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 band’s capability 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, hasn’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.

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