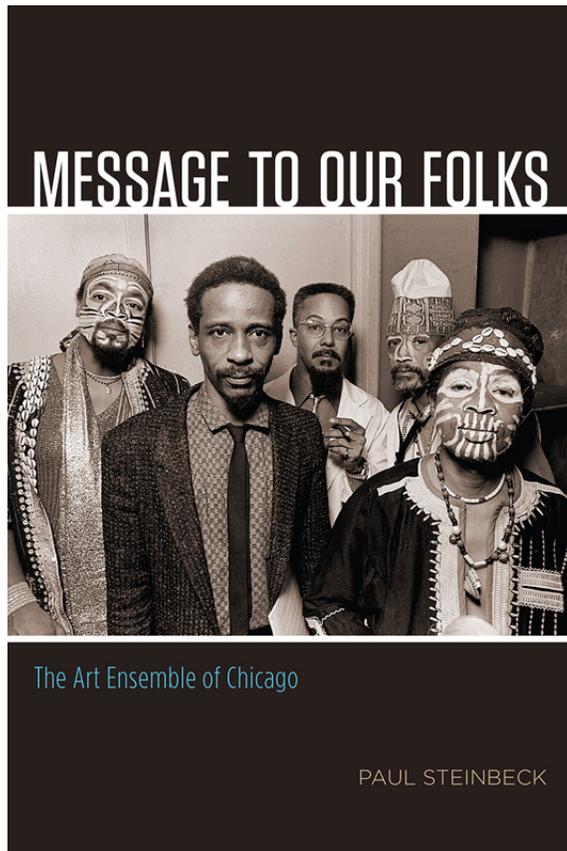




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## Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago by Paul Steinbeck

(University of Chicago Press)



Cover of Message to Our Folks

With its multifaceted radicalism, the Art Ensemble of Chicago occupies a singular niche in the American music timeline. That creative audacity could be found in the array of sounds the band generated, the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of those sounds, the virtuoso instrumentalism of its members, the self-reliant business model by which it operated and the theatrical presentation that defined its performances. Its origin story dates to 1961, when bassist Malachi Favors, then 34, and saxophonists Joseph Jarman, 24, and Roscoe Mitchell, 21, each a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces, met at Woodrow Wilson Junior College on Chicago's South Side. In addition to their music studies under Prof. Richard Wang, who taught the jazz and Euro canons at Wilson in equal measure, they attended frequent rehearsals in the basement of pianist Muhal Richard Abrams' house. There, they developed the instrumental command and imaginative flexibility needed to render Abrams' complex, far-reaching scores—works mixing elements of serial music, atonality, stark intervals, propulsive rhythms and African and other world-music motifs.

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In 1966, the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet, which included Favors and recent Chicago arrival Lester Bowie, recorded *Sound* for the Delmark label. It became a path-breaking document, presenting a structure-oriented alternative to the aesthetic of intensity that defined much “New Thing” expression at the time. In August 1967, that trio joined Jarman—who had already performed with John Cage, and was offering performances around Chicago that incorporated dance, poetry, ritual and Fluxus-influenced theatre—for the discursive Nessa release *Numbers 1&2*, under Bowie’s name. After the deaths of his close friends and bandmates Christopher Gaddy (piano) and Charles Clark (bass) in the late 1960s, Jarman devoted the majority of his time to the now collectively billed group. Local gigs were scarce, and in June 1969 the four partners traveled to France, where, over the next two years, the Art Ensemble of Chicago would add drummer-percussionist Famoudou Don Moye, record 15 albums and perform extensively. Operating by consensual principles, the AEC, now internationally recognized, retained this core personnel until 1993, when Jarman took an extended leave of absence, returning only after Bowie died in 1999.

The AEC’s story could be grist for a creative biopic, but in the meantime, there’s the well-sourced *Message to Our Folks*, in which Paul Steinbeck—an academic who earned his Ph.D. at Columbia under Prof. George Lewis, author of the authoritative AACM history *A Power Stronger Than Itself*—traces this transformative unit’s story in clear prose. Granted access to the AEC’s archives and full cooperation from surviving members Jarman, Mitchell and Moye, he supplements Lewis’ narrative with taut, psychologically perceptive portraits of each AEC protagonist, using their voices to guide the chronology. Three chapters exhaustively analyze the 1969 album *Message to Our Folks*, the 1972 album *Live at Mandel Hall* and the 1982 concert video *Live From the Jazz Showcase*, incorporating information about the AEC’s rehearsal procedures, real-time cuing systems and structural thinking.

All in all, *Message to Our Folks* provides newer admirers with an overview of how the AEC developed and flourished, while longtime followers attuned to the band’s message will find much new information.