



Ecstatic Ensemble: Original Music and the Birth of the AACM

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and Jake Nussbaum

IMPROVISATION

“I don’t stand to benefit when everybody is just trying to be like everyone else. All of us are highly individualized beings, different.”

—ROSCOE MITCHELL

What makes music original? We often use “original” to mean unique, but it also refers to the first, the root, the pattern. For the past five decades the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians has sought to answer this question and produced music that resists category. Reluctantly labeled jazz, avant-garde, classical, electronic—the sonic universe of the AACM is built on a philosophy of inclusiveness.

Known for having produced some of Chicago’s most renowned musicians and composers such as Roscoe Mitchell, George Lewis, Joseph Jarman, Anthony Braxton and Henry Threadgill, the AACM has a reputation for innovation that exceeds any one particular sound. Its members have created 50-piece operas, graphic scores, alternative tunings, and software that responds to improvisation. Costumes, body paint, incense, dancing, computers, and homemade instruments have all turned up at their concerts. Performances have filled entire gymnasiums and taken place among the crowd. Children have paraded down the aisles performing alongside professionals. The AACM’s quest for original music has been for something unlimited and universal.

The Association was an outgrowth of pianist and composer Muhal Richard Abrams’s Experimental Band—a rehearsal group of black musicians that met in Abrams’s south-side Chicago basement in the early 60s. Experimental Band meetings resembled a jam session only in format—instead of encouraging virtuosic one-upmanship, musicians presented compositions to the group and worked ideas out collectively. The focus was on creative development rather than classical or technical ability. From the beginning, the purposes outlined in the AACM’s charter were as much social as musical: “to create an atmosphere conducive to artistic endeavors,” “to stimulate spiritual growth in creative artists through participation in programs,” and “to provide a source of employment for worthy creative

musicians.” Their Chicago headquarters moved frequently, but the format remained constant: members paid dues to support rentals for venues, shared maintenance and promotional duties, and professional musicians were required to teach at the AACM School.

At the time of the AACM’s founding in May 1965, Chicago was heavily segregated and its black neighborhoods criminally underserved. There were virtually no opportunities for black composers, and it was rare for black musicians to teach at high levels, join orchestras, or be fairly compensated by local venues and record labels. High school teaching jobs were often the only opportunities open to trained musicians, and even those who had achieved widespread success struggled to maintain creative freedom and fair compensation. “We looked at the lives of great musicians that were just out there on their own, like Charlie Parker,” remembered Roscoe Mitchell, an original member and widely acclaimed saxophonist. “Many musicians left the States and had to go to Europe. It was not a good network.” As the 60s wore on, social movements like the Black Panthers and the Black Arts Movement found ways to improve the condition of black Americans through community and creative action. The Association, though not directly affiliated with either, envisioned a similar model of success—a space that could exist outside of mainstream institutional ideology and allow black artists to experiment without risking their livelihood. “The thing we wanted with the AACM was a place where we could all come together with a common interest,” said Mitchell. “We wanted to have control over our destinies. We didn’t want to just be blown in the wind.”

To that end, the AACM started a community school, open on Saturdays to students of all ages. Everyone learned composition and percussion, and were encouraged to try a variety of instruments. Association founder Muhal Richard Abrams emphasized original composition as a way to ensure students had all the tools necessary to decipher or reproduce the sounds they wanted. It was an implicit counter to the limited freedom black Americans faced at the time. “Being a composer, you knew what that was; that was an old white guy,” explained member George Lewis, who chronicled the AACM in his book, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*. “The basic idea throughout the entire thing was that you

Roscoe Mitchell, Gymnasium
concert, University of
Chicago, 1968.

All photos courtesy of
Leonard E. Jones



Art Ensemble of Chicago,
Paris, summer 1970.

had agency for what you were going to do with your own life, and that you could do what you wanted to do. You were living an alternative model, counter to what people were saying you could be doing, or the kind of possibilities you could have.”

Students were given pencil and paper and shown the basics of major scales and diatonic modules. Those with previous knowledge shared the same class under the assumption they would eventually come to something they didn’t understand. At the end of their very first three-hour class, students were expected to go home and compose. “That was it,” recalled Lewis, “you were a composer immediately.” This approach left little separation between learning and creating.

There was no preliminary exercise. With basic knowledge and tools, students could engage directly with the creative practice. Abrams envisioned this learning space as a meeting between “so-called teachers and so-called students,” where learning and doing happened together.

“I think the assumption was that everyone was wiser than you,” Lewis recalled. “If you were a person in some sort of pedagogical authority or prominence, and you went in with the attitude that you had a worm and were going to bring it to a bunch of open beaks, that’s not it. Your beak should be just as open as everybody else’s. So that way everybody was sort of feeding each other.”

Ann Ward, who directed the school from 1983 to 2008, described an environment in which music was explored openly, with accessible language. “I insisted that my children learn the qualities of each sound in the musical alphabet. Each letter could be flat or sharp, obtuse or narrow, which to me means augmented or diminished. We’d say, ‘Is it tight? Is it wide? Is it thick? Is it thin? Is it low and deep?’” The descriptions encouraged a personal connection to the sound that carried through in the way Ward taught musical notation. “When I was taught piano, I was taught,

‘this is middle C and this was a quarter note,’ but there were no connections. So I make sure that things connect. When I teach theory, we’re just looking at what symbols can mean. Symbols are simply a shortcut, which you can apply to sound. If I give you a wiggly line and I give you a point to start, you figure out what to do. That’s how we got the students to read our notation. The AACM notation was as far-flung as the sounds we made. We taught them traditional notation too of course, but we did it through patterns and logic.”

The original composition “A Jackson in Your House,” recorded by the Art Ensemble of Chicago (with members Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors, Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman) in 1969, captures the diverse and encompassing style of professional AACM musicians at the time. The piece opens with a whimsical theme stated in heraldic fanfare, then quickly disintegrates to a squawking bike horn, and eventually silence. A soft vibraphone fills the space, accentuated by clinks and chimes, as though drifting in off the street through an open window. The quiet atmosphere builds back into the theme, which is again interrupted by clanging, drums, shouting, and exaggerated laughing. A slurry voice chants, “1, 2, 3, there’s Jacksons in your house,” before blurring nonsensically. A clearer voice responds, “Jackson, that cat is somethin!” Suddenly a trumpet and clarinet launch into old-style bebop solos, and a vocal argument breaks out between old men. “You gotta play the blues, man,” one shouts, and the instruments become slow and lazy as the men banter on. The soloists state a completely new theme, and the piece fades out after just five and a half minutes.

By turns playful, silly, and as biting as a Shakespearean fool, the patchwork nature of the song seems to mock the restraint of past musical traditions, while pointedly evoking the complicated legacy of black minstrelsy. The Art Ensemble covers a wide range of sound with their unique instrumentation (toys, sound effects, little instruments) and performance style (it’s never quite clear who’s playing what), but also in their investigation of entire musical idioms (secondline from New Orleans, early bebop, “the blues”). Black musical traditions—even stereotypical ones—are re-purposed freely, seen not as limiting forms but doors to something original.

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Like Jackson, much of the AACM’s music at the time provided a context for members to affirm their legacy as black musicians, reclaiming idioms and instruments that had previously been appropriated by white audiences or labeled as “primitive.” African and Asian melodies and instruments played a large role in compositions and performances, as did black-American musical traditions like the blues, jazz, ragtime, funk, and R + B. Equally rooted in this tradition was the way the AACM pursued improvisation, an approach which traces its roots back through jazz to field songs, and further still to African music carried over during the slave trade.

Many of the first AACM members began improvising in more conventional settings—marching bands, churches, jazz combos—where improvisation was limited to solos over chord changes and evaluated by technical skill. But within the AACM improvisation increasingly became a group act. The band Air, with members Henry Threadgill, Fred Hopkins and Steve McCall, might start a piece with a standard jazz theme, but it was often only a jumping-off point for extended sonic explorations of melody and rhythm. Tunes from church, marching bands, etc., would resurface in new and unpredictable ways, and improvisation became an access point to musical heritage as well as its unknown future.

For Mitchell, “improvisation is a speeded up form of composition.” In this sense, it is always original music, born of the moment. But it’s more than high-speed composition; it is also a context in which musicians are free to access all their creative knowledge in service of an instant without adhering to a specific compositional framework. In short, it is liberating, and when undertaken collectively it fosters mutual support perhaps more than any other model.

Without a script to follow, musicians must rely on each other for creative direction, transcending the boundaries of what they know and think is possible, creating something that exists outside the imagination of any one person.

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“It’s not just about improvisational music,” explains Lewis, “but about improvisation as a general condition of being in the world that you have to articulate and that you can learn from and make connections through—a sort of microcosm.” Such collective creative action enabled the AACM to transcend what was perceived as possible at the time for black artists and provided a flexibility that was key to its longevity.

An absence of hierarchy between young and old, amateur and professional, meant everyone was both learner and teacher. New members could learn directly from founders while also placing value on their own contributions. Concerts from AACM professionals often included moments for the students to perform or join, establishing a generational throughline that naturally grew the AACM’s audience to include families and friends of the students. Small percussive instruments such as shakers, rattles and bells allowed children from an early age to play along with adult musicians. Ann Ward described the feeling of reverence between students and teachers: “Joseph Jarman would be brought to tears listening because these children could play just as well with the masters. The true percussionists would play the “other side” of the rhythm, and we’d say, ‘go ahead, because we got this side!’ Even if they didn’t keep the beat we’d call those ‘funny notes,’ and they were acceptable. They might create a little diversion for someone to move on to something else.”

American models of success have traditionally favored the individual over the group. Participation in groups is often seen as adherence to convention, or interference to individual impetus, as though the benefits of belonging, i.e. patronage and protection, come only at a cost to freedom, i.e. limited resources, conformity.

But this description fails to acknowledge the potential for reciprocity between the group and the individual, in which support is not just material or emotional, but also creative and de-



Clockwise from top
Malachi Favors Maghostut, bassist of extraordinary talents, Art Ensemble of Chicago Concert, 1968.
Danny Riperton, actually a pianist and brother of Minnie Riperton, the singer, AACM summer concert at the 63rd Street Beachhouse, Chicago, August 1968. Others in photo John Stubblefield, John Jackson, trp., and Wadada Leo Smith, right of Jackson
Henry Threadgill in the studio of Q Jan Telting, Surinamese painter Amsterdam, Holland, 1971.



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IMPROVISATION

velopmental. By connecting creative and social development, the AACM offered the advantages of collectivity—education, opportunity, creative community—without neglecting the needs of the individual creator.

The AACM envisions music’s impact far beyond performance or the lives of professional musicians. “I say it all the time: I’m not turning out musicians, I’m turning out well-rounded people,” explained Ward. “When you come out of here knowing that you can do this, what else can’t you do?” As a creative discipline, the music fostered self-discipline and confidence alongside a communal awareness of heritage, community, and collaboration. In its capacity as a collective project, music and music-making provide ongoing direction and metaphor for social renewal. “It is the total experience,” as Lewis says, “not just the playing part, or the composing part. It’s what music brings you in contact with; what kind of social worlds become revealed to you

through interaction in an artistic environment; what kinds of literature you’re driven to read, or the languages you learn or the kinds of people you meet, or the sorts of awareness or enlightenment that music has to offer you.”

When we talk about art’s relevance to society the discussion inevitably seems to center on individual experience, or final products. The AACM suggests an alternative—one where the creative context is in direct relationship with society, where the act of imagination itself is one that creates opportunities that didn’t previously exist. The AACM brought their music to the world, first through exchanges with similar collectives in Detroit and St. Louis like the Black Artists’ Group, then through a long stint overseas in Paris and Europe, and then finally to New York, where a second chapter was established in 1983. Both the Chicago and New York chapters are active and thriving still.

