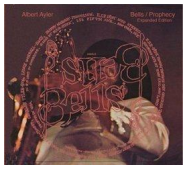
Albert Ayler - Bells & Prophecy Expanded Edition (2016)



Disc 1 *1. Bells 19:45 2. Spirits 7:53 3. Wizard 8:24 4. Ghosts, First Variation 11:18 5. Prophecy 7:13 6. Ghosts, Second Variation 7:06* Disc 2 *1. Spirits 6:38 2. Saints 10:32 3. Ghosts 10:56 4. The Wizard 6:51 5. Children 9:05 6. Spirits (theme) 0:28*
Albert Ayler – tenor saxophone Charles Tyler - alto saxophone (1.1) Donald Ayler – trumpet (1.1) Gary Peacock – bass Lewis Worrell – bass (1.1) Sunny Murray – drums, percussion
Track 1-1: Recorded live at Town Hall, New York City, May 1, 1965 Tracks 1-2 to 1-6, 2-1 to 2-6: Recorded live at Cellar Café, New York City, June 14, 1964

Albert Ayler's music was defined by its excesses. He played tenor saxophone with too much vibrato and too much feeling, outlining melodies that were too simple and too catchy before descending into skronky noise that was too harsh and too unsettling. Where jazz had been defined by its relationship to form, with musicians practicing their craft within established idioms or inching beyond them to create something else, Ayler's music was too amorphous for any container, a volatile liquid churning and splashing and running over and generally making a glorious mess.

Ayler's epochal studio recordings were made for the tiny ESP-Disk label in 1964 and '65. The first released was Spiritual Unity, and it was immediately recognized by those who heard it as a landmark. Five years earlier, saxophonist Ornette Coleman had reconfigured his group so that it no longer contained a piano, the first crack in the fissure that would soon become free jazz. By de-emphasizing chord changes, which provide the harmonic foundation for improvisation that had defined jazz since its inception, Coleman opened the music to new possibilities but also created confusion: If you could play virtually anything when you soloed, what made one player or one composition better than another?

On his early recordings, working with the trio of bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Sunny

Murray, Ayler helped clarify the answer to that question. The general shape of Prophecy, a live record capturing a date in June 1964 and reissued here in expanded form, hews very closely to that of Spiritual Unity, which was recorded in the studio one month later. Ayler's trio begins a given piece by playing one of the sing-song melodies that were pouring out of him during this period, melodies often based on simple folk songs from Western Europe. These fragments are so simple and memorable, in fact, that they are pretty much the definition of what we would now call earworms, the kind of tunes you might hear a five-year-old humming—think "Patty Cake" or "The ABC Song"— or else melodramatic march songs, like Ayler's "Spirits Rejoice," based on the French national anthem "La Marseillaise." Much of the tension in Ayler's early work comes in waiting for these theme statements to splinter and fall apart and be pulled into unrecognizable shapes. Once that happens, beauty clashes with ugliness, lines between joy and mourning dissolve, and the music becomes a torrent of undifferentiated emotion.

Despite his music's structural freedom, technique was essential to Ayler's art. He had a booming, bottom-heavy tone reminiscent of the honking sax players who dominated 1940s and '50s R&B, but he could also reach to the shrillest higher registers, and he played with an ultra-wide, quavering vibrato that brought to mind the ecstatic trembling of gospel music. Bassist Gary Peacock alternated droning bowed lines with a spindly single-note attack, and Murray moved drumming away from its timekeeping role and, leaning heavily on his cymbals, into the realm of pure texture. All this comes together here on "Ghosts," Ayler's definitive piece—he recorded it over and over during his early years, both live and in the studio, finding new possibilities every time he deconstructed its jaunty opening theme. Prophecy presents both the "First Variation" and "Second Variation" (Ayler's song titles were often confusing, with the same titles sometimes used for different pieces), which both found their way to Spiritual Unity. The trio crackles with life as they present the song here, seemingly aware that they were ushering in a new era.

The original Prophecy consisted of five tunes; this expanded version presents those alongside the rest of the music recorded that evening, which initially appeared on the Holy Ghost box set in 2004. Having it all together in one place makes sense. The other music included on this reissue is the 20-minute piece "Bells," which was recorded live in 1965 and initially released as a one-sided EP. Though they have been paired together on CD for some time now, there's no particular reason for "Bells" and Prophecy to be considered together, but early Ayler has been re-released and re-packaged steadily in the CD era.

If Prophecy found Ayler at the dawn of his game-changing new sound, "Bells" hinted at where he would go in his middle period, expanding his band and stringing together longer pieces built from smaller parts. (Though presented as a single piece, "Bells" is a number of shorter tunes that flow into each other.) Adding alto saxophonist Charles Tyler and his brother Donald Ayler on trumpet and switching Lewis Worrell for Peacock on bass, "Bells" explores how Ayler's

music worked in an ensemble. In another year he would add strings to his then-current touring band and they would become a bizarre and supremely moving sort of chamber orchestra (the peak recordings of this band can be found on The Complete Greenwich Village Sessions). "Bells" has hints of that development; it's an essential snapshot of the moment if not quite one of Ayler's essential releases.

One of the most telling sounds on this release exists outside the music. As "Ghosts (Second Variation)" ends in an impassioned stream of notes from Ayler and moaning vocals from one of his sidemen and he re-states the opening theme, we hear the applause of the audience, which sounds like it's coming from 10 people tops. It's true that this is Ayler at the start of his career, but it hints at the lonely road walked by an artist who sees the world differently. Ayler had a huge raft of great music ahead of him, but also a lot of heartache. --- Mark Richardson, pitchfork.com

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