Ayler's originality can't simply be subsumed under a style-category like "free jazz". By the time of these 1964 recordings, he'd exploded the conventions of bop, and was defining a genuinely free territory. The genius, in art or science, doesn't fall under some existing "ism" or style category – though they often generate their own, to which lesser talents subscribe. A genius can *found* a style-category, but they themselves are not simply subsumed under it. The genius often has a self-aware handling of styles – an ability to use multiple styles concurrently.

John Dikeman remains sceptical about attributing an individualist concept of genius: "Ayler's goal was transcendence. What really separates him is the sincerity of the cry – the technical innovations, profound as they are, are secondary. It doesn't matter if you believe in God or not – you can hear in his playing an absolutely transcendent experience". But that, to me, is itself a mark of genius.

Albert Ayler Quartet

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Andy Hamilton, January 2016

Albert Ayler Quartet European Radio Studio Recordings 1964

Albert Ayler *tenor saxophone*
Don Cherry *cornet*
Gary Peacock *double bass*
Sunny Murray *drums*

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Angels | 6:56 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601423 | |
| 2 | C.A.C. | 5:00 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601424 | |
| 3 | Ghosts | 7:29 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601425 | |
| 4 | Infant Happiness | 6:06 |
| | <i>by Don Cherry</i> | |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601426 | |
| 5 | Spirits | 9:10 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601427 | |
| 6 | No Name | 5:42 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601428 | |
| 7 | Vibrations | 7:41 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601429 | |
| 8 | Saints | 7:03 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601430 | |
| 9 | Spirits | 4:42 |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601431 | |
| Total Time DDD ²⁴ Bit | | 59:54 |

1–6 recorded on November 9th, 1964, Hilversum, The Netherlands; Recording engineer: Jan Schelling; Session originally produced for VARA-Radio by Michiel de Ruyter and Aad Bos; Special tanks to Dick Lucas. 7 - 8 recorded on September 10th, 1964 by Danish Radio Copenhagen, Denmark; CD master by Peter Pfister on March 8th, 2016; Liner Notes by Andy j. Hamilton; Cover and liner photos by Ton van Wageningen; Graphic concept by fuhrer vienna; Executive production by Bernhard "Benne" Vischer & Werner X. Uehlinger.

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