OUT THERE
by Francis Davis

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I'd left word with a friend of Charles Gayle's that I was looking for him, and he'd surprised me with a phone call. He was waiting for me, as promised, on the corner of Broadway and 10th, with his saxophone case by his feet. Even though I knew what he looked like from having seen him play, it took me a minute or two to spot him standing there by the curb away from the lunchtime crowd, completely inside himself, unnoticed and unnoticing. Maybe I was surprised just that he had shown up.

Although lunch was on the *Village Voice*, Gayle wasn't eating. He ordered a muffin, then hardly touched it as we lingered in a coffee shop on Astor Place, across from where the wretched of the earth dump old rags, shoes, and rained-on reading material on the sidewalk as though waiting for somebody to come along and bargain. (Who says capitalism no longer works?)

"Can I ask you a question," Gayle wondered at one point, after I'd turned off my portable cassette player at his request.

No actual question was forthcoming.

"A lot of people are working and I'm not. I don't know why, and I don't know what to do about it," he finally said, after a pause, pointing a finger to his forehead and fixing me with a wary eye. "See, sometimes you can't get no work, you begin to think you must be terrible. Don't misunderstand me. I don't even know if I'm interested in that—the music business. It's just that I wouldn't mind working every once in a while. That's all."

This sudden plea caught me by surprise. Earlier in our conversation, after revealing that he earned just enough money for one meal a day by playing on the streets (his own music, he assured me, though he does take requests), he'd characterized that unprofitable form of self-enterprise as "the only honest alternative" for a black musician opposed to the almost exclusively white ownership of jazz venues.

Somehow, what he was saying now didn't strike me as a contradiction. What difference was one night at the Knitting Factory—or, for that matter, three nights there, like he said he had coming up on consecutive Sundays in December—going to make in the way he lived? I took a good look at him, noticing the gold cap over one of his bottom incisors, and the string tied around his right pinkie. If he hadn't mentioned that he would be fifty-two in a few weeks, I would have taken him to be at least five years younger, despite the gray on his chin. Gaunt, with long, expressive fingers more like those of a pianist than a tenor saxophonist's, he was neatly dressed in layers, with a blue denim jacket over a green plaid flannel shirt and a dark green T-shirt, and nobody was giving him a second glance.

"See, I still haven't solved the mystery of why anybody would want to listen to me," he'd said when we first sat down, trying to convince me that he wasn't going to be a very compelling interview subject, especially since questions pertaining directly to his past were understood to be off limits. "Wynton Marsalis can probably tell you who he is as a musician, and Sonny Rollins can tell you who he is, but I don't know who I am, because I'm not part of the music world, so I don't know how I'm regarded or if what I do even

counts. I know there are some people who can hear themselves and evaluate whether they're good or bad. But I can't do that.

"I'm not trying to be modest. I just can't. I'm just a street person. I mean, I live in a squat in Bed Stuy. But I'm practically in the street. I will be again, soon."

After overhearing the part about the squat, our waiter rushed to refill our cups and assure us that the table was ours for as long as we liked.

I think that the first mention I ever saw of Charles Gayle was in Bob Rusch's interview with Buell Neidlinger, in a 1986 issue of *Cadence.* Neidlinger, who played bass with Cecil Taylor before joining the Buffalo Philharmonic in 1962 and eventually becoming a first-call L.A. session man, remembered Gayle "pushing televisions around in the Westinghouse factory" in Buffalo. "I brought him down to New York [for a concert] in '67 or something like that ... Pharoah Sanders had his band, and Archie Shepp was playing. He blew them all off the face of the earth," Neidlinger said. According to Neidlinger, this mystery man had "stayed one day and went right back to Buffalo, [because] he couldn't deal with New York."

Rusch passed along the tantalizing information that Gayle was back in New York, "playing like a mother."

I heard no more about him until two years later, when Marty Kahn, whose Outward Visions handles Steve Reich, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the World Saxophone Quartet, and other avant-garde fixtures, left me a phone message urging me to hear Gayle at the Knitting Factory. The gist of the message was that Gayle blew tenor with an intensity unmatched since Albert Ayler. What made the call different from any other I'd ever gotten from a bizzer was that it wasn't made on behalf of a client. Although circumstances prevented me from being there for Gayle's Knitting Factory debut, the euphoric word from friends who went was that Gayle's trio played unrepentant free jazz—that his music was "out there," as we used to say way back when. I sensed the beginning of a genuine, street-level buzz, maybe the first for an unrecorded performer since Wynton broke in with the Messengers in 1980, or since David Murray started to make a name for himself in the lofts a few years earlier. But unlike Murray and Marsalis, both of whom were then teenagers, Gayle was a middle-aged man (roughly the age that Ayler himself would have been, in fact) with an element of uncorrupted Bunk Johnsonism enhancing his credibility—though not for me.

In its own era, free jazz (nonchordal improvisation after Ornette Coleman, but especially the winged multiphonics and glossolalia that followed Ayler's *Spiritual Unity* in 1965) and the militant nationalistic rhetoric that usually accompanied it were blamed for scaring away what little had remained of the jazz audience. In punishment free has been banished from most academic histories and magazine trend pieces tracing the evolution of modern jazz from bop to fusion to bop again. In jazz the sixties have become the decade that never happened-or that never should have.

Yet I know (and so do you, if you get around enough) a type of romantic first-generation free jazz fan, now in his (always his) middle forties and usually (though not always) white, for whom free like it was in the 1960s, with indignant black men raising heaven's floor for hours at a stretch, is the only music that does the trick. Being first-generation myself (with the ESP Discs to prove it), I sympathize. But only to a point, because I suspect that this is my generation's moldy-fig primitivism.

I finally heard Gayle in Philadelphia, about a month after Kahn's phone call. As reported, Gayle's yawp was fierce enough to pin anybody's ears back. But as yawps go, it was a lot like Ayler's, though lacking both his melodic lurch and his thematic continuity. The concert was like somebody's foggy notion of a typical night at Slug's, circa 1966, with Dave Pleasant splintering drumsticks on his stripped-down kit, Hilliard Green plucking and bowing his bass with such force that it rocked, and Gayle scooping for high notes and bending from his waist for low ones. For its part, the audience got into the act by whooping and bowing forward rapidly as though *davening,* just like folks were said to do back when soloists measured their phrases by the breath, not the bar.

Say what you will about the superiority of live music, take home is sometimes preferable for sparing you the inevitably misanthropic exercise of comparing your reaction to that of everyone else in the room. In the early spring of 1988, just weeks after I'd dismissed him as a shuck, Gayle recorded *Homeless, Spirits Before,* and *Always Born,* the three Silkheart CDs that, when finally released earlier this year, forced me to reverse that judgment. Both *Homeless* and *Spirits Before* feature Gayle's trio, with Sirone (of Phalanx, The Group, and the Revolutionary Ensemble) on bass in place of Green. Sirone is also on hand, along with ARCM drummer Reggie Nicholson, on *Always Born,* on which Gayle faces off against John Tchicai (who played alto on Coltrane's *Ascension,* but sticks to tenor and soprano here).

In other words, Silkheart's Keith Knox, perhaps hedging just a bit, surrounded Gayle and Pleasant, both virtual unknowns, with impressively credentialed sidemen. Sirone, in particular, merits raves for his miniature symphonies of slurs, strums, and artfully timed double stops. But Tchicai frequently gets hung up on repeated phrases, never quite entering Gayle's orbit. And though Nicholson does fine, Pleasant is terrific. A heedless basher in concert, or so I thought (Sunny Murray taught him drumming in a hurry), he heats up *Homeless* and *Spirits Before* with a personal amalgam of vintage free drumming styles, ranging from Milford Graves's tabla patterns behind Giuseppi Logan to Sunny Murray's unmetered cymbal synapses behind Ayler and Cecil Taylor.

Gayle himself is the mind-bender, though. His longer solos are crapshoots, sometimes testing your patience along with his endurance *(Spirits Before's* title cut, for example). But others—typified by *Homeless's* "Then Creations," almost Monklike in its gradual enlargement of a three-note theme—rivet you with their energy, control, and endless ripple of ideas. Gayle at his most impressive is Gayle at his most "accessible"-nothing wrong with that. The track I keep returning to is "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," J. Rosamond Johnson's "black national anthem," here mistitled "Lift Every Voice" and consigned to the public domain. Fortified by Pleasant's lashing cymbals and Sirone's rolling bass, Gayle ravages the song, subjecting it to about six minutes of convulsive variations before allowing the melody to emerge in all its hardscrabble dignity, then brings it to a prolonged climax that's simultaneously turbulent and serene.

Published in 1900, with lyrics by James Weldon Johnson, the composer's brother, "Lift Ev'ry Voice" was a popular sign-off theme on black radio stations in the 1970s, which is probably how Gayle knows it. The only nonoriginal on the three CDs, it begs comparison as an anthem to many of Ayler's humble little themes, and Gayle underscores the similarity by stretching his intervals and fluttering melismatically at the end of phrases. But the resemblance to Ayler is flattering enough to Gayle to seem circumstantial rather than the result of direct influence. "We must have been drinking from Lake Erie around the same

time," Gayle quipped when I asked him about the Ayler connection. "He was from Cleveland, you know, and I'm from Buffalo."

"Did Charles give you his political rap?" a fellow critic asked me, alluding to the strange night at the Knitting Factory last June when Gayle spent most of a set haranguing whites for attempting to play jazz, pretending to appreciate it, and controlling its presentation. (Remember, Amiri Baraka's preferred term for "free jazz" was "the new black music.") That night has since become part of Gayle's legend, along with the time he supposedly requested a jar of baby food as his preconcert dinner.

The rap I got—maybe by virtue of facing Gayle across a table rather than being one white face among many in a darkened room—was softer and sadder. He told me that he was part Cherokee and that he had grown up in a Buffalo neighborhood in which all of the stores were black-owned-and-operated. "You could walk all over the city and feel that you were coming home to something that belonged to you," he said.

This was as autobiographical as he got. A friend of mine, who once worked as a graduate assistant in the Department of Adult Education at SUNY Buffalo, had told me that one of her co-workers there had been involved in a stormy relationship with Gayle. "That was my wife's name," he said when I mentioned the woman my friend remembered. But the silence that followed made it clear that he wasn't going to open the door any wider.

From talking with a few current and former upstate musicians, I did find out that Gayle himself once taught at the university, inheriting the jazz course from Charles Mingus in 1969. Somehow that piece of information wasn't as surprising as the news that one of his students was Jay Beckenstein, who later founded the wretchedly successful fusion group Spyro Gyra.

"I recall a funny scene with Charles trying to teach Jay how to play the blues," said the saxophonist Paul Gresham, another of Gayle's students and later a member of his band. Gresham, who's still active around Buffalo, remembered Gayle as "the kind of musician who could pick up any instrument and play it well. When I was in his band, with both of us playing saxophone, he would often play piano behind my solos."

On the other hand, another Buffalo musician who requested anonymity told me that he thought Gayle "played free from start to finish, with no tonal center" because he was a late starter who never mastered chord changes or saxophone technique—an accusation that dogs every free musician. But according to Gresham, Gayle was "like Eric Dolphy in that respect. He would play inside the changes, but so fast and so completely that it might go right by you. It was inside, but it sounded outside." Did Gayle have an audience upstate? This also depends on whom you ask. Gresham remembers him always packing the house, "whether it was some hole-in-the-wall club or a concert at the university." Then again, how often would a free player like Gayle have worked? Buffalo was a hotbed of avant-gardism in the early 1970s, with Robert Longo showing at Hall Walls; an experimental video scene forming around Steina and Woody Vasulka; Lukas Foss conducting the Buffalo Philharmonic and commissioning works by John Cage, Morton Feldman, Lejaren Hillyer, and others; John Barth and Robert Creeley on the university faculty; and Allen Ginsberg in town for a drug symposium every other month or so. "But jazz was never included in that," says the drummer Bobby Previte, who grew up in nearby Niagara Falls. "The jazz scene was owned by the boppers. It must have been brutal for someone like Charles Gayle, coming out of late Coltrane and Albert Ayler. It was for me. That's why I'm in New York."

“It wasn’t just Buffalo. There was no audience for that kind of music all over, except maybe New York,” Gayle told me, visibly considering but finally unable to answer the question of when he moved to New York, “because I was going back and forth for a long time.”

Gresham remembers hearing Gayle in Greenwich Village with the drummer Rashied Ali’s band around 1973. Otherwise, the years between Buffalo and now are a mystery.

As a general rule of thumb, neglected geniuses bear some complicity for their neglect. But I don’t know what skeletons Gayle has in his closet, and he wasn’t about to tell me. Still, we could talk about music. As we walked east on St. Mark’s Place, I asked him why hardly anybody else was still playing free. I have my own pet theories, of course, one of which is that many of the style’s originators are now too waddled in middle age to take many risks anymore, and another of which is that they grew so weary of hearing not just their musicianship but their sanity questioned that they themselves must have begun to wonder how many times they could go to the edge before forgetting their way back (Ayler wound up in the East River, after seeing flying saucers).

“It was just a fad,” Gayle said, surprising me. “It didn’t start off to be, but you know very well that it became that. They couldn’t continue because it wasn’t in them to continue. It was just the *time*.”

What about him?

“It’s just something in me. It’s a fate that challenges you until it becomes very natural. You have to dig inside your soul and keep creating. You have to fight your memory, because it’s easy to recapitulate. You keep pushing, because it’s there, and you don’t know what it is. You just keep going.”

I asked him if he needed anything—a taxi to where he was going next, maybe?—but he wouldn’t take my money.

Two days after our meeting, Gayle flew to Amsterdam on a one-way ticket bought for him by one of his admirers. He’d heard that a musician could make a decent living playing in the streets there. A few weeks later I heard that he was back in New York again, inclement weather having prevented him from earning very much money. This bit of hearsay was from someone who knows someone else in New York so passionate about Gayle (the ultimate jazz cult hero, famous for longer than fifteen minutes, but known to only fifteen people) that she kept track of the weather in Amsterdam the whole time he was there. Again, I left word for him to call me, but he never did. In the library a few weeks ago, while researching another story, I considered looking up “Gayle” in the Buffalo telephone directory, to see if he still had relatives there. But I didn’t have the heart.

Gayle showed up at the Knitting Factory for his gig the Sunday before Christmas, along with Dave Pleasant, Hilliard Green, and about two dozen late-niters, including me. Thirty years ago Ornette Coleman, just in from California (some said the moon), confounded New Yorkers by not counting off his tunes. Gayle doesn’t count off, either. He announced his presence with a sustained renal shriek, the first of many during the next forty-five minutes, which ended with him jackknifing into oblique staccato phrases that, given a different rhythmic underpinning, could have passed for R&B. Remember when reviewers used to complain that the problem with free jazz was that you could drop the needle down anywhere on the record and hear the same thing? To anyone ducking in and out of the club every five or ten minutes, Gayle’s performance might have sounded as

monomaniacal. But if you stuck with him, he overpowered you with his soaking emotionalism, his flying dynamics, his lovely and unexpected sobs of melody. It was free jazz not just like you remembered it, but like you always wished it could be.

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Gayle now works frequently enough to rent a small apartment.

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Bebop and Nothingness is out of print. *Buy a used copy.*