



A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music

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Founded in 1965 and still active today, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) is an American institution with an international reputation. George E. Lewis, who joined the collective as a teenager in 1971, establishes the full importance and vitality of the AACM with this communal history, written with a symphonic sweep that draws on a cross-generational chorus of voices and a rich collection of rare images.

Moving from Chicago to New York to Paris, and from founding member Steve McCall's kitchen table to Carnegie Hall, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* uncovers a vibrant, multicultural universe and brings to light a major piece of the history of avant-garde music and art.

A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music Details

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Matt says

Wow. A virtuosic display of scholarship, George Lewis' book traces the 40 year history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. A group of forward thinking improvisers who wanted to move free jazz from the heroic soloistics of the early 60's into a realm of collective ensemble texture, compositional complexity, and postmodern referential diversity, the AACM totally changed the game by explicitly asserting and exemplifying that African-American art music was just as advanced and intellectually sophisticated as the "pan-European" (as Lewis refers to it) avant-garde music being produced by white American composers at that time.

The early chapters are inspiring as Lewis tells the story of how the early founding members realized they would never be able to play the music they were envisioning in the club scene of early 60's Chicago. So they organized, creating a self-sufficient community to accommodate every aspect of rehearsing, performing, promoting and recording each others' compositions as well as founding a music school to teach theory and composition to kids in the Chicago ghetto.

This is a very complex history, describing 3-4 generations of musicians who eventually ended up working in multiple cities and continents; and Lewis wants to convey not only the factual information of their story but also the philosophy behind the music they made and the complex dynamics of race and class involved in the interplay between the AACM and American high-culture institutions and critics. Needless to say, this book is BIG, and I somewhat agree with other reviewers that at its worst it can feel like an endless list of musicians' names. However, I don't think that occasional problem takes away from Lewis' achievement here, and considering the breadth of the material and the fact that Lewis himself was an important member of the organization I think it's impressive that the book was able to be edited down to even 500 pages.

Also, I've gotten so much great music from reading this! Braxton, Jenkins, Abrams, the Art Ensemble, etc. Some really fantastic records I'd never heard before.

ralowe says

juba got enthusiastic when i showed her what i was reading. juba showed me a picture as a child published in a different book about black nationalist high schools. we're both reading really big books. one effect or probably purpose to the participation in this intellectual tradition is validation that one is not alone in the wilderness. i didn't really know what to make of john cage until i finished reading this, which means i didn't know how to feel about a sonic tendency and its political and situated implications. this is restorative magic for any middle passage descendant who has ever felt that their interests in some way dissociated their person from historical time. this is a compliment to the fred moten intuition that the outside is the inside. this is a high detail view of a root that also is one of the most readable pieces of literature i've ever encountered for some time. i've finally made contact with culture.

Todd Jenkins says

The five stars are for those folks who will truly understand and appreciate the subject matter of this enormous work. I can't help thinking that this book is, metaphorically, larger than the impact the AACM had on American music as a whole. Yes, the Chicago avant-jazz scene was vital and transformative. Yes, we still feel the repercussions and implications of its vision today. Yes, these men and women have been largely neglected by the jazz media and are more than deserving of proper biographies and analyses of their contributions. But Lordy, my head keeps saying there's a thing called editing.

Lewis has forgotten more about the AACM than most people will ever know, and I think he included every iota of what he remembers in these pages. The foreword, with its completely unnecessary outlining of each coming chapter, is longer than some prior academic evaluations of the AACM. The minutiae are sometimes overwhelming. And yet this is one of the best histories I have ever read of a musical movement. As much as I feel it could have been hacked down, in hindsight I don't know what I would remove aside from the foreword. Exceptional work, sir.

David Keffer says

This book serves as a one-of-a-kind historical documentary of the AACM. It provides personal and professional anecdotes of the musicians. It also provides a social analysis of the challenges associated with sustaining a collective program of non-idiomatic creative music. There is a repeated emphasis on the particular challenges that African Americans face in this regard. It is at times easy to read and difficult to read. Sometimes, in trying to chronicle the activities of so many musicians one loses track of the forest for the trees. Probably the author would argue that to tell the story in any other way, relying on generic "tropes" rather than individual experiences would less clearly portray the truth of the matter. It took considerable time to read this book in its entirety and, having finished, it seems to me that that time was well spent.

James May says

One of the most engaging non-fiction books I've read in a while. Not only is it an awesome history on a remarkable group of musicians, but it deals with issues of genre, style, race, class, gender, power, and all possible intersections in a nuanced way. Absolutely amazing, should be required reading of any music grad student.

Oliver White says

Quite on point, however as all in this world seems to be overthinking it and the innately divine and spiritual isn't pedagogical however probably leaning more in the egalitarian regiment as aforementioned in the book so overall very on point. However, again, this was a point mentioned even a book on the subject doesn't cover it all I mean there is of course the legendary Hassan and Cecil Taylor but even to view things egotistically those beings in spirituality understand theirs and others music because nobody owns the music or sound for one but we are still here in this material realm as I write this for now, I will stop as not to discredit the actual spirituality of the music, my being could play it out in terms on a baby grand for you and vice

versa if you have the free form originality god gave you but the sheep pedagogue indoctrination schools and prison planet from negative nefarious beings is polluted, Digression but never to self suppression.

Sen says

A fine book about an important organisation the AACM and all of its major artists for over 40 years. Could have included more of in the way of actual musical scores, analysis and compositions by some of the masters like Muhal, Threadgill, Mitchell, Braxton, Jenkins, Air, Art Ensemble et al. Speaking as a graduate of jazz music at the time this book was published there was absolutely NOTHING about these artists in mainstream education, so-called educators ignore this whole development post 1965 to now. Overall it is a vital document to any musician or non musician wanting to understand the contribution of the AACM.

Brian says

Unfortunately, I gave up on this book about a third of the way through it.

Since its inception in the 60's, I have listened with great awe and respect to the music coming from Chicago's AACM (Association For The Advancement of Creative Musicians.) Some of the most important and neglected experimental composers of our times have found their home in the AACM. Their music is by turns cerebral, spiritual, funky and esoteric. I was really interested in learning more about their history and approach to music.

I decided to put the book aside after one too many sentences like this: "Thus embodied in the issue bought to the table by Dogan was a complex dynamic of personal and professional interaction, crucially mediated by race and culture, where mappings of whiteness and blackness to insider-outsider binaries were defined not so much by phenotype as by issues of trust, collegiality--and power."

Give me a break! Why is this necessary.

Parts of the book (as far as I read it) were very interesting and I would have liked to continue, but the regular intrusions of unintelligible ramblings like the sentence above killed it for me.

Maybe I'll finish the book someday when I'm a more forgiving soul.

Greg says

amazing book. thorough and thoughtful history of the AACM. black experimental music. issues of race in the music world. generational views of experimental. politics of an all-black organization. jazz vs. avant garde dynamics. new york vs. chicago black music scene.

and histories and struggles of many amazing musicians. art ensemble of chicago, anthony braxton, leroy jenkins, wadada leo smith, air, muhal richard abrams, douglas ewart, roscoe mitchell, george lewis, etc. in depth, well researched book from someone who was a big part of the 2nd wave of the AACM. if you like free jazz, black history, experimental music, chicago history, etc, youll love this book. highly recommended!

Jesse says

This is a virtuosic book. It is a history of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) written by one of its longtime members. Lewis conducted many interviews, and quotes from them make up the bulk of the book. It had to be very time consuming and difficult to construct. But the results are great. I enjoyed checking out the early AACM recordings by Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, while I read about them. It was inspiring to read about the formation of the AACM and how it gave these musicians a way to present their music. I'd like to implement some of their ideas and ways of presenting themselves in the Brooklyn music scene of today, at a time when it seems that there are less and less venues that welcome creative music. Of course times are different now and many of the AACM's ways would have to be modified, but it's good to be inspired to act.

Djill says

I should add a Goodreads shelf for just this one book:

Keep-trying-to-read-but-get-nauseous-after-one-paragraph.

Or

Books-I-had-high-hopes-for-but-which-landed-with-a-dull-thud.

Declan says

A superbly well written and thorough account of the coming into being of The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a co-operative which formed on the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s and which brought together a group of open-minded and creative young people who would go on to establish themselves as some of the most innovative musicians in late 20th century America. Most prominent among those who guided the AACM was Muhal Richard Abrams, and George Lewis - who was himself a member and is now a well established trombonist and composer - has done a wonderful job in making the many achievements of this great man known to all those who care to listen.

For those, like me, who have enjoyed and admired the music of the first generation of AACM musicians, such as The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Amina Claudine Myers, and those of the more recent generation e.g. Nicole Mitchell, this is an invaluable book. I found the opening chapter which tells of the Great Migration of African-Americans from the southern states to cities in the north, such as Chicago, especially interesting, as all of the first-generation AACM founders were children of parents who had made that journey. In this chapter, and throughout the book, Lewis draws on theoretical writing to establish frameworks within which he can then examine the social, cultural and political circumstances of the lives of his subjects. It is typical of the book that his use of this theoretical writing is always apposite, lucid and illuminating. Lewis is also able to use a huge amount of material from interviews with all of the principal participants and material from the AACM archive.

The story of the AACM is astonishing in many ways, not least in how so much adversity was overcome, and in how, as in many significant artistic movements, time and conditions coincided to bring together a hugely talented group of people who improvised into being a revolution in music.

Dont says

A quick glance at my reading list of late and you can pretty much figure out my current project. After years of arguing for the aesthetic autonomy of political movements, I decided to invert that formation. The project has turned into something of a reassessment of modernism where the terms of autonomy are located not in the aesthetic, but in the political. Of course, autonomy itself is being detoured here; thinking of autonomy in the Italian Marxist sense. Thus, I have reviewing key moments in modernist aesthetics; Russian constructivism, Brechtian aesthetics, Third Cinema in Latin America, Feminist aesthetics and avant-garde jazz in America. It's an admittedly idiosyncratic history.

One of the guiding questions for me in this assessment of radical aesthetics stems from the age-old problem of abstraction. In the story told by bourgeois art history, abstraction is placed in opposition to realism and seen as the whimsy of a desire for novelty - a desire totally ready for co-optation by capitalism. Hence, abstraction as a strategy of "making things new" becomes a strategy for capitalist expansion. While this may be ONE of the stories we can tell, it is by no means the only story. Even if we accept the notion that Cold War (i.e. U.S. hegemonic) cultural politics equated modernist abstraction with a slight of hand that sutured together bourgeois democracy and market liberalism, it remains to be explained how abstraction went from the privileged strategy of anticapitalist cultural radicals to capitalist hegemony. Even after the strong hand of Uncle Joe smothered the Soviet avant-garde under Social Realist kitsch, modernist abstraction continued to mark a space of anticapitalist dissent. It was this very tendency that fueled the formal experimentations championed in Europe by Brecht and Benjamin as well as by their progeny in radical cinema from France to Brazil. It was also the modernist impulse that made jazz the music of choice for much of the political avant-garde in North America. At the moment when the Civil Rights movement enters its most militant, internationalist, and anti-imperialist phase, avant-garde jazz becomes the sound track of that moment.

In 1965, a group of musicians living in the African American neighborhoods of South Chicago joined forces to found a collective. Adopting a bold nine-point manifesto promoting original music (over the connoisseurship of traditional standards), experimentation, collectivity and composition, this group of musicians launched the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, or AACM. Bound up in its founding charter was an implicit but clear politics around intentional organization, collective self-reliance, control over the means of production and distribution, and cultural practice situated within the everyday life desires and aspirations of the community. The strength and clarity of purpose of that mission statement is evidenced by the fact that the AACM continues to this day with active chapters in Chicago and New York.

Part of the second generation within AACM, the trombone player, computer musicians and composer George Lewis joined the collective in the early 1970s. Drawing on nearly forty years of experience and relationships, he has composed what has to be one of the most remarkable studies of any cultural movement. With his native-informant status, Lewis assembled interviews with all of the key players from the numerous generations of AACM members as well as a scholarly survey of the literature on the AACM and surrounding post-bop jazz in general. The resulting book is a combination history of jazz in Chicago beginning in the late 1950s, ethnographic study of a community of cultural practitioners and, just as importantly, a valuable critical polemic on the politics of race and class in American discussions around experimental art. I can honestly say that I have never read so thorough and thoroughly illuminating a study of collective cultural

practice in any field. Anyone interested in collective cultural production should read this book. I cannot stress enough how absolutely important it is that Lewis himself is not just a working musician but an insider to the AACM community and history. His position as both makes it possible for him to offer the kind of critical reflections and deep historical analyses that one rarely if ever finds in a study of art history or musicology. Absent are the sort of pithy convenient comparisons that require the critic to construct false dichotomies and comparisons only for the sake of an (blatantly ideological) illusory objective assessment.

Perhaps one of the most thrilling and original contributions Lewis makes in the book are his reflections on the condition of migration in the experience of creative musicians and in the articulation of their aesthetic. Lewis describes how all too often, detractors and promoters of jazz will cite the history of the great migration of blacks from the south in the years of Jim Crow as formative for the practice of improvisation. However, when examined closely, what critics tend to mean by that is a coded political analysis of migration as individualized, spontaneous, and cavalier. With these terms in place, the resulting analysis of improvisation not only fails to understand the practice but actually effaces the intelligence of the aesthetic and its practitioners. Based on personal and historical accounts, however, we know migration to be something entirely different; a deeply communal experience, organized around social and familial networks, involving a range of ethical and affective exchanges, deliberate and collective. The implications of the autonomy of migration (to borrow a phrase invented by the Kanak Attak movement in Germany), leads to an understanding of improvisation and, by association, the black radical aesthetic, that is profoundly distinct from contemporary avant-garde traditions such as the Cagean aesthetic. This is an argument that Lewis has been developing for many years in his essays. But it is in *A POWER STRONGER THAN ITSELF*, that he has the epic canvas of the history of the AACM to really tell the story behind that argument.

One of the only criticisms I would make of Lewis's book is his dependence upon the French theorist and economist Jacques Attali. I can appreciate the value of Attali's book *NOISE* given that it is one of the few theoretical statements on avant-garde music that takes free jazz seriously - not merely as an example but as a subversion of our normative categories. The fact that Attali would give such crucial importance to the free jazz movement while simultaneously inventing a critical discourse around sound rarely gets mentioned by the armies of sound theorists who draw on Attali for their own ruminations. That said, however, at the end of the day, Attali has a very clear political position that privileges the very bourgeois politics being countered by artists with clear working class politics such as those in the AACM.

That criticism aside, the book remains an enormously important intervention at so many levels. In addition to the challenge to rethink the relationship between a radical aesthetic and migration histories, Lewis also problematizes the too-easy opposition between modernist specificity and post-modernist eclecticism. Here the strategies of abstraction sit within a logic of eclecticism that is at once an aesthetic commitment to "hearing all the sounds as having musical importance" and a political commitment to the totality of everyday life. One could argue that such is the generosity of the founding AACM mission statement that never uses the words jazz, experimental music or avant-garde. Rather, its aesthetics balance a clear cultural politics with a non-authoritarian and non-prescriptive understanding of art (and improvisation) as a practice as something that one does to perfect one's life in the community. For this and for so many other reasons, I simply cannot recommend this book enough. We will all be learning from its riches for years to come.

Marxist Monkey says

The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians has made one of the most important institutional contributions to American music of the twentieth century. Formed in 1965 and in continuous

operation since, the AACM has provided an organizational framework that is always in process, always the product of multiple struggles, always connected to its neighborhood(s), and always the incubator of creative music. Always? That makes it all sound too easy. One of the great achievements of George Lewis's monumental genealogy (roll over, Foucault) of "The AACM and American Experimental Music" is that it avoids the temptation of a whiggish approach where the legacy of the institution and its movement was set in stone by a few early brilliant founders only to develop in its inevitability through the following years.

Instead, Lewis gives us a much more complicated picture of the tensions, disruptions and out and out fights that accompanied every step of its history. The AACM was never guaranteed of success, and, indeed, when one considers the institution's goals, both audacious and grounded and established during its initial meetings, one must be amazed at the level of success the organization achieved. Each of the nine goals combines musical, philosophical and material concerns. Each displays the organization's philosophical commitment to the mutual generative responsibilities of individuality and commitment. Goals five, six and nine demonstrate the complexity of the association's understanding of the lives of musicians: "To provide a source of employment for worthy creative musicians;" "To set an example of high moral standards for musicians to uplift the public image of creative musicians;" "To stimulate spiritual growth in creative artists through recitals, concerts, etc., through participation in programs." (p.118) Together those three goals articulate the interconnectedness of musicianship, artistry, public image, material success and personal integrity that characterized the highest aspirations of the organization. Much of Lewis's book is devoted to the efforts of the AACM to reach and sustain these goals.

Lewis's book is personal yet methodologically rigorous. He draws on his own history with and investment in the group supplemented by an academic's professional orientation to historical accuracy and ethnographic authority. Indeed, Lewis seems to have set out to correct many of the myths that have grown up around the AACM by a thorough interrogation of both documentary sources and extensive interviews. First, the Chicago originators did not draw their musical style directly and solely from Sun Ra. Like many post-WWII musicians, their sound derived from a wide variety of "Great Black Music"—from Louis Armstrong through Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman but also including William Grant Still and James Reece Europe. Lewis points out, however, that the organization constantly battled the jazz tradition of linking current performers to great individual precursors and the corresponding tendency to write jazz history as a set of stories of great individuals. Instead, Lewis insists that the AACM wanted to emphasize current connections among individuals and their multiple communities and sought to include as wide a variety as possible of great sounds among their influences. Second, the AACM was not a black nationalist organization. They were committed to their own autonomy as artists and as entrepreneurs. They were committed to promoting great black music. Their roots in the black community and the Great Migration ran deep. Their knowledge of the history of white exploitation of black creative efforts was extensive. But their understanding of the keywords: "great;" "black;" and "music" were nuanced, complicated, and the result of years of disagreement, compromise, and actual real world practice. (Boy, did these folks practice.) In Lewis's analysis, the AACM developed a theory of black music that was not limited to the traditional genres of jazz, blues and r&b, and was not simply defined by the racial identity of the performers. Great black music could be performed by musicians with any racial identity, so long as the music could be recognized as such. (This requirement did beg the question of who was authorized to legitimate the recognition.) Furthermore, this music need not be improvised or funky or dance-oriented. It could be notated, severe and cerebral. AND it could be improvised, funky and dance-oriented. At the same time, musicians like Anthony Braxton, Muhal Richard Abrams and Roscoe Mitchell were not simply grafting jazz instrumentation and improvisational techniques onto pan-European musical strategies. They were investigating and experimenting with music in the pursuit of the material, philosophical, and artistic goals of the organization.

Despite its massive achievements, the book is not without its gaps and weaknesses. One chapter near the end deals with problems of gender that haunted the group from the beginning. Isolating these concerns in this

way is efficient for the author and makes for a logical organization. But it has the (presumably undesired) effect of seeming to absolve the AACM of this problematic aspect of its history. Lewis's personal history with the organization results in a tendency to include the names of hundreds of musicians in list after list of performers at this anniversary or that festival. The effort at inclusion is consistent with the organization's eschewal of the great performer tradition, but the names loose force in their repetition. Finally, after all the tremendous work that Lewis has done to compile, organize and write this extensive and far-reaching history, I would have liked more critical engagement with the recorded legacy of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Leroy Jenkins, Muhal Richard Abrams, and the rest. Perhaps it was too difficult for Lewis to write critically about his companions in the struggle. If so, I am grateful for that, for it leaves some work for the rest of us.

Devin says

By a strange twist of life's unknowable destinations this book I pre-ordered in Baltimore, finally got around to starting while living in California became my constant companion as I relocated to the roots of this book's story in Chicago. Providing a deeper understanding to a musical scene that has always held strong gravity for these ears accompanied by the palpable thrill of experiencing this living, local history as part of exploring the sonic terrain of the Windy City.

It would be hard to imagine a better writer to document the story of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music. The impressive academic credentials of Professor Lewis balances well against his considerable clout as a member and practitioner of creative music of the highest order. This labor of profound love and discipline never loses sight of the rich story and the many personalities involved. The affection for the individuals comes through as several biographies and episodic chapters unfold a history of collectivism and sound that paints a vivid image of an organization that has survived and thrived well within and beyond the vision of its original founders. The honest assessment of the collective's successes and short comings providing an insight to the evolution of a musical movement that has infused and continues to contribute significant vibrations in American music.

George E. Lewis confronts the role, and controversies, of race and gender in avant jazz and new musics with devastating honesty. Confronting the sharp contrast in critical reception that awaited (and to an embarrassing extent still awaits) musicians who cross or blur musical genres. From speaking candidly about the indifference and disdain toward jazz held by white American composers of the early twentieth century seeking to define a cultural identity with more Eurocentric roots, to observing the lack of panelists of color at New Music Chicago's "New Music and Our Changing Culture" session in Chicago in 1982 to the long struggle toward institutional support for African-American musicians and composers. Culminating in an observation of how Anthony Braxton's music is frequently regarded as a betrayal of his ethnic roots while John Zorn is embraced for plunging musical style into the same omnivorous appetite pioneered by Braxton without being subjected to such accusations. The AACM's own evolution as an organization that admitted few women (who were often not treated as equals) to its current form with Nicole Mitchell at its helm portrays a membership willing to reflect upon their own sensibilities as it strives to correct injustices from within.

The communal impact of the long running presence of an AACM in Chicago is noticeable. I am struck by the difference in the quality of audience at new music and jazz concerts in Chicago compared to other cities.

The community outreach has developed an audience that understands and respects this music in ways that are profoundly different from audience reception in Seattle, San Francisco or Baltimore. The level of diversity and engagement is striking and a testament to the positive impact this association has built up over many years. The quality of the music and the improvisers also reflects the level of development that is possible with this kind of open support structure that is in place.

Ultimately, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* is a much needed voice on behalf of a substantial part of the American musical landscape. George Lewis has added a new permanence to this incredible tradition by telling its story and offering an insider's view that further realizes the high ideals that its founding members set in motion in 1965.
