

Art Ensemble Origin Story

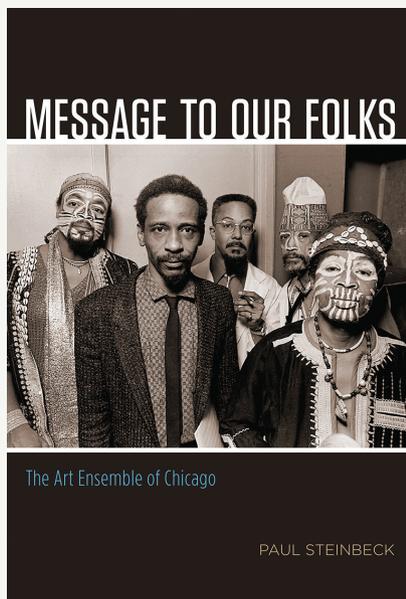
The Art Ensemble of Chicago wasn't just one of the greatest collectives in jazz; the band's early years constitute one of the genre's greatest origin stories as well. As the most acclaimed act to come out of the seminal Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in Chicago in the late 1960s, the Art Ensemble put that organization's policies of artistic and economic independence into successful practice. They became internationally renowned without compromising their vision and survived five decades and the death of two key members, proving that they were truly greater than the sum of their parts.

AACM member George Lewis told the story well in his vital 2007 tome *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press), but the Art Ensemble is important enough to warrant a volume of its own. They get just that with **Paul Steinbeck's** well-researched *Message to Our Folks* (University of Chicago Press).

Steinbeck intersperses his chronological narrative with chapters focusing on specific releases, providing both macro and micro views of the band's work. He relays the remarkable tale of the Art Ensemble's 1969–1971 Parisian sojourn, during which they established themselves as an international act even before having built a domestic following (and added "of Chicago" to their name). He tells of their triumphant return, portraying them convincingly as a phenomenon in the jazz world, both onstage and off. As Steinbeck relates, the band handled its business practices much the way they did their concerts: establish a goal (a set list, a tour schedule) and realize it through a consensual process. Between 1975 and 1979, they incorporated as Art Ensemble of Chicago Operations (AECO), launched their own label and hired a small support staff.

Concentrated attention—including detailed musical analysis—is given in three separate chapters to the albums *A Jackson In Your House* (recorded during their time in France) and *Live At Mandel Hall* (their homecoming concert, recorded at the University of Chicago on the city's South Side) and to the concert video *Live From the Jazz Showcase* (also released on DVD as *In Concert*), recorded at Chicago's Blackstone Hotel in 1981. Steinbeck suggests listening to these recordings during the respective chapters, and his pacing is astonishing, allowing for a leisurely read with room to stop and listen.

That said, the selections point to the book's big shortcoming. We follow the rise to fame and speed through the rest. An informed discussion of the group's later



years—how they carried on through the departure of Joseph Jarman in 1993, the death of Bowie in 1999 and the death of Malachi Favors in 2004—would hardly have dragged the text down. Roscoe Mitchell and Famoudou Don Moye persevered during that time, bringing other musicians into the fold and making some strong recordings. It's not the rags-to-riches part of the tale, but it is no less integral.

Steinbeck does do a good job with the part of the story that most interests him. The Art Ensemble enjoyed not just artistic success but a level of social mobility in Paris that was not available to them in the States. Freedom in France, however, came with a racial filter of a different sort, the same one that had made Josephine Baker the talk of the town 40 years prior. The band members were aware of this, and played to it with old-time spirituals and revolutionary politics. In retrospect, the "message to our old folks at home" routine seems at once a sincere reminiscence and a biting pantomime.

The band was capable of stark social satire, especially in its early days. It also fostered a shared interest in theatricality. Steinbeck outlines these points without hammering them home.

But the author, an assistant professor of music theory at Washington University, isn't into issuing polemics, and his prose here is more admiring than academic. Lewis' AACM book is already necessary reading, and *Message to Our Folks* sits quite nicely beside it. **DB**

Ordering info: press.uchicago.edu/index.html

NOAH PREMINGER

MEDITATIONS ON FREEDOM

Noah Preminger *Meditations On Freedom*

DRY BRIDGE RECORDS 005

★★★★

It's been said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture, though certainly not by anyone in music journalism. But is playing music about issues of concern equally pointless? Musicians and critics would surely unite to deliver a resounding "No!" Especially after they've listened to *Meditations On Freedom*.

Whether composed by Noah Preminger or drawn from the canon of songs inspired by inequity and injustice, these nine tracks derive their eloquence from two primary sources.

The first of course is the players involved. Preminger highlights this effectively with opening sections that spotlight duo combinations. Check the overtone chimes and double-stops that flavor Kim Cass' bass alongside the sax at the top of "A Change Is Gonna Come." Then submit to a more solemn spell, with Preminger and Jason Palmer treating the theme to "Only A Pawn In Their Game" as if they were reading Scripture together.

The other key to Preminger's method is to omit a harmonic instrument from this session. Including a piano would inject a sense of structural anticipation: It would be difficult for the player to not signal an impending chord change or cadence or chorus.

Compositionally, of course, that's a prerequisite for this material. But Preminger removes that aspect of listening and probably even of playing these works.

Will any of this music actually increase the odds of world peace? Probably not. But it will take you to a better place -- and that's important too.

—Bob Doerschuk

Meditations On Freedom: Only A Pawn In Their Game; Just The Way It Is; A Change Is Gonna Come; We Have A Dream; Mother Earth; Women's March; The 99 Percent; Give Me Love (Give Me Peace On Earth); Broken Treaties (49:45)

Personnel: Noah Preminger, saxophone; Jason Palmer, trumpet; Kim Cass, bass; Ian Froman, drums.

Ordering info: noahpremier.com