

earnest human being—who wove his life and times into some truly remarkable compositions” (180). The Ives we see here is vital and real, and the model for looking at the music from across the whole time span of its composition is exciting. Magee suggests that understanding this “unvarnished” Ives provides a challenge, but the man himself becomes more accessible and fascinating in her account, and the music sounds forth in all its beautiful complexity.

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A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music. By George E. Lewis. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

For over forty years members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) have, as George Lewis puts it in his new history of the organization, tried to “survive and even thrive while (a) pursuing their art and (b) controlling the means of its production. These goals are, in fact, intertwined with another important goal—that of affecting the discourses surrounding and mediating the activity of the African American artist” (497). A longstanding member of the organization himself, Lewis’s magnificent volume builds on this project, written as it is, “in the hope that this work will help the AACM and the communities it has touched to realize just what they have accomplished, as well as all that they might accomplish in the future” (xxxvi). In doing so he builds on a tradition of critical interventions by AACM members that includes Wadada Leo Smith’s *Notes (8 pieces) Source a New World Music: Creative Music* (1973), Anthony Braxton’s *Tri-Axium Writings* (1985), and Lewis’s own essays. And these goals are, by his own definition, intertwined with the ambitious scholarly project of “encouraging the production of new histories of experimentalism in music” (xiii).

Although this book is not the first historical study of the AACM, it is the most substantial, succeeding brilliantly in charting the group’s institutional, social, philosophical, and aesthetic development over time in the face of its unintelligibility to a variety of critical and scholarly assumptions about the production of African American music. By situating this story within both social and discursive networks, we learn why the AACM has not received its full due, and Lewis’s narrative calls, both through example and through exhortation, for a history of experimental music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that is more attentive to black-created experimentalism, political economy, racial and gendered ideologies and practices, and the complex web of social and personal relationships that energize and sometimes constrain the production of art and the utopian dreams with which it coincides.

A Power Stronger than Itself succeeds, at one level, as a rigorous documentary history that broadens our understanding of the AACM’s emergence and activities

over several decades. Lewis has benefited from securing greater access than other scholars to the personal reflections of AACM musicians—he conducted ninety-two interviews with “members and supporters” for the book—and to previously unanalyzed archival materials, including tape recordings of early AACM meetings and performances. However, as he balances his own authority and agenda as historian and ethnographer with an effort to incorporate the perspectives of his informants so that “a useful story might be realized out of the many voices heard in this book, the maelstrom of heteroglossia in which we nervously tread water” (xxvi), Lewis also shows that there must always be some uncertainty in the revisionist project, that there is still room for additional and alternative accounts of the organization.

When discussing the genesis of the organization, Lewis covers familiar ground, but he brings more detail to the story. He maps the ideological and aesthetic complexity of the early organization, complicating those narratives that position the group as narrowly invested in lockstep fashion to cultural nationalist or “free jazz” ideologies. Obviously these orientations were significant, but Lewis shows how this terrain was contested and defied consensus. We see this disagreement, for example, when Lewis explores the complicated and wrenching debates over issues such as just what constitutes “original music” and whether the organization should include whites among its membership. As he explores these debates, we also gain insight into the ideas, goals, and contributions of a wider spectrum of the AACM membership than typically surveyed in scholarship on the organization. Too often the broader membership has served merely as a supporting cast, or even foils, to figures such as Anthony Braxton or members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Lewis shows, for example, that a postmodern sensibility, the “multiperspectivalism” celebrated in the work of Braxton, to name one figure, was a deep-seated, widely shared (and much discussed) aesthetic commitment among AACM members.

Perhaps even more important is that Lewis takes the story of the AACM into the twenty-first century. Although there has been significant scholarly attention to individual members’ music and writings into the present, most published work on the organization itself focuses on its emergence and early activities. In Lewis’s account we learn more about the post-1975 AACM as a protean formation that had many successes but that also faced great challenges as it confronted urban social transformations, a shifting political climate, the vicissitudes of government funding for the arts, its own racial and gender politics, and disagreements between Chicago- and New York-based members. Especially valuable when examining the later AACM is the glimpse we are offered of the increasing role of women as musicians and as officers in the organization, as well as of the gender politics in musicians’ circles as they developed hand in hand with the women’s movement and responses to it beginning in the 1970s.

One particularly valuable device Lewis deploys in telling this story is his foregrounding of the Great Migration of African Americans from the U.S. South to the urban North. Throughout the book Lewis generally introduces AACM musicians to the reader by drawing on information from his interviews with them about their personal or family histories of migration, about their musical education, and about the various social and interpersonal factors that ultimately drew them toward the AACM. By doing so, he shows that the complex web of personal, institutional,

and social networks developed during this movement have been fundamental to the boundary- and genre-shifting aesthetic sensibilities of AACM members and to the ethos of collectivism and self-determination that has famously shaped its programs. He also establishes an interpretive framework for understanding the AACM as grounded in a particular working-class experience but still being simultaneously mobile and transgressive. These migration stories also make clear the central importance of overlapping communities and networks to the creation and sustenance of the AACM. That “imagined communities have important musical consequences is at the heart of what the AACM meant to both musicians and audience” (485), Lewis states at the end of the volume. *A Power Stronger than Itself* thus does an extraordinary job in showing that the organization has been more than just the institution, its individual members, and the music they have produced. It is a product of a far-reaching web of friendships, love relationships, longstanding and emergent cultural practices, music education networks, and other channels of communication, affinity, and support.

Such community-building efforts, of course, have also been made meaningful and impinged on by the social and aesthetic discourses surrounding African American musicians and musicianship. Lewis’s documentary project is geared throughout toward correcting misconceptions about the group because of its unintelligibility to an array of conversations about music. Defining the AACM’s project as “American Experimental Music” in the book’s title throws down the gauntlet. Lewis quickly suggests that a reasonable and accurate account of the AACM must deviate from “world of jazz” discourses that “cordon off musicians from interpenetration with other musical art worlds” or that de-emphasize the collective aspects of music making while focusing on the “singular heroic figure” (x). One must also write against “racial” accounts of experimental music that do not acknowledge the work of black experimentalists, except as constitutive others.

Lewis is invested in showing how these critical blind spots shaped the conditions under which AACM members pursued their art. Those familiar with Lewis’s essays will recognize some of the arguments, but assembled together here they articulate them in a more systematic way. After foregrounding the theme of the Great Migration and discussing the personal and musical histories of some of its early membership in chapter 1, Lewis jumps in chapter 2 to a discussion of the New York art world of the 1960s and the prevalent aesthetic discourses established there with which AACM members would eventually have to contend. Here he more specifically maps the ways that emergent discourses on musical experimentalism lumped black experimentalists into the jazz category and positioned that genre as an inspiration for avant-garde projects, but not as an equal, worldly participant. Black experimentalism was positioned as a narrowly conceived thing-apart by Eurocentric critics who didn’t take it seriously as art, by black nationalist critics who demanded revolutionary purpose and cultural purity, and by liberals who, ironically, could also see avant-garde black music only in disagreeably oppositional terms. The black experimental musicians themselves, for whom such critical discourse affected where and how often they worked, faced a choice between “total Europeanization or a narrowly conceived, romanticized ‘Africanization’ . . . In this discursive environment, engagement with African American culture could not serve as one element among many.

Rather, race itself was assumed to overdetermine the identity of the black creative artists" (33).

This chapter sets the stage for further examination of the array of residual and emergent discourses with which the AACM would have to contend over the years and that have also, in Lewis's view, narrowed our understanding of experimental music. We learn about, for example, influential black critics' lack of attention and, indeed, hostility to this sort of experimentalism because of its engagement with pan-European forms and ideas; the misreading of, and sometimes hostility to, the AACM by some French jazz critics invested in Black Power ideologies; the marginalization of the AACM during the 1970s and 1980s by government and corporate funding apparatuses that pigeonholed it as a jazz organization; a reinvestment in pan-European cultural practice and devaluation of African American forms by European and "downtown" American experimentalists affiliated with movements venerated for their breaking down of cultural and generic boundaries; and the marginalization of AACM and AACM-like projects during the jazz revival of the 1980s and 1990s by the narrow aesthetic and historical vision informing the work of practitioners and critics alike. Bringing the critique into the academic present, Lewis takes on cultural studies scholars who have not yet figured out a way to address the full aesthetic and political import of experimental music created by black practitioners. Many, Lewis argues, rely on problematic ideas of the "popular" or "vernacular," without coming to terms with the ways in which these categories are ideological constructions. "Far from articulating resistance or class struggle, those who import the bourgeois-versus-vernacular binary dialectic unblinkingly into the complex world of black musical expression run the risk of inadvertently serving as the ventriloquist's dummy for corporate megamedia" (368). What is necessary instead is a more contingent model of the vernacular, attuned to differences in cultural expressions, the communities that produce them, and the work they do in the contexts in which they are heard.

Lewis regrets that there was not more discussion of the music itself in the volume. He explains the decision to focus on other matters as a result of not wanting to privilege particular pieces or individuals as being emblematic of the organization, and he adds that significant discussion of music would make a lengthy book even longer. Despite the disclaimer, I still came away from the book wishing there had been more on the music, although not necessarily in terms of discussion of specific pieces. Rather, I found myself looking for more discussion of musical visions and goals as they were shared by and diverged among AACM members and groups. We get some of this analysis, of course. We learn, among other things, that there were competing definitions of "original music" among the membership and that the group's commitment to multi-instrumentalism enabled a fuller exploration of the sonic palette and at least implicitly challenged the individualist focus of much jazz criticism. Nevertheless, I wanted to read more about how sounds and musical goals developed over time. Even while understanding the value of emphasizing shared goals in challenging exceptionalist narratives about certain AACM members, I also found myself wondering what Lewis might have to say, in a comparative fashion, about the differences in Bowie's and Braxton's uses of irony, of how the invocation of African aesthetics may have functioned distinctly in the work of Samana and

the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and so on. Lewis is, after all, uniquely positioned as scholar, composer, theorist, and longtime AACM member to analyze in a more systematic way the broader sweep of the group's evolving musical vision.

Still, this wish for what might have been should not detract from my overall assessment that *A Power Stronger than Itself* succeeds wonderfully in giving us the fullest portrait of this important organization. The book also offers a powerful challenge to critics and scholars to move beyond various discursive practices brought to bear on experimental music and to pay better attention to the complex interface of individual and collective creative goals, social power, identities, interpersonal affinities and conflicts, and discursive formations that inform but also occlude these dynamics from view. Lewis has, in the end, made a compelling case for the inclusion of the AACM in the history of American experimental music and, by extension, a remapping of that field.

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