

Jeff Lederer first heard the music of Albert Ayler when he was at Oberlin College in the '70s, studying religion but playing a lot of saxophone on the side. The head of Oberlin's jazz department at the time, Wendell Logan, told him about Ayler's 1968 Impulse! album *Love Cry*, which he then hunted down on vinyl in the college library. "That record spoke to me immediately, and it started off an interest that's just continued to percolate over time," Lederer says. "It's still my favorite Ayler record. To say he plays anthems on that album may not be quite right, because the music doesn't have a martial or patriotic feel. But really, an anthem is any song that draws everybody's attention to a central point in a hurry—it's right there, everybody can feel it—and Albert was an expert at doing that."

Not long after this auspicious introduction, Lederer had the privilege of meeting a special visitor to Oberlin: Donald Ayler, whose thorny trumpet playing can be heard on several of his older brother's albums, including *Love Cry*. During his afternoon on campus with Lederer and fellow students, Donald was visibly struggling with the mental illness that had already begun to exhibit itself in the mid-'60s and would hound him for the rest of his life. To everyone's disappointment, he didn't say much about his late brother, perhaps due to lingering guilt over the circumstances of Albert's 1970 death by drowning in New York's East River—presumed, though never conclusively proven, to be a suicide. But he did let one revealing remark slip. His brother, Donald said in all seriousness, was from another planet.

CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION

By Mac Randall

SEARCHING FOR THE CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCE OF
ALBERT AYLER



It's probably fair to say that **lots of people have thought the same thing on first hearing Albert Ayler's saxophone.** Even now, all these years later, it resonates with a profound sort of alien-ness: a sound as blocky as a brick house, with vibrato an acre wide, crazy overblowing, microtones galore, and oh, those ungodly shrieks! Ayler's detractors, of whom there once were many, viewed these stylistic elements as angrily confrontational and often responded in kind. The BBC, to name just one non-believer, deemed his 1966 live radio session unfit for broadcast and erased the tapes to protect its listeners forever from such aural violence. Ayler's supporters, however, took those same musical trademarks as evidence of his boldness and spiritual intensity. Chief among them was John Coltrane, who spent his last few years on Earth absorbing Ayler's work and heavily referencing it in his own.

When Ayler was still alive, he was thought of, for better and for worse, as

a revolutionary, taking the innovations of Ornette Coleman and pushing them several steps further. But in the years following his death, jazz seemed on the whole to be in retreat from the advanced position that he and a few of his contemporaries had staked out. Of course, everything goes in cycles, and sure enough, Ayler's name has begun popping up again with greater frequency in the past 15 years or so, cited as a touchstone by critics and an inspiration by players. But where are the audible traces of his revolution today? Eighty years after Albert Ayler's birth, can we conclusively say how the planet he came from has affected the orbit of ours?

To try and answer these questions, it's important to look beyond the obvious. For example, namechecks can be misleading. When saxophonist David Murray wrote a piece called "Flowers for Albert" and made it the title track of an album in 1976, listeners quickly made assumptions about Ayler's influence that Murray was quick to dispute in subsequent years. "Ayler was influential

► "When I do his repertoire, I change it in big ways," says Jeff Lederer, whose recent album *Brooklyn Blowhards* features Ayler material alongside traditional sea shanties. "Though, I'm still striving to get at the universal quality of his melodies."

in making me wary of the dangers that can befall a jazz musician," Murray says in Francis Davis' 1986 book *In the Moment*. "After all, his body was found floating in the river. That's what I was thinking of when I wrote 'Flowers for Albert,' but everyone heard the tune and all of a sudden decided I sounded just like Albert Ayler. But I never turned Albert's [solos] back to 16 rpm so I could transcribe them and play them note-for-note the way I did with Paul [Gonsalves]' 27 choruses on Duke's 'Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue' or Coleman Hawkins' 'Body and Soul,' or lots of other things."

Just because you don't put a certain musician near the top of your list of personal heroes doesn't mean you discount that musician's achievements, and it's clear that Murray regards Ayler as significant. In June of 2000, he told Bill Milkowski in this magazine's pages that Ayler "was the perfect cat for his time. For what was happening, he just said it in a nutshell." Note the silent implication here, though: What was perfect for his time isn't necessarily perfect for ours.

The next obvious feature to look past when evaluating Ayler's legacy is the first one most people notice: the so-called "energy playing." This is harder to get beyond because it's been lovingly adopted by so many artists, particularly players from the other side of the Atlantic, like saxophonists Peter Brötzmann, from Germany, and the Englishman Evan Parker. Lederer, whose devotion to Ayler continues to burn strong, confesses to a certain ambivalence about the way that the noisier aspects of Ayler's style have been employed over the years. "I love the European players who took after Ayler, but I don't connect with them as much," he says. "I don't always get the sense they're moving the music forward. What I personally pick up on most in Ayler is the combination of melodic quality and pure physical energy, which I just don't hear in today's players. That's not to say there aren't a lot of great free improvisers around, but to my ear nobody has that overwhelming physical presence. And his energy playing is so strong because it's always respectful; it's so rooted in song."

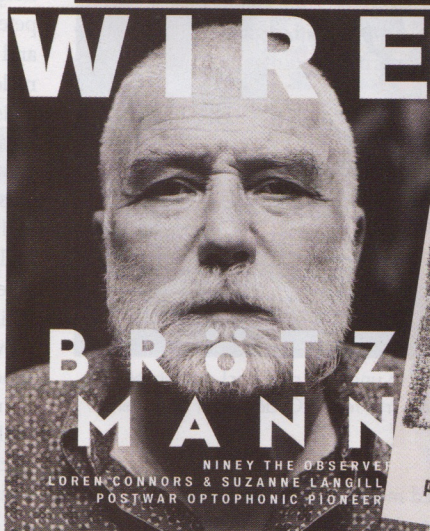
ROB LOWELL

MURRAY BY ALAN NAHIGIAN

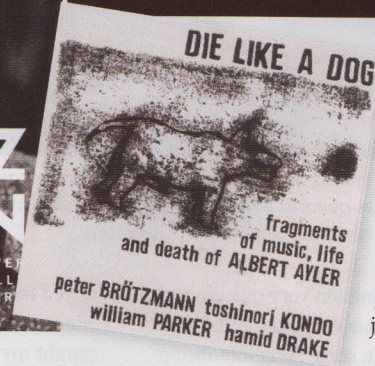
Much like Murray, Brötzmann has felt the need to put some distance between himself and Ayler, in his case arguing that he developed more concurrent to Ayler than after him. In the liner notes to his 1993 album *Die Like a Dog: Fragments of Music, Life and Death of Albert Ayler*, he writes, "We [Ayler and I] both tried to do similar or almost identical things at the same point in time, each independently and without knowing anything about the other—each of us within his own culture." And in a 2011 interview with *Time Out New York*, he expressed some dissatisfaction with the worldview implied by lofty Ayler album titles like *Prophecy* and *Spirits Rejoice*: "[T]his always was very far away from my way of thinking. I always was really standing with both feet on the soil. ... We had to fight every day, and I know the guys in your country had to do the same, but the solution for us was not in some kind of other world—it was just here."

For Darius Jones, a saxophonist and composer whose still-in-progress nine-album *Man'ish Boy* series indicates a dramatic ambition worthy of Ayler at his peak, the crucial distinction between Ayler and the European musicians he influenced was that the former's music was steeped in American life and culture. "I know free music became more prevalent in Europe," he says, "and those players had a lot of the same 'fuck it' spirit, but I have to say, as an African-American who loves America, that Ayler's art is of *this* place. I'm from the South, and when I first heard him, I didn't think it was out. What he played made a lot of sense to me."

Indeed, anyone caring to dig beneath those thick surface layers of sound and fury in Ayler's work will soon find that his approach to jazz is deeply grounded in traditional, easily comprehensible forms: church hymns, folk tunes, military-band music and old-fashioned New Orleans-style collective improvisation. The New Thing was, in fact, not so new—or at least it was based in things that weren't. For Marc Ribot, this is a point to emphasize. The guitarist has recorded Ayler's songs for the Pi label in his band Spiritual Unity, named after the saxophon-



► While they harbor deep reverence for Ayler's music, both David Murray, above, and Peter Brötzmann, seen here on the cover of the British avant-garde magazine *The Wire*, have felt the need at various points to distance themselves from his legacy



with the African-American experience in a way that contemporary jazz musicians just don't."

Think about this for a moment

ist's landmark ESP-Disk' LP of 1964, and in his current trio; both groups feature bassist Henry Grimes, an Ayler alum. "Albert," Ribot says, "was not the first revolutionary, political or musical, to conceive of what he was doing as a return."

"If Ornette Coleman is Muddy Waters, then Albert Ayler is Howlin' Wolf," Jones says. "He's really raw, and he understands how to harness that rawness. Today the blues is really neglected in jazz; it's not as much a part of the modern narrative. So when you're connecting your music to something in that continuum, as Ayler was, it hardly makes sense now. He was dealing

too: What Ayler was doing, above all, was responding to bebop, which tends to be complex on the top (extended harmonies, rapid-fire improvisation) but simple on the bottom (32-bar AABA or 12-bar blues song forms as its foundation). "Historically, jazz had been moving for a long time toward being more harmonically sophisticated, toward being a listening music," Ribot says. "By Ayler's time, bebop form was standardized and, frankly, boring. The changes were doing nearly all the work in a composition. Ayler called that into question. He wanted something else to do the work. And so he created a kind

of ritual process for musicians to undergo and audiences to participate in. It was a total reversal."

What did that process involve? A different sort of sophistication. "He didn't take an open-ended route like Pharoah Sanders or Alice Coltrane," Ribot notes. "Instead, he often imposed forms on the music that were quite complex: heads that took a long time to play through, preplanned noise events, changes in density, even jump choruses, like you hear on 'Bells' [1965]. He was taking musicians who had been trained through bebop to process huge

rock avant-gardes meet. He first got hip to Ayler while playing in John Lurie's Lounge Lizards during the mid-'80s, prompted by keyboardist/trombonist Anthony Coleman and guitarist Robert Quine, the latter best known for his work in Lou Reed's band. "Anthony pointed out that some of the stuff I was playing at the time had some common borders with Albert Ayler," he recalls, "and then Quine actually played me some of his music: *Swing Low Sweet Spiritual* [recorded in 1964 but released in 1971] and the live version of 'Bells' from *At Slug's Saloon* [1966], which absolutely

conversant with rock and similar idioms and aren't afraid to bring the noise. Look to the quirkiness of the Jazz Passengers, with whom Ribot partnered early on, or Chicago-based saxophonist Mars Williams, whose many groups include a long-running Ayler tribute band, Witches & Devils. Look to bold auteurs like Darius Jones, or saxophonists John Zorn and Ken Vandermark, or pianist Matthew Shipp, or drummer Gerald Cleaver. In jazz's modern mainstream look to Joe Lovano, who has frequently professed his fondness for Ayler and who relishes bringing a free aesthetic into unlikely contexts.

Last but not least, look to Lederer and his latest group, Brooklyn Blowhards. Their self-titled debut album, released earlier this year on the Little i label, combines four Ayler compositions—"Bells," "Island Harvest," "Heavenly Home" and "Omega"—with traditional sea shanties like "Haul Away Joe" and "Black Ball Line." While Lederer, fellow saxophonist Petr Cancura, cornetist/trumpeter Kirk Knuffke, trombonist Brian Drye and accordionist Art Bailey take care of the melodic duties, percussionists Matt Wilson, Allison Miller and Stephen LaRosa weigh in on ship's bell, chum bucket, chain and other nautically oriented items. The final track, "Insular Tahiti," tops off the whole *mélange* with a gripping passage from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, recited by Lederer's wife, the vocalist Mary LaRose. (During their recent tour to promote the album, the Blowhards played a gig by Melville's grave at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.)

In its weird way, it all works tremendously well. Then again, maybe it isn't so weird; after all, Ayler played bagpipes on 1969's *Music Is the Healing Force of the Universe*, the last album he recorded before his death. In essence, the sea shanties of *Brooklyn Blowhards* perform the same duty as the church hymns of Ayler's *Swing Low Sweet Spiritual*, providing a deep traditional foundation out of which the pain, anger, humor and joy of free improv can naturally erupt with an unexpected familiarity. They further Ayler's legacy as effectively as anyone has.

"I don't ever want to sound like an Albert emulator," Lederer says. "When I do his repertoire, I change it in big ways, though I'm still striving to get at the universal quality of his melodies. I was just teaching at a jazz camp in Connecticut, and we did a version of an Ayler tune, 'Witches and Devils.' I put pretty chord changes to it and made it a bossa nova. People were saying, 'Great tune.

All of this suggests that to find modern players who aren't just citing Ayler but actually summoning his spirit,

you should look for artists who know their history, enjoy experimenting with structure, are

amounts of information very quickly and forcing them to play very slow and simple. When you do that, something interesting can happen psychologically."

Jones concurs. "The blues is complex," he says. "We act like it's not, but it is. We've learned how to explore our instruments more since Ayler, but it's in a more classical way. We haven't had his street education. I mean, this cat went on the road with Little Walter in the '50s. Most cats now wouldn't even have *survived* doing that. They don't know what it's like to feel that kind of danger. And that feeling helped create a sound that you don't get from playing in a practice room."

Ribot is an example of how Ayler's influence has leaked more often than anywhere else into the fringes where the jazz and

slayed me. What I heard in him was not what a lot of other people heard. What caught my attention was that the chords were simple. They weren't bebop chords; they were closer to rock." (Thought of in this way, Ayler's own move toward rock in the late '60s, with his *New Grass* album on Impulse!, could be seen not as the label-dictated sellout critics accused it of being but as a natural evolution.)



▶ "[Ayler] created a kind of ritual process for musicians to undergo and [for] audiences to participate in," says guitarist Marc Ribot, seen here with trio-mates Chad Taylor and Henry Grimes (right), an alum of Ayler's mid-'60s groups

► "I'm from the South," says Darius Jones, "and when I first heard [Ayer], I didn't think it was out. What he played made a lot of sense to me."

Who wrote that? Maybe I should go all the way and write some lyrics for it in Portuguese." If that does ever happen, one suspects the composer would have approved.

"If you want to go out on tenor sax, you've got to go through Ayler," Jones acknowledges. "But if someone were consciously setting out to be like him now, I'm not sure anyone would like it. And believe me, I've tried to harness that spirit. But you have to be completely unapologetic about what you're doing. When I hear his music, I hear something that takes me back to juke joints and gutbucket nastiness. I hear a guy who wasn't really trained like jazz musicians are now but who just kept on working on his thing, who went onstage with the attitude of 'I don't fucking care what you think; you will deal with my sound.' Does that spirit exist in other players to some degree? Yes. The person I can think of who got it the most



was David S. Ware. But there's no one making art like Albert. With him it's about more than music, it's about character. And that's why we'll be listening to him forever. Like Ornette, he did something that transcended

category. I mean, *is it even jazz?* Was Albert Ayler truly a jazz musician?"

Jones pauses, then lets out a big laugh. "I don't want to even try to answer that question." **JT**

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