

**News
and Job
Alerts**

Sign up now

Search The Site

Go

More options | Back issues

Home

News

Opinion & Forums

The Chronicle Review

Commentary

Forums

Live Discussions

Careers

Multimedia

Leadership Forum

Technology Forum

Resource Center

Campus Viewpoints

Services

Help

Contact us

Subscribe

Day pass

Manage your account

Advertise with us

Rights & permissions

Employment opportunities

**News
and Job
Alerts**

Sign up now

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Chronicle Review

[Subscribe](#) | [Day pass](#)

From the issue dated November 14, 2008

Thoroughly Modern Music

An insider's history of a Chicago-based movement may finally put it on the map

By PETER MONAGHAN

New York

In 1977 members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a Chicago-based collective of musical experimentalists, marked more than a decade of accomplishment with a four-day festival here. The performances, exclaimed a veteran *New Yorker* critic, Whitney Balliett, "revealed a ferocious determination to bring into being a new and durable music — a hard-nosed utopian music, without racial stigmata, without clichés, and without commercialism."

The music was variously "beautiful, infuriating, savage, surrealistic, boring, and often highly original."

George E. Lewis cites that review approvingly in *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press), his 676-page history of the organization. Balliett had evoked AACM ensembles' galvanizing performances well. The members of the band Art Ensemble of Chicago, for example, deployed hundreds of instruments from many cultures and improvised with found objects; they wailed on bells, gongs, and

bicycle horns; they dressed in African headdresses, face paint, and in the case of the trumpeter Lester Bowie, a lab coat.

In his book, both social history and critical study, Lewis makes a claim that devotees of the AACM have long embraced but that is discomfiting some composers and critics: The jazz-related collective, which emerged from black, working-class areas of Chicago in the 1960s, became one of the most significant artistic forces of the 20th century — yet histories of American musical experimentalism almost never say so.

The book is "absolutely stunning," says John Corbett, author of *Extended Play: Sounding Off From John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Duke University Press, 1994). "Until now there hasn't been an adequate accounting of how the AACM emerged, and how it evolved."

"George is uniquely equipped to deal with all that," says Corbett, an adjunct associate professor of art history, theory, and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "He's a musician, a scholar who is a musician, an AACM member himself, but he's also got enough critical distance, having participated in lots of other musical communities."

Lewis joined the collective in 1971, when he was 19. Acclaimed as a trombonist and early adopter of computers in composition and performance, he has great musical range. In collaborations with leading lights of new music from around the world he has created music, text-sound works, computer-based multimedia installations, and much else. Some 120 recordings document his work. His early *Homage to Charles Parker* (Black Saint, 1979), which features key AACM figures including Muhal Richard Abrams and Roscoe Mitchell, is, according to the *Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*, "an essentially modern record" and "triumphant" in evoking the spirit of the bebop icon without playing any bebop references.

Lewis is also an able analyst of American musical history. Before coming to Columbia University in 2004 to direct the Center for Jazz Studies, he spent a decade running the innovative program in critical studies and experimental practices at the University of California at San Diego. In 2002 he won a "genius" fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The AACM,

Your peers are using
SAS® software to
improve institutional
research efforts.

Find out how and why.
On-demand Webcast

SAS THE POWER TO KNOW.

Related materials

Link: Hear samples of music by members of the AACM

Article: [Experimental Music and Academe](#)

Article tools



Printer friendly



E-mail article



Subscribe



Order reprints



Discuss any Chronicle article in our forums

Latest Headlines

U. of Kansas Sues NIH to Gain Credit for Patents

The university wants recognition and compensation for the years of work it says two of its researchers contributed to developing a lucrative anticancer drug.

Student Lenders Get New Federal Aid and New Opposition

Miss. High Court Says College Can Cut Ties With Alumnae Group

For a Raise, Try Looking in the Evergreen State

Most College Graduates Flunk 'Civic Literacy,' Group Says

A Scottish Weekend Endures for Centuries

The FREE daily e-mail newsletter from the editors of The Chronicle

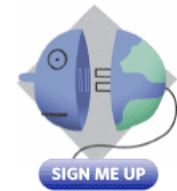
Academe Today

Keep up with all that's happening in academe.

[Sign up for Academe Today](#)

It's the 3-minute e-mail news update that summarizes the latest in higher education with links to the full articles on [chronicle.com](#).

Fast. Smart. Free.



which continues as a nonprofit organization with an active music school, could then boast of two, after the saxophonist and pianist Anthony Braxton was awarded one in 1994.

In 1965 a handful of musicians in their 20s and early 30s founded the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. As Lewis relates, in the "hypersegregated" neighborhoods of projects on Chicago's South Side, aspiring musicians had little hope of attending college, let alone conservatories. But at church they heard works by black composers; in parlors they listened to the country-and-western music that their Southern forebears called "folk music"; and, thanks to some culturally alert public-school teachers, they learned of revolutionary developments in jazz and contemporary classical music.

In short, Lewis says, they did what ambitious musicians anywhere do, regardless of economic circumstances: They followed their curiosity and made art.

The South Side jazz haunts, although drug-riddled, were peopled by jazzmen who experimented in their own way. On the bandstands, Lewis says, they tried to one-up each other as they explored the possibilities of bebop, but after shows, their late-night jam sessions were marked by "communal generosity rather than shaming."

When the AACM formed, members adopted that spirit of "working-class self-help and self-determination," Lewis writes. They produced their own performances and recordings because they were fed up with a music industry that demanded they stick to white audiences' notions of black music, and then cheated them financially.

The collective's pioneers were determined to "engage a larger world of connections between musical forms," Lewis says. From the free-jazz movement, they adopted experiments in rhythm, melody, harmonics, timbre. They challenged the centrality of "swing" and moved away from covering tunes toward creating original music. They declined to emphasize virtuosity because, Lewis says, virtuosity was not the point, any more than it was in the work of, say, Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol. More highly valued were spontaneity, exploration — wringing surprising sounds from their instruments. (That initial indifference to virtuosity notwithstanding, several members, including the saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell and Lewis himself, became instrumentalists of the highest order.)

Such approaches sprang from idiosyncratic minds, and in person Lewis's certainly appears to be one of those. A man of bearlike physique, he somehow expresses both a deadly seriousness and a boyish delight when he discusses music. Describing the evolution of the AACM, he punctuates his complex, polished analyses of music with guffaws as abrupt and generous as his trombone blats, peals, and whinnies. When he performs, the play of emotion on his body is obvious, and he has even been known, while conducting, to break into a jig.

Just before he joined the collective, in the late 1960s, bands like the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Anthony Braxton's trio became causes célèbres in Paris. Chicago could not contain the ambitious pioneers, and European critics seemed more alert to their accomplishments than American ones. Ekkehard Jost, for example, wrote that the designation AACM became "something like a guarantee of quality for a creative music of the first rank."

The performances, Lewis writes, were "risky, unstable, emotional, often unabashedly political" in the way they drew together "high" and "low" art from African America, mainstream America, and anywhere they cared to mine it. As the Black Power era dawned, the musicians grounded their art in a historical, "folk" consciousness that was in contrast to acclaimed movements such as the "indeterminate music" of John Cage and his circle, or art's Abstract Expressionism.

After studying recordings of the group's early meetings, Lewis can report that the question of whether the new music was jazz was barely raised. Some of the work resembled jazz; some barely hinted at it: The AACM's founders were intent on erasing the lines between genres. Still, many music critics corralled them within jazz because they were black — even though, Lewis writes, white American experimentalists "were able to describe themselves without opposition as 'former' jazz musicians."

The unusual nature of the collective, and its members' leering of music journalists and historians, guaranteed confused critical responses. For starters, the AACM bucked jazz-journalism expectations by shunning individualism — rather than play long solos that were set up by the "heads" of tunes and emphasized showmanship, players embraced an ensemble framework, even while contributing their own idiosyncratic musical voices. Lewis suggests that the approach was an echo of the slave "ring shout," a religious dance ritual that provided all participants the opportunity to call out in song or prayer.

More contentious was the decision by members, at the outset, to be a black-only organization at a time when racial mixing on jazz bandstands was emerging. Lewis says that decision reflected a Black Power-era mix of suspicion and self-determination, but it was also a function of the segregated communities that had begot the collective, and the musicians' fear that integration could relegate them to secondary status.

Feeding their suspicions were racially coded dismissals by gatekeepers of American high culture. Lewis cites the historian Jon D. Cruz's observation that criticism of the new music as "just noise" recalled many slave owners' earlier obliviousness to the significations of slave songs. "Similarly,"

writes Lewis, "the noisy anger of the new musicians seemed strange, surprising, and unfathomable to many critics, along with the idea that blacks might actually have something to be angry about."

As a result, Lewis contends, music historians have failed to acknowledge the influence of the "transgressive new black music" of the AACM and other innovators like Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and Cecil Taylor, dispatching them to the ranks of mere jazz oddballs.

Lewis has been making that revisionist claim for a decade, and is not alone. He cites, for example, Fred Moten, a Duke University-based cultural critic, poet, and performance artist who wrote in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003): "The idea of the black avant-garde exists, as it were, oxymoronically — as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand — each depends for its coherence on the exclusion of the other."

Lewis sees evidence of that blind spot in many historical elisions. For example, he says, experimentalists centered in New York, virtually all white, enjoyed institutional and critical support but failed to question their own "racialized power base." He writes: "A dominant sentiment among members of the white musical avant-garde drew upon modernist notions of music as politically disinterested, even disempowered."

Lewis's critique of American avant-gardism is "profoundly important and long overdue," according to a specialist in American and 20th-century music, Amy C. Beal, an associate professor of music at the University of California at Santa Cruz. "Histories of 20th-century music and jazz are racially segregated, and there are various institutional reasons why that happens," she says, "It's time we started examining them."

But by doing so Lewis is annoying proponents of an earlier conception of avant-garde experimentalism. Devotees of the iconic composer John Cage, for example, are not amused by Lewis's claim that Cage disavowed key methodologies of jazz, such as improvisation, but readopted them blanched of their "Afrological" associations. In a review for *The Wire*, an English publication that is prominent in the genres Lewis and the AACM straddle, the composer Philip Clark denounced such claims as "unkempt outbursts." Clark wrote: "His analysis of the institutionalized racism within American funding bodies — faceless committees of white academic composer buddies passing the pot between them — is persuasively put. However, for all the passion and historical context he brings to the AACM's alternative vision, this book is dragged down by its agendas and intransigency."

Sabine M. Feisst, an associate professor of music history and literature at Arizona State University at Tempe, contends that Lewis fails to take into account that Cage rejected jazz improvisation because he believed that performers invited to be spontaneous tended to fall back on habits. So, she says, he embraced such compositional techniques as chance and indeterminacy while also rejecting some kinds of music — including jazz, but also Beethoven — as too expressive of ego.

Still, she allows that Cage, as a musically alert American, could hardly be uninfluenced by jazz. And that, Lewis says, is his point: Cage mixed and performed with musicians from jazz backgrounds, including AACM members. "It's in the hanging out that a lot of the new knowledge gets produced about a sort of composite experimentalism," he says. Rather than disparage Cage and his white contemporaries, he says, he wishes to point out that histories omit avant-gardism's full scope: "I'm interested in who's in the room and who gets erased from the conversation when the stuff gets written up."

But Lewis, despite much "first-class scholarship," misses some key points, suggests one of the few experimental composers who have commented on Lewis's book, Daniel James Wolf, a prize-winning American composer and writer based in Budapest. He finds it "odd" that Lewis focuses his critique on experimental composers and musicians, like Cage, who have so little power compared with music managers, recording companies, grant-making agencies, academe, and musicians in popular idioms. Moreover, he says in an e-mail message, "when experimentalists have themselves received institutional positions, they have been unflinching in their outreach to and support of African-American experimentalists, in both programming and hiring."

Lewis says his point is that musicians of all kinds need not only to accommodate race, but to get over it. That includes some AACM vanguardists. Many schooled themselves by poring over compositions by European and American modernists but some concealed that, "to make the case for a purely black origin for their ideas," fearing the "great-white-father complex," he says.

"Hopefully, now we don't have to do that."

Peter Monaghan is a correspondent for The Chronicle. For many years he edited the monthly Earshot Jazz and was host of a weekly Seattle community-radio program, Outside Jazz.

<http://chronicle.com.proxy.library.nd.edu>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 55, Issue 12, Page B7

Copyright © 2008 by The Chronicle of Higher Education | [Contact us](#)
[User agreement](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Site map](#) | [Help](#)
[Subscribe](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [Press inquiries](#) | [RSS](#) | [Today's most e-mailed](#)

[Home](#) | [Chronicle Careers](#) | [The Chronicle Review](#)

