



**Gene Ammons** *Photo by Don Schlitten*

# jug eyes

## **1969: *The Boss is Back!***

*The Boss is Back!* The album was on the Prestige label, the first Gene Ammons made after being released in 1969 from Stateville Penitentiary following a seven-year term for heroin possession. With Junior Mance on piano, Buster Williams on bass, Bernard Purdie on drums, and Candido on conga, it's a hell of a record. Ammons's tenor holler breaks loose over the hard funk backing, out of the horn something like a contagious fire catching on the fills and slides and the stuttering beats. At times the music almost sticks, suspended machinelike, Ammons's horn a lyric, swaying juggernaut on the verge of overwhelming it, chopping off a phrase with tensed menace, collapsing an arpeggio into a broken staircase, bursting through the octave with a stabbing slashing roaring. It's the sort of music that recalls the power of words like *bad, mean, evil*—corked inside it all the flocking spirit tongues of jazz, all the flaring red devils of the blues.

The infernal idiom comes naturally when speaking of Ammons. In the old music reviews and liner notes, he's forever framed in flames—hot, blazing, turning up the fire, inhabiting a realm where the tenor sax and the musician who plays it merge into a single hybrid creature, a burning birdlike monster who dips and soars, swoops and flutters, and dives to the attack. He's a powerhouse, a smoker, a cooker; the thing is blistering, bristling, raw, muscular, carrying a torch, punching out phrases; he brings the house down, he takes no prisoners: the Boss is back! Listening to the record, I have to admit the justice of the language. Here's the first cut, "The Jungle Boss," Houston Person and Prince James the guest brass section and Ammons's horn doing exactly what the writers describe: charging, surging, heating up, roaring out, the rest, a series of further glosses irresistibly emerging—shouted party talk, the fight at midnight, a crazy sex boogie waltzing through a mirrored room, Magic Markered asterisks and handwritten notes under the song titles on a battered DJ copy: *Mellow Boss; Jugs Down Hard; Kicks Royal Ass*.

Yet I hear one thing more. It *booms*—yes, the horn echoes and booms like it's down in a tunnel, some effect of Ammons's playing or Rudy Van Gelder's miking. I've heard too that the sound was a commercial move, one of those bids for radio play like Sonny Stitt's Varitone a year or two later. It booms: the verb opens out a street, a Chicago night, the world is big, big (another Ammons epithet); it's the sound of a giant heartbeat, the sound of the cannon and the gun, the sound of a fate that hangs over you and one day drops, boom, or a fate that brings you to the top, boom you're there, sound inside the body a fast-jump pulsing of love or hate, boom I'm yours, you're mine, or boom you're dead, a blessing or a curse. It booms because it's touchy, it's hair-trigger, it's explosive, not spoiling for a fight but hauling a weight, a critical mass that's building toward a chain reaction, that smears across the clouds of a fall Chicago sky some eruption of a tear in the face of a cold wind, some laugh out of a warm loaded belly, some hard rush off the end of a sax or a bottle or a needle. *Boom*—I don't hear Ammons from anywhere outside, horn sounds off a stage or drifting from a window, but from inside, inside the tenor itself, a bright blind world of warm slicked brass and a rumbling, vibrating shaking. A twisting phrase. A touching. Man it hurts, it feels so good, rattling hide stops of the pads under invisible fingers and shadows telegraphing inside a hearted chamber where all I hear is you and me. A touching.

In the pressure of that sound's opening I hear the passional bottom ground of philosophy, *primum* of love and hate, the foreboding brooding of the Anaximander fragment—*things perish into those out of which they have their birth . . . for they give reparation to one another and pay the penalty of their injustice according to the disposition of time*—as the horn gruffly erupts upward and then sweetly swoops back down, within that interval the surge and the gravity and the exposure of a world's becoming. *Jug*—Ammons's best-known nickname, the fifth of Seagram's at his side during recording sessions, the word titling scores of compositions, those free-blowing or deep-down tunes where the promise is one of everything pouring out, Ammons offering again his all, yet at the same time a sense that the vessel he becomes still holds a reserve, the echoing and the booming, the debt and the payment and the love and the hate going around so there's never a final settling-up, there's always more to take and more to give. The Jug: inexhaustible.

*The Boss is Back!*—in the cover photo, Ammons is disembarking from a small airliner. He stands at the top of the stairs, a bulky figure wearing a tan overcoat, underneath it a plain black suit with a wide-collared gold shirt. He has his sunglasses on, and one hand is raised in greeting. It's a confusing gesture, that wave of the hand, sign of a new freedom, a happy sense of finally coming home, yet hinting as well at anger, at violence, the arm raised and the broad palm and fingers poised as if ready to slap something down or to shape into a pounding fist. By art or by accident, the photo's mise-en-scene underscores the duality. Dissolving into or looming up from the iron stairs, the lower half of Ammons's body is nearly invisible, like he's conjuring himself or perhaps struggling to escape from a dropping shaft of darkness. Above it, his upper body is framed by the plane's heavy-duty airlocks and latches, the free-waving hand seeming fettered, fixed to the door's white steel border. On the fuselage alongside, a fragment of the airline's logo appears: the letter *A*, almost perfectly sliced in half.

**1970: “Laughter Echoed Softly”**

1962, a Chicago street, Gene Ammons arrested, jailed—to tell the full story of the events that led up to 1969 and *The Boss is Back!*, to Ammons's second career or his resuming a career interrupted, one would track down the newspaper archives, work through the interviews and the comments from musicians and agents and friends and relatives, all the words spoken by those who knew Ammons and knew of him. My account will only be a partial one—the version of the story I heard and have remembered and imagined for many years, the story that called me to attempt to speak of another's life, the life of a man who was a stranger to me, a distant hero or celebrity but mostly a commanding, disturbing presence, a power in my world.

It's hardly a story, really, only what I heard from one person, who said he'd heard it from Ammons's wife when she was in his cab one night. It was around 1970 that Chuck Andrews told it to me. He was a friend, a man in his mid-thirties I'd met a year or so before when I discovered the secondhand bookstore he owned on the Northwest Side. The place was an overloaded small storefront, the books in chaos, Chuck hauling in stock from resale shops and estate sales, opening for business between his shifts driving a Checker taxi. Though I'd been haunting city bookstores

for years, he was the only proprietor who'd ever bothered talking to me, a kid obviously without much money, not a real buyer or a serious collector. He asked me questions, spoke about everyday things, mentioned his old lady he was split from, smoked a lot of Viceroy's with his feet crossed on the desk. Talking with Chuck I forgot the chronic feeling I had at the time of being younger and thus suspect, awkward, and uninformed, a confused hanger-on among the stacks of books thick with words and ideas. I wandered from shelf to shelf with only a vague sense of what I was after. I looked at his face—he had an uneven mustache stained with smoke and already turning gray, large eyes gazing directly at you but without any pressure, eyes that just lightly touched upon yours, a voice that said things in general like it was fine if you didn't have a reply—and I saw kindness.

Kindness may be the right word for what I felt there in the little bookstore. In the gentlest way, Chuck made me believe I was his friend but there wasn't any pretense of establishing a point of identity or resemblance between us—after all, he was twenty years older than I was and had lived through a world of things I knew nothing about. The sense was that it didn't matter: you were whoever you were. Nobody was going to cling to you, pull your sleeve, make you look at something he thought you should care about. That was how I came to the music, Ammons and the rest—it was just there, itself, lightly touching the air through the speakers buried among the piles of books under the desk. Chuck lived in that music, played it all the time he was in the store, varying it occasionally with Bartok or Debussy but soon going back again. It took a good while before I could hear or could attend to what I knew was called jazz—it seemed a strange word: so scrappy-small, so oddly unhooked—and today I can only imperfectly reconstruct when it happened, when what had sounded like a whirling piping, something fast and scratchy whispering mysteriously through the air, suddenly resolved itself into the nervy jump phrases of Charlie Parker's "Out of Nowhere," Chuck with a cigarette looking out the window and listening to the music in an ecstatic silence. He let the silence stay for a long time, long after the record had ended and the traffic sounds were drifting in from Cicero Avenue, my own breath audible along with his sounds—a slight shuffling of his feet, the record sliding into its sleeve, another crack of a wooden match. I understood I didn't have to say anything. What mattered, what didn't matter, was so light on the air that it

scarcely existed. It was whatever happened to be there without my searching for a word or a theme; it was the stain on the cover of a book, the gray color of the afternoon on the store window, the indifferent murmur of the passing cars and buses on the street. It was Chuck and I looking at each other, the brightening stirring of the music shining for an instant across our eyes and our faces and already passing somewhere else, nothing you could claim or capture. The one word we could speak was the emptiest and the fullest—mere cliché, nonsense, dumb affirmation: *Yeah*.

Though he didn't know Ammons, Chuck had been around the Chicago scene in the 1950s. He was a young zoot-suiter, baggy slacks pegged down around the ankle, a slouching, tailored member of the original Harrison Gents, a West Side gang. He was close to Ira Sullivan and other bop musicians in the city. Like many of them, Chuck was using heroin, an addict for most of those years. It had damaged his heart: he struggled now going up stairs and got winded lifting the boxes of books. He told me once that he'd seen a man die, shooting up in a bathroom stall. It had been really good shit: too much, an overdose. The man's face had turned blue, he was cold as ice. But he wasn't cool, Chuck told me. He'd been too hungry, too greedy. Cool was another thing entirely. Cool was the whole idea of heroin that people didn't understand: you were in front of the stage hearing Bird blow at the Club De Lisa and you didn't move. You didn't interfere with the spirit in the air, get your hands on things, shouting and clapping like the drunks or snapping your fingers like the so-called beatniks. Cool so you might even look like you were asleep, and it wouldn't matter if you were because you felt the velvet hand of the music touching you everywhere; it turned you inside and out like you were its soft glove. Chuck wrote poems, words I never saw but there was one phrase of his I heard later, a favorite line of his wife's: "Laughter echoed softly / through hand-held gifts." I thought for a long time that the language was merely pretty and not true to the passion of the music it was describing. Now, though, I hear something else in those words—a sense of the music being a subtle kind of contact, a lightness as well as a weight, at its heart not just the love or anger I always thought was there but a passionate generosity, a laughter of giving everything away, a joy of powers spending themselves, hands offering all their gifts.

**1962: Heroin Possession**

The story: Ammons was in the car with somebody else; he wasn't even holding the drugs. The heroin was stashed under the seat, though, and he was the driver so that was all the cops needed. It might have been he was framed, set up. That was it: all Chuck told me.

1962, Chicago. It might have happened somewhere on the South Side, the Black Belt as they called it, maybe Thirty-fifth and Cottage Grove or Forty-seventh and State, one of the neighborhoods torn down by urban renewal by the time Chuck told me the story, a strip where fires raged and windows shattered in 1967 and 1968. What kind of car was Ammons driving that night—a Cadillac Fleetwood, red and heavy with chrome? Or a boxy black Buick Electra 225, a car like a big rolling coffin? Ammons was driving around casually, the Cadillac taking a ride over the dividing line at State or near the Ryan construction zone, the kind of car that almost goes by itself, you can forget you're driving the thing, things drifting before he knew it into the Back of the Yards or Canaryville or maybe Bridgeport, Mayor Daley's Irish neighborhood. He'd be seen right away by white people on the streets who were jealous of their territory, some of them resentful at what they saw as smart-assed coloreds coming over to show off what they had, a big fancy car. The telephone at the stationhouse might have started ringing right away after the Fleetwood was sighted, a middle-aged lady watching the street from her steps or a corner-grocery owner looking out the window and picturing black gangsters coming through his door with blue-steel pistols under their loose leather coats.

In Bridgeport, the police would respond fast. The mayor lived there, the house on Lowe Street, their neighborhood too and the power base of the Chicago Democratic machine. But the police wouldn't even need a call. Riding in one of the black Chevy sedans with red flashers and a swaying ten-foot antenna on the trunk, a pair of them could have spotted the car coming into the neighborhood or maybe not in the neighborhood at all but still over on the other side, the east end of the sector. The way Ammons was driving might have pissed them off, a big black man driving easy and fast, the Fleetwood boating around a corner off Southern Parkway, Ammons with a good high going that night and grooving on the deep power reserve of the 454 engine, on his home ground and feeling comfortable, his passenger lighting up a nice matchstick reefer out of the

pack as casually as he would a Chesterfield, pure Panama Red. The police car would get right up on the tail of the Cadillac. They'd put a cramp in Ammons's styling. Show him who the hell was boss.

Ammons's passenger—his name was Pete or Ronnie, or a name like Moon or Fast Jack—started swearing, seeing the black cruiser, the white cops. He moved quickly, sliding the package of heroin under the seat. In his hurry he gave it such a push that it came out the other side in the back, riding over the transmission hump and landing right behind Ammons. The uniforms in the cruiser kept at the tail—Ammons tried to make a turn, get headed east again, the lines of lush trees along the street all pointing back toward the lake, all the neon signs seeming to read backwards, everything suddenly going in the wrong direction. In the mirror he could see the antenna on the cruiser, a thing quivering with signals, voices, plans for a roundup on the other side of the Belt Line tracks. The flashers weren't on yet, though, and he hoped it was a tease, a game like other times, at worst their ugly faces and words, a fifty-dollar bill handed over to them with the driver's license, after that a laughing cop whose voice would remind him of a clogged drain, something choking on itself.

And that might have been all. Harassed a while, worried a while, the money in hand to pay them off—that was what they always wanted, so give it to them. *Ammons, stop fucking around*, Ronnie said, *Stop this goddamn car right now*, but Ammons wasn't in the mood that night, he wanted to make them show their red, he gave them his own, touching the wide pedal on the power brakes and making the high fins glow and the Fleetwood rock, asshole Ronnie going out of his head already because he was afraid, so afraid. *Shine your light*, Ammons said to the mirror, *I'm looking to be harassed in a properly legal manner tonight*, and that was the bad magic, there it went, the Mars light flashing like a cold fire over the black hood in the mirror, cold devil faces behind it, and the more nervous Ronnie was getting the more Ammons was bulking his spirit, his body too feeling all its weight. *Could be I'll never stop this car*, he said, *just have to shoot me through the damn head*, and he felt the bullet already, saw his body on the street, the blood pouring out of the wound, and straight off from Ronnie the fear ran into him, and he took his foot off the accelerator and let the Fleetwood glide as though it was happening by itself, the car rolling over to a stop, the black doors slamming then and the

cops getting out, the money sliding into position in his wallet, the sweat breaking out now across his face and his neck he thought he was saving.

In the instant when he turned over his wallet to the growling policeman, the second one's face hovering behind him with a close thin grin like he was sewing up Ammons's mouth, tasting all the words that couldn't be said, all the words that were expected—*Yes sir, No sir*, to a cop who wasn't good enough to shine his shoes, to lick the dust off his Cadillac—Ammons felt himself getting right. The cops felt it too, and saw it—the immovable way he sat in the driver's seat as though the car was his kingdom and he was suffering an insult, bearing it, his eyes staying with the cop as he fingered the money, checked the denomination, tucked the bill away like it had never existed. *Eugene Ammons? Yes that's right*. They never heard of that name, spoke it like it was nothing, a joke, schoolboy in glasses, *Hey you, Gene, Eugene*, and *Ammons*, what was that, I thought you boys were all named after the presidents, the people who got the money, hey hey.

*Hey hey—Get the hell back into the car, boy*, but Ammons was out the door, standing on his feet. What was Ronnie doing now? Making sure the package of heroin was as far away as he could get it, Ammons out of the car and the cops distracted so he slid it up under the driver's side? Or is Ronnie just now getting the package out of his pocket, doing what he had agreed to after his last bust, delivering over a high-profile case the DA imagined would teach certain people in Chicago a lesson: famous Negro jazz musician arrested for heroin on South Side, Gene Ammons in jail and facing ten years in prison, smug stories in the *Tribune* and regretful ones in the *Daily Defender*, where Ammons was a hero?

It was going bad—was it the cop or Ammons telling himself to keep his arms where they were?—his hands wanting to jump, it would be a heavy blow he'd land on the cop's face and then another come raining down, let it fall. *You're under arrest*: the words seemed to lose their meaning or they meant too much, everything, now there was a crazy pissy welling like tears, Ammons raining inside, and he couldn't move, it might be his own body that would fall. Up the street, he could see the railroad viaduct, the incline of the pavement going down into it. A train was passing above, even here he felt the vibration rumbling under his feet. Inside the viaduct, traffic shadows jumped across the whitewashed walls, on the vertical supports painted names blossomed with loops and flourishes and

snaked themselves into secret languages. On the black-striped center pier a caution light flashed yellow. Walking through, a kid could beat as hard as he wanted to on the iron rails that leaned over the street, shout as loud as he wanted to inside the noise of the traffic. He could write his name up there under the road of the train. Listen to the booming echo of his voice. Small turned big.

Ammons smelled the fear coming off the cops, himself, and Ronnie suddenly still and collected as though the plan all along had been to drop off Ammons here and take over the wheel. *Get back into your seat.* The partner's gun was already drawn, dog-head clawed out his own and pushed it at the air like a prod or a stick, but still Ammons didn't move until the thing touched him, clumsily bumped his face and slid dumb and cold against his left ear. That touch enraged him—better to shoot him up front than to molest his face. And his ear—he had beautiful ears as his mother always said, women loved their small delicate shape, nibbling and biting and making up stories about what they could tell. Ear that could catch anything, Captain Dyett had said: key from the first bar of a song, melody off a passing fragment. Perfect pitch. Like a hunter's ear, too, tuned to the vast sounding world, hearing the littlest things down inside the house, rustlings and creaks of ghosted frames, hearing along the wind the heavy life of the leaning trees in the park, hearing the light life of human voices inside rooms and doors and windows, hearing the floating life of music rising from the body and making a system in the air, fragile bridges stretching out and elevating their spans and at their edges asking to be crossed and recrossed, spun and pulled and tensed.

With his face set hard, Ammons suffered the touch of the gun. He was waiting for it to happen, the thing to go off before he did. But he was listening so intently for the stir, the scrape, the click that would be impossible to hear because he would be dead before he could hear it, thirty-six years old and a corpse with his brains blown out from behind his temple, that he scarcely noticed the drop of the first cuff on his wrist, his other arm being pulled around behind him for the second.

*All right, all right,* he said then, *but keep my friend out of it,* nodding at Ronnie who didn't care and didn't need any help, maybe thinking Ammons was a joke, his ass down the river; or maybe he was saving Ronnie, whose life would be a waste from that moment on anyway, everybody accusing him of selling out Ammons when he didn't. But why did they

let him off? Ronnie could never explain to them that for one minute the cops had been afraid of Ammons and so they obliged him and let Ronnie take off down the street with whatever he had or hadn't been holding. He wasn't the one they wanted anyway.

After that, the world changed the way it sounded. Ammons wasn't listening to its motions and shifts and voices but instead to an inside of things, nearly imperceptible whirling or subtly grinding sounds that accompanied a falling, a spinning, a being jerked into place like starting hard and panicky from a quiet drifting into sleep. There was nothing but air around him—the same air he had lived by, the stack of wind, the column and the pipe, buzzing breathing staff of all his powers—but it was impossible for him to touch anything, for anything to touch him. Somebody else was writing his name, writing his life, and he hung inside an icy void like one of Dante's condemned, all the reaching hands and dear faces and unbelievable walls around him draining off into some devising of a type or exemplum, the law freezing him inside his skin.

Stateville: those first days, that week, that month, he dreamed out his hunger for the syringe, the pricking needle—the bars of the cell, the perforations in the metal bed, the chug of the stinking commode and the hot voices calling *Jug, Jug, you with us too, brother*, all that cold hell pumped out like water, not a particle reaching him. Ammons sat there hard and impervious as a rock, but a thing like a hand coiled inside him, felt on its pulse a dipping plunge of his blood that made him so weak and so limp a baby could have slapped him aside. Nothing but air: November winds blowing hard across the flat Illinois cornfields outside the walls, the wind-ed heave of his chest he sometimes caught himself waiting for or found himself trying to catch up with, the bodiless suctioning blank where the clang of the steel doors died out after a minute, an hour, seven years.

In that stilled cloud he imagined the touch of the junk, his heartbeat becoming a far-off thunder, his fingers gloved again in warm velvet, the touch like a prickling bud on the skin of the world, a slow oil distilling down into a swelling, a throaty voice. Touch that made the Boss boss, let the Jug fill itself and pour itself out.

Levered boom of the doors, uneasy fall of the dark, a murmuring then of love and hate, everything owed from the day that would get paid off in the night.

Ammons sat there untouched. Listening to the echo of an echo.

**1975: Jug Eyes**

A night at the Jazz Showcase on Rush Street, a bill with Frank Foster, Jodie Christian, Rufus Reid, and Wilbur Campbell. Foster was the second tenor, about the same age as Ammons but seeming so much stronger and younger, though not making a point of it. I sat there drinking my Beck's and like thousands of others in clubs and concerts over the years, watched at my leisure Ammons's every move—the poise of his fingers, the cut of his grizzled chin as he again took the reed into his mouth, the way he signaled to Christian as he approached the microphone for the solo. Even as he started, his tired face was showing the labor of it, his dark-ringed eyes hopefully going wide and then gradually closing themselves down, Foster's solo hanging still in the air over him, his own maybe an impossible thing he had to do anyway, all the room waiting on him to deliver the goods.

Working through the standard phrases, the signature lines, the hollowed booming echoing of his sound, slash of his own mark on the air, he made it happen again—it shined enough, it caught some fire, faltering only here and there, the hard applause afterward recognizing that if Foster hadn't been on the stage it would have sounded better. In the middle of it all, though, there was a small floating terror, watching the heave of his shoulders and the push of his chest, the terror that this next minute, this next phrase, this next note, we might see Ammons fail for good, we would lose him.

I had watched him avidly for years, though my own eyes closed sometimes in the wash of his power, the music's demand calling out an answering labor in the heart, the soul, the hard rollicking edge of it finally driving the feelings into something as sober as a prayer. I could watch him at my ease because he had nothing to do with me, he operated in the near yet ideal world of the music, the instrument, the intimidating superiority of his name and his art. That night, however, I felt myself drawing uncomfortably close, his gaze catching now and then on mine as though he felt its pressure, maybe resented the way I was sitting there gobbling him up, unseemly in the controlled swoon of a cognoscenti's delight. As he broke off into another solo, I felt the way I hovered, my mouth, my breath, my body leaning slightly forward in the chair, strangely blended with or strangely parasitic upon his, an unconscious sympathy or identification suddenly brought to awareness by the answering look he'd directed

at me. The sensation was disturbing, a sort of vertigo in it that was like an approach of death, mine or his, I couldn't tell which as I followed the strain of his work, his labor, all that Ammons was again giving, delivering, pouring out. Perhaps it was no more than a touching between us that was made by the hours and years of my watching and listening, unmade too by that swift moment when his gaze returned mine, an intermittent and uncertain link that was of no more substance or consequence than a drifting curl of smoke across the stage lights or the rattling of ice in someone's drink at the table beside me.

For the rest of the night I found it impossible to look again, to countenance the returning gaze of Ammons's charged, tired face. I was caught out, abashed, mortified. I had been making him into my theme, my thing. Listening to the music I only stared down at my hands or closed my eyes, his face appearing anyway before me as though I were awakening from a dream. The image was at times wavering and distorted, at others suddenly as clear as a photograph. A face possessed of a rocklike solidity, a gravity of power in it like a spirit mask, eyes in their deep sockets vaulting an unrecoverable mystery. A face I saw in painful, near-hallucinatory detail, every minute line and incision and pocking of the skin, each singular marking on it of a time, a world, a life, and a death. His eyes—they were brown, dark dark brown—appeared immensely fragile, immensely strong; they lidded over, they closed in some ecstasy of making a line, a sound; they opened again in the middle of what was being offered, what was already moving off and away, time-tunnel of that great stalking booming, that delicate running echoing.

### **1999: *Echoes***

Echoes, echoes of echoes—why do I return to this almost meaningless phrase, perhaps too vacuous and too trite to say anything true? It's just the emptiness and lightness that I like, its sense of a touching that doesn't linger, that reverberates indefinitely. Each thing pays the penalty of its injustice according to the disposition of time—the echo of an echo forgets any origin or source, can't claim any patrimony or descent; there's a motion, a rhythm, a syncopation in between that only offers itself there, that doesn't settle down into being but exposes a becoming, again, again.

“Jug jug”—in Coleridge’s poem, it’s what the nightingales sing, alone in the wood in the dark, echoing one another’s calls, somebody nearby leaning to hear. Jug, jug: sound of a joy attended by the ear, a whorled opening to the world, I with my eyes closing in the listening, Ammons stomping off like some thundering cloud, Ammons fluttering off like some stirring of evening birds, taking it all away, giving it all back once more.