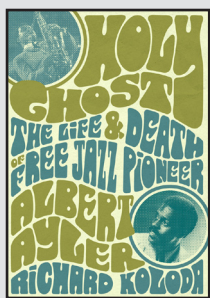


IN PRINT



Holy Ghost:

The Life and Death of Free Jazz Pioneer Albert Ayler
Richard Koloda (Jawbone Press)

by Kevin Canfield

Albert Ayler played the saxophone with tremendous intensity. This is well-known. But as Richard Koloda demonstrates in this thoroughly reported biography, the late musician's endurance was just as remarkable. Bassist Mutawaf Shaheed tells the author that he accompanied Ayler during an arduous pre-show warmup: "We played for four hours: one song." On such nights, if Ayler saw a bandmate losing zip, "he would get behind them with the horn," Shaheed says, "and you could actually feel the force of the horn in your back." In *Holy Ghost*, Koloda, an Ohio lawyer and jazz writer, seeks "to draw attention away from the circumstances surrounding Ayler's death and bring it sharply back to the legacy he left behind." His efforts have yielded a perceptive book.

Koloda doesn't underplay Ayler's tragic final days. He recounts the professional disappointments and apparent depression that dogged Ayler before his body was found in the East River 52 years ago this month; though an apparent suicide, his death at 34 has stirred rumors ever since. But Koloda's focus remains on Ayler's creative breakthroughs and setbacks. As all biographers must, he discusses his subject's youth and family life—Ayler teamed, then split with his trumpeter brother Donald—but Koloda's staunch commitment to Ayler's music is commendable.

Influenced by New Orleans jazz, his daring '60s musical counterparts and a desire to access the divine by speaking in tongues through his horn, Ayler famously took his music "further out than what many felt was acceptable," Koloda writes. His book attentively charts Ayler's multifarious musical journey, from the spontaneous honks and squawks heard in his soundtrack for the 1964 film *New York Eye and Ear Control* to the off-kilter R&B of his 1968 album *New Grass*. Whether Ayler was, in his words, playing "geometric shapes and forms displayed musically" or aiming for relative accessibility, he elicited vastly different reactions from critics and audiences. He was well-received in Europe, but when he returned home Ayler was for a time "largely barred from playing the New York City clubs," which wanted safer music, Koloda writes. An Ayler album would reliably receive both critical raves and pans. His stated goal remained consistent: to play music that evoked "true spiritual feeling or jubilation," as Ayler wrote.

Koloda's book includes many new interviews and a vast bibliography, no surprise considering, as he writes in a preface, his book "has been in the works for over 20 years." He uses many long quotations, an approach that occasionally gives *Holy Ghost* the feel of a middling oral history. More often, though, this is an engaging biography worthy of the fascinating musician at its heart. Those who saw Ayler play without interruption for hours at a time never doubted his commitment to his art. Nor will anyone who reads this admirable biography.

For more information, visit jawbonepress.com



Sweet Nothings (for Milford Graves)
Joe McPhee/Evan Parker (Corbett vs. Dempsey)
The Art of Flight: For Alvin Fielder
Survival Unit III (Astral Spirits/Instigation)
No Questions No Answers
A Pride of Lions (RogueArt)
by Stuart Broomer

Joe McPhee, who turns 83 this month, is one of the great travelers of free jazz, a musician whose innate lyricism moves freely between reeds and brass instruments. Over the past 60 years, he has taken initial inspirations from Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler and carried those messages forward, creating global bands and bonds in the process. The pointed communicative focus of his work is evident from *Sweet Freedom - Now What?*, his 1994 homage to Max Roach's Civil Rights projects, to his collaborations with many significant European tenor saxophonists of his own generation and beyond, including Peter Brötzmann, Evan Parker, Daunik Lazro, Mats Gustafsson and Rodrigo Amado. These three recent releases, covering the past two decades, represent long-standing partnerships.

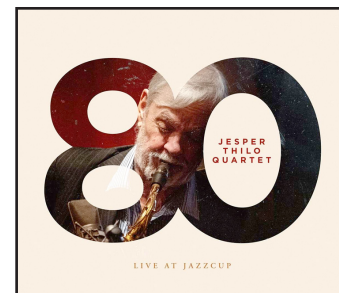
Following *Chicago Tenor Duets* from 1998, *Sweet Nothings for Milford Graves* presents a meeting of McPhee and Parker, this one from the 2003 edition of Chicago's Empty Bottle Festival. There is a broader sonic spectrum here, though, with McPhee and Parker both playing soprano saxophone as well as tenor and McPhee adding pocket cornet. There's a sense of deep breathing and contemplation. "Sweet Nothings 1" has both on soprano, taking turns playing long tones against the other's developed melodic lines, their oboe-like sounds suggesting shehnai master Bismillah Khan. Their tenors on "2" are deeply reflective, sustained interaction the result. If the saxophone matching suggests resemblance enough, the relationship is even maintained on "3" and "4" when McPhee matches his pocket cornet with Parker's soprano and tenor. As the performance proceeds, segments expand and grow in power. There is heightened intensity on "V", whether the two are matching tenor multiphonics or developing individual perspectives, Parker with a harder edge, McPhee with a gentler, rounder sound. "VI" finds the two mirroring and varying each other's high-pitched soprano lines, suggesting birdsong.

First launched 20 years ago, *Survival Unit III* is a trio with McPhee, cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm and percussionist Michael Zerang. Recorded at the 2018 Instigation Festival in New Orleans, *The Art of Flight* is the band's first release to present Lonberg-Holm without electronics, but it also highlights the trio's combination of empathy and expressionism. The five-part improvisation shifts among leads with support and ensemble play, solos, duos and trios, but welded together by a kind of spiritual yearning, a stretching toward meaning. It is there initially in McPhee's spiky trumpet eruptions, then his explosive, broad-toned tenor, with Lonberg-Holm bending his arco lines to provide horn-like counterpoint. It is there in Zerang and Lonberg-Holm's brilliant sonic abstraction, with the cellist sounding electronic without electronics. McPhee proceeds with ever-greater fervor, launching "Part III" simultaneously playing raw tenor saxophone while vocalizing his own duet through the horn, bridging individual and collective lamentation.

The high points of free jazz possess a kind of grandeur and *A Pride of Lions' No Questions No Answers*, recorded at Jazzfestival Saalfelden in 2018, is a tribute to the acuity of writer Alexander Pierrepont's Bridge project, linking the Chicago and Paris free jazz

communities. *A Pride of Lions* is a family given to calm reflection, but also capable of some mad expressionism. Here McPhee is occasionally heard in full cry, but he can also represent structural contrast to longtime associate Lazro's flights into chaos and rapture. The 35-minute "Unanswered Question" begins with a mood-setting confluence of bowed and plucked basses (Joshua Abrams and Guillaume Séguron) and spare drum strokes (Chad Taylor) before launching a series of rich and shifting textures, with both potent individual statements and strong dialogues by McPhee on soprano and alto saxophones and Lazro on tenor and baritone, all of it supported by shifting rhythmic backdrops. Along the way fresh textures emerge, with Abrams' guembri and Taylor's mbira invoking Africa. The special mark of this particular brotherhood is a quotation from Albert Ayler's "Spirits", which arises in the relatively brief (at 12 minutes) "An Unquestioned Answer". McPhee plays pocket trumpet and also vocalizes through his alto while Lazro openly assumes Ayler's compound voice, singing highs cutting to pitch-bending lows. The concluding "Enough" focuses on an intense and taut dialogue between the two saxophonists, McPhee on soprano and Lazro on baritone.

For more information, visit corbettvsdempsey.com, astralspirits.bandcamp.com and roguart.com



Live at Jazzcup
Jesper Thilo Quartet (Stunt)
by Scott Yanow

Dane Jesper Thilo, who turns 81 this month, is a hard-swinging tenor saxophonist who blends together elements of Coleman Hawkins and Zoot Sims. He has led over 20 albums, virtually all for European labels and sticking exclusively to playing spirited swing, and has yet to let listeners down.

For this 2022 set, Thilo is joined by an excellent rhythm section of pianist Soren Kristiansen, bassist Daniel Franck and drummer Frands Riffbjerg. The leader is heard throughout in prime form, performing straight-ahead jazz with passion, fire and creativity within the genre. The set begins with Matthew Gee's catchy "Oh Gee" (a blues with a bridge), "Body And Soul" (during which the tenor shows obvious affection for the melody) and a cooking "Just Friends". Thilo originally began his career as a swing clarinetist and he returns to his roots on warm renditions of "If I Had You" and "Memories Of You".

"Blue 'N' Boogie" is taken quite uptempo, "Sweets To the Sweet" is a feature for Franck, Kristiansen displays the inspiration of Oscar Peterson on "Tenderly" and Riffbjerg excels throughout on heated tradeoffs with Thilo. Other selections include a Hawkins-influenced "Stardust", melodic "Like Someone In Love" and hard-swinging explorations of "I Remember April" and "Lester Leaps In". The latter finishes up as "Anthropology" and is followed by a chorus of "Montmartre Blues" during which Thilo cuts loose with some surprising high notes.

Thilo, who in Denmark had preceded Scott Hamilton and the comeback of small-group swing in the United States, sounds pretty ageless throughout the club date. *Live at Jazzcup* will be a delight for those who love spontaneous swing-oriented jams on standards.

For more information, visit sundance.dk