

free cry

"Let's do the interview at your place," suggests Charles Gayle, reigning king of New York City's black free jazz players. "Because the heat at my place is not really happening." The January weather has been severe in NYC and Gayle, aged 54 but still tall, lean and muscular, lives as he has for four years in an unrenovated East Village squat.

It seems that free jazz in New York is nearly homeless, certainly at the culture's farthest fringe. Though physically vigorous, the nominally non-commercial, sometimes politically engaged, sometimes rhetorically self-righteous, sometimes fatally self-absorbed music that erupted from Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra and their many associates three decades ago now has just a few devotees who earn about as much money and respect as street people. Nonetheless, tenor saxophonists such as Gayle, David S Ware and Zane Massey, pianist Matt Shipp, bassist William Parker, drummer William Hooker, and a score or two of others persevere.

Free jazz is shunned and/or scorned by music mags, record labels, the latest wave of so-called mainstream players, influential critics, academics and presenting institutions. It is characteristically loud, dissonant, anarchic and confrontational, though free jazz players claim, as they always have, spiritual catharsis if not transcendence as their aim. The style's superficial chaos, its apparent lack of differentiation, resembles, more than anything, the helter-skelter interactions of urban life. Well, what grows in the city takes on protective colouration. Most New Yorkers probably see and hear no more in free jazz than they do in weeds.

Drummer Rashied Ali (who appeared on Gayle's 1993 FMP release

Touchin' On Trane) recently hosted the saxophonist at his Monday night series of concerts at The Cooler — a large, dim room in the remote meat-packing/transvestite-hooker district of New York. Other than such performer-produced occasions and infrequent events like radio station WKCR's 'Loft Jazz' festival at Columbia University, you only find free jazz in New York's midtown streets and subway tunnels — and at the Knitting Factory. There, Michael Dorf has promoted Gayle and others through regular bookings, inexpensive recordings, and tours of America and Europe.

Dorf knows that free jazz as practiced by blacks and whites and anyone else (Tuvan singer Sainkho Namchylak could certainly hang) refuses to disappear, be co-opted or die. In fact, he sees new fans arriving at the juncture of out rock and Improv (which is exactly the kind of connection being made in the music of guitarists like Rudolph Grey or Raoul Björkenheim, or such initiatives as Thurston Moore's free jazz releases on his Ecstatic Peace label). "There's a segue between Charles Gayle and Sonic Youth or even Nirvana," says Dorf. "It's like The Violent Femmes being interested in Cecil Taylor because of his cascade-of-notes concept. Charles just recorded with Henry Rollins, who wants him to open for his band when they play New York this spring. Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth wants to do something with Charles. These popular white rockers appreciate the noise content of free jazz."

In a warm office, Gayle unwraps wool scarves from his face, blows urgently on his hands, declines coffee, accepts peppermint tea in a mug bearing a picture of Malcolm X, then leans back and speaks candidly. "I'm thankful for the Knitting Factory," he says, "because if it wasn't there, it would be a little bit harder."

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On the streets and in the subways of New York, the spirit of black free jazz lives on in the music of a few true believers — musicians like **Charles Gayle; homeless, neglected but still burning with the passion to be free. Report by Howard Mandel. Picture by Lorna Foote.**

Through his Factory appearances he's gained a new audience who'll brave a sub-freezing winter or a sweatbox summer to hear the piercing cries, gut-centred bellows, and melody-shredding phraseology that mark his take on free jazz.

On the street he plays solo; otherwise Gayle plays in trio, sometimes adding a second bassist. His combos are dense and unremittingly active, though he says he prefers not to work with pianists because they get too busy and in his way (but he has performed with Cecil Taylor and enthuses, "If you're going to play with somebody, play with Cecil Taylor. He'll see what you're made of. He's constantly thinking and turning ideas over at a rate nobody else does").

Most of Gayle's accompanists (usually little known bassists and drummers he finds through word of mouth) strain to pump as much air as he does over a set (in terms of his approach to performance, Gayle has spoken of wanting to "go through the wall when I play... if the building is still standing when we've finished then we've failed"). Gayle often seems like a man possessed of a message. A self-professed Christian, he is not evangelical. So one is moved to ask: how did he come to play free jazz?

"I always had a big sound," Gayle says, as if *that* was easy. "Big as all Buffalo [his New York hometown situated in an industrial snow belt]. I grew up in the projects, nice normal family, had a sister. When I was nine or ten I had a couple years piano lessons. The rest is self-taught.

"I wouldn't say I always heard the way I'm playing since I was young, but I sort of knew I was leaning in a different direction. Because when I practised piano as a kid, I'd just go off into something else," and he mimes hitting clus-

ters with his elbows on the keys. "I know kids do this, but somehow I never stopped doing it. I'm still like a child that way. I don't mess with what you might call practising. I push for certain things for a while, but I don't go nuts trying to get a certain sound out of a horn or pushing in one direction. I let it happen. I let the intensity, the drive, take me wherever. And I like to play all the time.

"I also remember from early on religious music in the tent-churches, super Baptist gospel where people would be rolling in the sawdust on the floor and the musicians would play not regular nice little songs but another thing totally. I never forget those experiences. So jazz was not my first exposure to this music. And when I started playing saxophone in the late 50s I started to go this way, even though playing piano I was more straightlaced.

"I had straight-out gigs as a pianist, playing show tunes, bop, Charlie Parker, most of what everybody else played. I wasn't great at it, but I did it at parties, lounges, piano bars; I'll use the expression 'jazz' gigs. I knew the changes, I studied the music. When I got a saxophone, exposing myself to people through playing was already ingrained in me. I didn't think, 'Playing like this is for myself, *personal*.' I went out for gigs as soon as I learned a scale up and down. I never thought I was ever *not* going to do this, and the way I played it just seemed natural to me. I felt easier than on piano, much more myself. Even to this day, I know I could go the *other* way, but this way I feel more myself.

"Of course, when you're younger you think people *should* listen to you because you're playing something that's worth listening to. Now I don't have any attitude that anybody's supposed to listen to me, that I deserve being heard. I'm always amazed people will listen. It's just a surprise, like a