

Albert Ayler New York Eye And Ear Control Revisited

Don Cherry

John Tchicai

Roswell Rudd

Gary Peacock

Sunny Murray



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When the Canadian filmmaker-musician-sculptor (and much more) Michael Snow moved to New York City in the early 1960s, he quickly immersed himself in the burgeoning avant-garde jazz scene, going so far as to make his Chambers Street studio available as a practice space for a number of luminaries therefrom, including Archie Shepp, Milford Graves and Roswell Rudd. He had begun working on a theme that would preoccupy him for much of the decade, that of the “Walking Woman”. In this instance, it would be a film that was entirely imagistic, focussing on a silhouette of a woman in stride that would be iterated throughout, without any narrative structure, a kind of blurred, ghostly presence. He also desired a full integration of visuals and sound, with neither taking precedence.

In 1964, via an urging from poet Paul Haines, Michael Snow heard and had been very impressed by the Albert Ayler Trio, at that time including bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Sunny Murray. He invited them, along with trumpeter Don Cherry, trombonist Roswell Rudd and altoist John Tchicai, to his space, stating that he “wanted to buy a half hour of music.” His concept was fairly radical for the time, its principles adjacent to that practiced for several years by the ensemble Group Ongaku and taken up the following year by the British collective, AMM. Within jazz, perhaps the closest reference would have been the more or less concurrent work of Sun Ra, as in ‘The Magic City’ or Larry Austin’s New Music Ensemble. Michael Snow wanted pure improvi-

sation—no themes, no solos, saying, “As I was being involved with so-called free jazz, I was always surprised at how everybody was still bookending, as in all of previous jazz where you play a tune, play your variations, then play the tune again. I kept feeling that I didn’t want that, and particularly what I had in mind for the film, I definitely didn’t want it. I wanted it as pure free improvisation as I could get.” Further, the two aspects, the visual and the aural, would proceed separately; the musicians would not reference the film while playing and, if anything, Michael Snow would adapt the film to what emerged from the music.

The recording is divided into three tracks, including a very brief opening piece, ‘Dons Dawn’ [sic], featuring Don Cherry and Gary Peacock. Given all of the above, one may be surprised to hear, essentially, a haunting intro to a ballad—very beautiful and deeply felt, as well as indicating an approach Don Cherry would return to in upcoming years—though at least proto-thematic in content. As with many things, it’s easier to talk about relinquishing basic



elements that have long been foundational than actually accomplishing that task. 'A Y' launches directly into full group improvisation, at first sounding reminiscent of similar passages in Ornette Coleman's 'Free Jazz', but not 45 seconds in, one can sense a drift into an Ayleresque dirge-like area. Unlike the principles of the above-cited ensembles, especially as regards AMM, there was no impetus to discard the essential *language* of jazz, in Albert Ayler's case the blues and gospel roots: there was no real reason to do so. As in other ostensibly free music from around the time, despite the rhythm section not being tied down to formulaic phrasing, one still has the sense of the horns "soloing" atop, though generally not on their own but in tandem with one, two or three others. These

the others. Again, there's the perhaps inevitable coalescing and dissolving of lines, for example midway through when Cherry and Tchicai briefly form a plaintive two-note pattern, quite beautiful in context. Elsewhere, one can almost hear an anticipation of the kind of improvisation one might encounter a few years hence in the work of The Art Ensemble of Chicago; one wonders if this recording may have been a touchstone for them. Still and all, it's Albert Ayler's voice that seems to be the driving force throughout, replete with trademark guttural cries and elaborate tendrils spiraling off into the heavens. Near the conclusion of the track, he concocts a descending three-note pattern, a kind of simple dirge, soon augmented by the others, gently laying the

considerations aside, the music generated by the sextet ebbs and flows, sometimes congealing into masses of immense power and force, then regrouping, searching for a while, finding a different pathway and exploring in that direction. In many ways, it embodies a notion that would become pervasive in upcoming years: that a performance was a *process* of locating beautiful and/or interesting ideas, not a finished product where everything "worked".

'ITT' generally operates at a somewhat slower pace, though remaining resolutely active. Don Cherry often backgrounds himself, sending skittering sheets of sound like an intense wash behind

piece to rest, but not before a short call-to-arms. The truth was still marching in.

Neither Albert Ayler nor, in any deep sense, the other musicians involved would really explore this particular line of investigation further, each returning to an aspect of jazz (or, in Don Cherry's case, various world musics) containing strong elements of freedom, but also melodies, solos, regular rhythms, etc. 'New York Eye and Ear Control' stands as a brilliant one-off, very enticing as a "what might have been" but entirely strong, imaginative and even elegant on its own terms.

Brian Olewnick, June 5, 2021

