

Albert Ayler for Example

A FEW MONTHS AGO, in reviewing an LP by the young soprano and tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler in this space, I said that Ayler might be working out a perfectly valid musical language of his own, but that it perhaps might be best not to intrude until he has things further along. More recent releases by Ayler make me realize that if such a view does not need to be altogether abandoned, it does need to be drastically reconsidered.

A new Fantasy LP called *My Name Is Albert Ayler* (Fantasy 6016; stereo 86016) is a recital of only limited success. But paradoxically it is at the same time a highly enlightening one, and not only about Ayler's talents but about the intentions of the jazz *avant-garde* in general. The LP is an American release of music recorded in Denmark a couple of years ago. The repertory is, on the face of it, conventional, and includes readings of "Bye Bye Blackbird," "Summertime," "On Green Dolphin Street,"

and the blues by Charlie Parker called "Billie's Bounce." Besides Ayler, the ensemble includes two Danish musicians, on piano and bass, and a young American drummer. The pianist, particularly, is thoroughly capable and (like hundreds of pianists the world over) thoroughly schooled in the conventions of bebop or modern jazz; he is also (again like hundreds of pianists) bland, slick, almost thoroughly dull, and to Ayler, apparently, almost thoroughly inhibiting. At first impression, Ayler's playing declares above all else: let me be free of this thoroughly capable, slick, bland, dull, conventional music.

Does Albert Ayler attempt to make music only from a negative premise, then? Well, perhaps that is only one's first impression.

One's second impression is apt to be even more negative, however. Out of Ayler's saxophone come notes that are overblown, honked, twisted, growled, shrieked. Indeed, he sometimes sounds

like an amateur who simply has not learned the proper embouchure for a reed instrument or the proper fingering for the saxophone. Yet at other times he perfectly articulates strings of difficult, short notes, fleet runs, and perfectly pronounced saxophone tones. It is evident that Albert Ayler is a very good saxophonist indeed. And putting one and one together, it is therefore necessarily evident that whatever Ayler plays on his instrument, he plays deliberately. Ayler has decided that whatever sound he can cause his horn to make, that sound might become a part of his music. Much as King Oliver decided that the wail produced by putting a pop bottle in the bell of his cornet was a part of his music, and much as Sidney Bechet decided that the growl produced partly in his throat was a part of his music, and much as Rex Stewart decided that the choked sound produced by pushing the cornet valve only halfway down was a part of his music, so Albert Ayler has decided that the honk or whinny produced by a too-loose use of the saxophone reed can be a part of his music.

Ayler plays the melodies of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "Billie's Bounce" with a kind of anti-swing and calculated carelessness—almost as though he did not quite know them or know how to play them. And he approaches the slower

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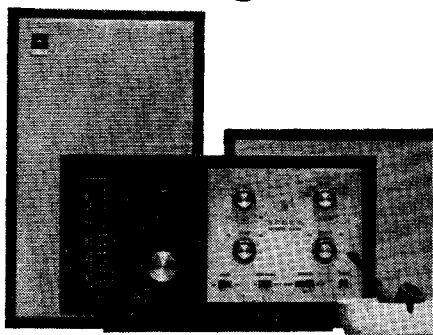
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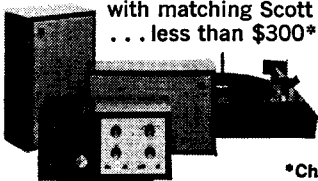


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—Walter Drego

Ayler . . . "a kind of bizarre beauty."

ballads, "Summertime" and "On Green Dolphin Street," with what seems at first a deliberate bathos. Does deliberate bathos make for parody? I think not, but I do think that in Ayler's music a kind of bizarre beauty emerges.

Much contemporary art has as a major purpose the deliberate esthetic exposure and destruction of old standards. That is a quality shared, it seems to me, by Picasso, Joyce, the Marx Brothers, and the Three Stooges, as well as earlier jazz. And I believe that with much truly contemporary art one also sees the emergence, however tentative, of new standards. All well and good, but a work may be fully contemporary in tone and still not be very good. The Marx Brothers were superb comedians but the Three Stooges are not.

The test of Ayler's music comes when he is not boxed in by conventional standards and conventional formats. On "C.T.," he is accompanied only by the superb young Danish bassist Niels-Henning Petersen and the very good drummer Ronnie Gardiner, and he is allowed to roam freely. I appreciate the challenge involved; I appreciate the careful and attentive response of the accompanists; I appreciate the passion and the daring of Ayler's improvisation. But I would be less than honest if I were to deny that after a few minutes of the performance, I was no longer engaged; I felt, as I often feel with John Coltrane, that I had attended a search

of twelve minutes duration for a reward of three.

A later Ayler can be heard on a record I have mentioned in this space before, ESP-Disc 1002, with the perhaps regrettably portentous title of *Spiritual Unity*. Here, with a trio, Ayler explores four thematically related pieces, all built on simple (and, for me, simplistic) compositional ideas. Ayler's solos are frequently orderly and logical developments, especially so on a piece called "The Wizard"—more orderly than many of John Coltrane's but, for me, less imaginative than Ornette Coleman's.

The most recent of Ayler's recordings is something of a reversal. It is a one-sided LP of a single work called "Bells" (ESP-Disc 1010), recorded by a sextet during a concert. The opening portion features some simultaneous improvisation by all the horns, and is perhaps deliberately anarchic. This is followed by a cadenza by Ayler; it is teasingly effective but it prepares us for nothing more daring than music built around simple marchlike themes, featuring an ordinary triad and performed with more than an echo of the shakily intoned, archetypal brass bands of New Orleans!

Any conclusions I would have to offer on Ayler at this point are necessarily tentative; I would say that as a composer he has a sense of form superior to his sense of melody, and that as an improviser he gains stature among players of "the new thing" from that same sense of form.

—MARTIN WILLIAMS.

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PRE-CHRISTMAS RECORDINGS

Negative Feedback, Positive Result

By IVAN B. BERGER

AN AMPLIFIER'S JOB is to magnify the signal, yet every high-fidelity amplifier incorporates something called "negative feedback," which reduces its ability to amplify.

Gain—the ratio between an amplifier's input and output—is cheap. If feedback reduced a stereo amplifier's gain by 90 per cent, the loss could be restored by adding a single tube to the circuit. But in exchange for the gain it takes away, negative feedback brings the benefits of decreased distortion, flatter frequency response, and improved impedance characteristics.

In an amplifier with negative feedback, a portion of the output signal is fed back into its input. This feedback signal is opposite in polarity to the input signal; for every positive excursion of the input wave, there is a correspondingly shaped negative excursion of the wave from the feedback loop.

If the input and feedback signals were of equal amplitude, they would cancel each other out. The feedback signal is therefore limited so as to cancel out most but not all of the input signal, while being itself completely canceled. If 90 per cent of the input were so canceled, only 10 per cent of it would remain to be amplified, and the gain of the amplifier would be reduced to 10 per cent of its original value.

Every amplifier adds some distortion to a signal, which will be fed back into the input along with the undistorted portions of the output signal. The undistorted portions of the feedback signal will be canceled out by the corresponding but oppositely polarized input signal. But since the distortion products have no counterparts in the input signal to offset them, they will not be canceled out. Instead, they will be fed through the amplifier, along with the uncanceled remainder of the input signal.

But the distortion products now undergoing amplification are of opposite polarity to those that the amplifier produces. If the amplifier produces a self-generated positive "spike" of distortion, it will find its counterpart in a negative "notch" of nearly equal size representing the amplified, reversed distortion product from the feedback loop. The two cancel out; in effect, the signal has been pre-distorted by feedback to compensate for the distortion it is about to undergo. Thus, feedback reduces distortion.

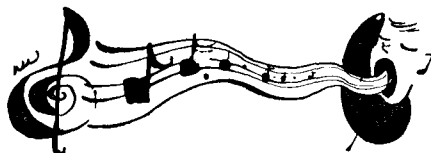
If an amplifier's output is weaker at very high or very low frequencies than it is in the center of the audio band, the feedback signal will be reduced at those frequencies. Since there is less feedback at these frequencies, less of the input signal is canceled. The input signal remaining is therefore greater at these frequencies, compensating for the amplifier's reduced gain. Similarly, more signal will be fed back at any frequency where the amplifier's gain is higher than normal, and the net gain, after feedback, is reduced to normal levels. Thus, feedback smoothes out an amplifier's frequency response.

Feedback compensates for signal variations caused by tube aging or fluctuating power-supply voltages.

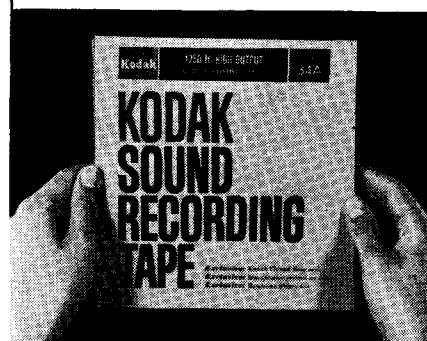
For all its undeniable advantages, feedback does create some problems other than gain reduction. Too much feedback (the exact amount varies from one amplifier design to another) makes an amplifier unstable, tending to oscillate at supersonic or subsonic frequencies. While these oscillations are not themselves audible, they create audible problems. Subsonic oscillations can cause "motorboating," a sound similar to the "putt-putt" of a motorboat. Supersonic oscillation causes high frequency distortion and may burn out tweeters in multi-speaker systems.

When feedback is used to compensate for very severe frequency discrimination, another problem occurs. In the frequency range where the amplifier's output is weak, there is little feedback, permitting (as we have seen) a correspondingly stronger input signal to reach the amplifier. This does correct frequency discrimination. But since distortion increases with increases in the amplitude of the input signal, there will be more distortion at the frequencies where this compensation is taking place. And, since there is less feedback at these frequencies, there is less control over this distortion.

Proper amplifier design can and does overcome these pitfalls. Feedback is one of the amplifier designer's most useful tools, and is universally used wherever fidelity is more important than gain. Without negative feedback, in fact, the modern high-fidelity amplifier would not exist.



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