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*Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago*. By Paul Steinbeck. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

October 2016 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, a remarkable achievement for any experimental music group, let alone a Black experimental music group formed in the South Side of Chicago. The quintet of trumpeter Lester Bowie, saxophonists Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman, bassist Malachi Favors Maghostut, and percussionist Famoudou Don Moye has been the subject of several critical articles, and the band appears throughout George E. Lewis's authoritative history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the Black artistic collective that the Art Ensemble is affiliated with.<sup>1</sup> *Message to Our Folks* is the first book-length account of the group and its compositions and performances.

A singular study of the Art Ensemble is a formidable challenge considering the group's fluency in multiple musical styles and their use of intermedia that included spoken word, physical movement, and theatrical sketches. As Steinbeck makes clear early on in his study, the intermingling of "music that could be alternately tranquil and raucous, mythic and political, humorous and intense" with theatrical elements are what drew audiences into a performance by the Art Ensemble (2). To bridge these diverse areas, Steinbeck focuses on "the Art Ensemble's musical and social practices" (4). By this, he means that the musical performances and practices are shaped by the collective individualism of the group, and the members' individual identities and approaches to music making are reflected in the performances of the group. Focusing on these two realms allows Steinbeck to create cohesion across a book that blends historical research, social contextualization, and musical analysis. Although the book is organized chronologically, it is perhaps best to view the book as two distinct parts commingled across nine chapters.

The introduction and first three chapters of *Message to Our Folks* present the biographies of the four original members of the group (Bowie, Favors, Jarman, and Mitchell), detail how the four came to play with one another, discuss the genesis of the AACM, and provide historical and social context of post-World War II Chicago. Chapter Three, "The Art Ensemble of Paris," presents an intriguing discussion of the Art Ensemble's twelve-month residency in Paris from June 1969 to

<sup>1</sup> Examples of critical scholarship on the Art Ensemble include Robin Kelley, "Dig Thy Freedom: Meditations on History and the Black Avant-Garde," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 3 (1997): 13–27; Norman Weinstein "Steps toward an Integrative Comprehension of the Art Ensemble of Chicago's Music," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 3 (1997): 3, 5–11; Bruce Tucker, "Narrative, Extramusical Form, and the Metamodernism of the Art Ensemble of Chicago," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 3 (1997): 29–41; and George E. Lewis, "Singing Omar's Song: A (Re)construction of Great Black Music," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 4 (1998): 69–92. For more on the history and music of the AACM see George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

June 1970. Steinbeck positions the Art Ensemble within a cultural milieu in which French critics and audiences demand for black culture ensured the success of the Art Ensemble in Paris. However, these same critics' and audiences' interpretation of the group's performances through an essentialist viewpoint all but guaranteed that the Art Ensemble's music and performances would be misunderstood or conflated with nationalist spectrums of black political activity and ideology during this time.

The two middle chapters chronicle the addition of percussionist Famoudou Don Moye, the development of side projects led by members of the Art Ensemble, and the establishment of a corporation that would ensure the group's financial stability. Discussions of the band's business practices and pathway to financial stability—an untold luxury for many Black artists—run throughout the book, demonstrating the viability of cooperative economics and how musical practices can translate to the business side of art. The last narrative chapter details the Art Ensemble during the 1980s, a period that saw the group release multiple records on West German jazz and experimental record label ECM; solidify the definition of their well-known slogan “Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future”; and feud with Wynton Marsalis over the history, aesthetics, and future of jazz. Particularly interesting in this chapter is Steinbeck's brief discussion of the mischaracterization of the Art Ensemble in Ken Burns's *Jazz*. The series cursory mention of the group was immediately noticed by *New York Times* critic Ben Ratliff, who bemoaned that the group was “almost ridiculed by the process of editing,” and *Village Voice* critic Michelle Mercer, who described the scene's narration and quick fade to black as one of the series “more apocalyptic scenes.”<sup>2</sup> Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace share a similar viewpoint and argue that the series frames the band as the “ultimate scapegoat for jazz music's downfall in terms of public and commercial relevance.”<sup>3</sup> Steinbeck details how the series' claims about the group are demonstrably false while also presenting this scene as the apex of a professional disagreement about the history of and future direction of jazz and a personal feud between series consultant Wynton Marsalis and Lester Bowie. Steinbeck's analysis of this moment puts on display how individuals and their personalities can shape the narrative(s) of jazz history. The book closes with a brief summary of how the band overcame the loss of three of its members and continues to still be active to this day.

The second part of the book consist of three chapters featuring musical analysis of, in Steinbeck's words, “three exceptional performances by the Art Ensemble” that capture the sonic, performative, and intermedia qualities of the group's performance practice (5). The three performances are a studio recording (*A Jackson in Your House*); a concert recording (*Live at Mandel Hall*); and a video recording

<sup>2</sup> Ben Ratliff, “Fixing, For Now, The Image of Jazz,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2001, Michelle Mercer, “Jingo All the Way,” *Village Voice*, January 16, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ewart et al., “Ancient to the Future: Celebrating Forty Years of the AACM,” in *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz is Now!*, ed. Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 244.

of a televised performance (*Live from the Jazz Showcase*).<sup>4</sup> In these three chapters, Steinbeck deftly combines musical analysis of each recording with discussion of the Art Ensemble's musical and social aesthetics. While there is not enough space in this review to go into detail about each chapter, notable moments from each chapter are worth highlighting. In chapter 4, "A Jackson in Your House," Steinbeck draws out how the integration of intermedia and intermusical references in the album's A side ("A Jackson in Your House," "Get in Line," and "The Waltz") are simultaneously humorous, put forth a nuanced commentary about the reception of black musical performances, and display the individual member's musicianship.

The second musical analysis chapter centers on the Art Ensemble's 1972 concert recording *Live at Mandel Hall*, which Steinbeck lauds as "perhaps the best Art Ensemble concert ever captured on audiotape" (181). Steinbeck's in-depth analysis and transcriptions of this performance brings to the fore the "contingent nature of improvisation" alongside drawing attention to the thematic relationships within and across the compositions (183). The best example of this analytical approach occurs in Steinbeck's examination of the improvised transition between the opening number "Duffwipels" and Mitchell's modular composition "Checkmate" (192–93). Another noteworthy aspect of this chapter is Steinbeck's inclusion of insights from Famoudou Don Moye about this performance that amplifies the nuances and layers of this recording.

For the final analytical chapter, Steinbeck examines how the Art ensemble merge sonic and visual components in a video recording of a live performance.<sup>5</sup> Recorded in 1981, *Live from the Jazz Showcase* documents a band at the height of their critical popularity with over fifteen years of collective experience performing, recording, and touring together and "makes visible the full range of visual intermedia employed" by the Art Ensemble in concert (235). Steinbeck delves into the ways that the Art Ensemble augment their sound through a "rich visual counterpoint" that includes numerous instruments on stage, the physical gestures and interactions amongst the musicians, and their concert dress (236). Steinbeck's discussion of dress was the only part of the book that fell short, leaving one to wonder if the significance of the Art Ensemble's dress could have been corroborated by a comparative

<sup>4</sup> *A Jackson in Your House*, Art Ensemble of Chicago, BYG/Actuel 529302, 1969, LP; *Live at Mandel Hall*, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Delmark DS-432/433, 1974, LP; *Live from the Jazz Showcase*, Art Ensemble of Chicago (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1982), VHS.

<sup>5</sup> Combining music with visual aspects, in addition to being a core principle of the Art Ensemble, was a recurrent feature of the performance practices of the individuals and groups affiliated with the AACM. For more on this practice and its relationship with wider Black cultural practices, especially within the context of post-war Chicago, please see Naomi Beckwith & Dieter Roelstraete, eds. *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). The art gallery exhibition accompanying this book displayed several artworks and artefacts from the Art Ensemble and prominently used the phrases "art you can hear" and "music you can see" in its marketing campaign. For more see Lindsey Anderson, "Art You Can Hear, Music You Can See," <https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Blog/2015/9/Art-You-Can-Hear-Music-You-Can-See>.

discussion of how the fashion of the Art Ensemble fit within cultural dress practices of the trickster or dandy figure in the Black diaspora.<sup>6</sup>

*Message to Our Folks* is an important volume that expands our understanding of the musical practices and history of one of the leading experimental music groups of the last half of the twentieth century. A major highlight of this book is Steinbeck's musical analyses and the ways he connects the music to the book's wider themes of the Art Ensemble's social practices. Steinbeck bolsters his with the use of primary sources drawn from the personal archives of the Art Ensemble alongside interviews with and personal insights from the Art Ensemble. Steinbeck's integration of these sources into his book supply an additional layer of nuance and can be viewed as part of the recent turn toward the archive in jazz studies.<sup>7</sup> Steinbeck's work also demonstrates the value of a single-subject monograph, especially on artists whose polyvalent musical and social practices cannot be contained within specific critical theories or methodologies. Overall, *Message to Our Folks* will be of interest to general music audiences and interdisciplinary scholars of music, sound, performance, improvisation, and composition.

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*Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870–1929.* By Nicholas Gebhardt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Nicholas Gebhardt's monograph seeks to chart the changes undergone by popular entertainment in the United States between 1870 and 1929 in order to find the moment in which performers shifted the way they thought about themselves and their self-presentation through performance and developed a new relationship with the people who comprised their audience—he theorizes vaudeville as the form that was instrumental in driving this process. Gebhardt's introduction notes the increasingly corporate nature of entertainment in this period and the shifts this brought about in the ways that performers viewed themselves and their position in the entertainment industry. Vaudeville was, he argues, a new kind of entertainment that drove new relationships between managers and performers, and between performers and their audience. Gebhardt quotes the editor of *Harper's Monthly*,

<sup>6</sup> For more on black cultural engagements with fashion and clothing see Monica Miller's, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of the archival turn in jazz studies see Michael Heller, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); and this reviewer's dissertation "Saturn's Ark: The Improvised Archives, Politics, and Performances of Sun Ra," Ph.D. diss., University of Guelph, 2018.