

# Albert Ayler in a kilt

## The Assassination Weapon

### Edinburgh, 1966/7

## Robin Ramsay

Looking back on it, the hippies, dopers and beats in Edinburgh in the Summer of Love, 1967 got a shitty deal. Where their equivalents in London got to sit and get blasted in front of light-shows accompanied by early versions of the Soft Machine and Pink Floyd at UFO, their Scots cousins' first exposure to light-shows was accompanied by a rambling avant-garde jazz band called the Assassination Weapon which must have sounded like a bad Albert Ayler out-take.

The name came from the band's drummer, Jamie Muir, and was taken from a J.G. Ballard short story. (Ballard was very hip at the time.) Jamie and I started the band; and though I have no recollection of how that happened, it was probably through Jackie in Cairns Brothers Bookshop near the University. Jackie ran the record-shop in the basement and began importing the first ESP records and I used to walk the three miles or so up from Leith where I lived to buy coffee and listen to his latest acquisitions. One day he played Albert Ayler's *Spiritual Unity*—and I walked back down Leith Walk in a trance. What an amazing sound! And to play this stuff you didn't have to learn all those damned, complicated, be-bop chord sequences. Which was good news to me: I could play the trumpet, but though I loved jazz, had been listening to it on things like the *Voice of America* and Barry Aldis' jazz programme on Radio Luxembourg since I was in my early teens, and could do a fair impersonation of mid-period Miles Davis, I knew next to fuck-all about playing the stuff.

The core of the band was Muir, me on trumpet and a sax player called Bernie Greenwood—a doctor, whose claim to fame was having once played with Chris Farlowe's band. Other local musicians would turn up just to try this stuff out. A very good trombonist called Brian Keddie, for example, a bass player called Ian Croall, who later went into jazz administration and was running something in Manchester, and a young tenor player called Gordon Cruikshank, I remember. (Cruikshank is a now very fine tenor player in the Coltrane mould and was still gigging, last I heard, based in York.)

We began playing in a pub and, amazingly enough, an audience turned up. More amazingly, they liked it. We outgrew that pub and moved to a bigger one where a friend of a friend called Adrian, who had been down to UFO, bought a couple of projectors and began doing wet slides on the wall behind the band. Suddenly the place is packed with every shade of underground/alternative people and there was this funny smell in the room. 18 years old at the time, I didn't smoke fags and had no idea what dope smelled like. But dope it was and after half a dozen? ten? nights in the place the police came along and leaned on the landlord and we were expelled from the room. 'For inducing a drug-like atmosphere', we were told. It

must have been the light-shows: the music would only have induced a headache. Somewhere along the way a group of art students, Alan Johnson, Graeme Murray and Ken Duffy—friends of Muir who was an art school drop-out—adopted the band. (Johnson did the artwork for the first Evan Parker LP on Incus, *The Topography of the Lungs*.) They got some money from the Art College and brought up from London the Spontaneous Music Ensemble—at the time just a name I saw occasionally in articles in the *Melody Maker*. My memory says that the late John Stevens, Kenny Wheeler and Trevor Watts came up from London—no small trip up the A1 in those days—in a Mini, for £50. They blew us away: goodbye Albert Ayler and Pharoah Sanders. The SME's sound was the one in my head from then on.

Expelled from the pub the band began to change. Adrian the light-show guy went off—to do Scientology?—and the band shrank. The SME showed us that bands could be any size or line-up and the Assassination Weapon changed its name, became the Free Association Quartet—Or was it Ensemble? And did the name change happen then or later that year?—and moved to a basement bar in one of the roads leading off Princess Street. Some nights it was just me and Jamie Muir, drums and trumpet, thrashing away in front of the audience. I blush at the thought of how that must have sounded.

By now it was definitely 1967 and Jamie and Bernie decided to move to London to join the free music scene there, centred round the Little Theatre Club. I didn't fancy going to London with no money, went to University instead, lasted a term and dropped out and went to London. But there was no scene at the Little Theatre Club. Most nights the people on stage out-numbered the audience. Jamie and I played there once, I seem to remember, and John Stevens invited me to play with the SME after our set. So I got to stand amidst the Gods—Kenny Wheeler, Derek Bailey, Paul Rutherford, Evan Parker. An amazing experience. But I was living in Richmond, supporting myself working in Marks and Spencer's, playing opportunities were few and far between and after a miserable 7 or 8 months in bed-sitter land I went back to Edinburgh where I teamed up with a Norwegian clarinet player called Jon Christopherson and began playing as a duet, mostly; but occasionally as a trio with Ian Croall on bass.

Of that period I remember little. But one highlight remains in my memory. In 1968—or was it 69?—messers Murray, Johnson et al conned the Arts Council of Scotland into giving them some money to put on a concert of 'contemporary German music' and brought over Peter Brotzman on sax and Hann Bennink on percussion. The gig was in the Traverse Theatre, the old Traverse, which was about 25 foot square and seated about 40 people. A group of Scottish Arts Council people turned up in their evening suits and sat on the front row. Brotzman and Bennink walked on and proceeded to make the loudest and most ferocious acoustic music I have ever heard. Brotzman was blowing and chewing his tenor's reeds to shreds every few minutes and changing them while Bennink thundered along without him. At the end



The Pink Floyd 1967

of the first piece the appalled Arts Council wallohs made a hasty exit to the bar.

Jamie Muir played quite a bit with Derek Bailey in London and joined King Crimson on one stage, part of the late seventies wonderful Crimson line-up with Bill Bruford—one of the greatest live rock bands I ever heard but whose recordings never lived up to the live version. I see the name Jamie Muir as producer of BBC TV programmes and it might be the same man. Bernie Greenwood I never heard of after 1967. I gave up playing at the age of 21—I had begun to hate the trumpet: it was so limited compared to the saxophone—and these days I could not sit through one side of the solitary Albert Ayler LP still in my collection.

About ten years ago, when I was about 40 and hadn't played for nearly 20 years, Evan Parker brought a band to Hull where I live. I went to see them. At the interval he came over and said hello to me and my partner, Sally. He said something like this to me: 'You were good. If you'd kept at it, you could be playing with me.' I said, 'Thanks a lot Evan. Pity you didn't tell me I was good in 1967, when I was a pimply, fucked-up, adolescent having a horrible time in London. I might have stuck at it longer.' But he didn't and I didn't. Life is full of what-ifs.

