

George E. Lewis

A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music

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In this thoroughly researched and well-written text, George E. Lewis tells the story of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the African American artists' collective founded on the South Side of Chicago in 1965 whose "composite output" (ix) has encompassed experimental music, improvisation, concert music, multimedia performance, jazz, computer music, visual art, and other expressive forms. Lewis shows how AACM members have championed "working-class self-help and self-determination" (x), resisted exploitative and culturally essentialist practices in both the popular music industry and the high-culture establishment, and collectively embodied a "mobile, boundary-crossing experimentalism" that "works across genres with fluidity, grace, discernment, and trenchancy" (511). The breadth of Lewis's book is one of its best features. Placing the history of the association "in dialogue with the history of music and the history of ideas" is a central theme of *A Power Stronger Than Itself* (xxviii–xxix), and the reader learns about the AACM in the contexts of African American social history, the postwar avant-garde, the Black Arts Movement, the European free-jazz *Emanzipation*, the 1970s "downtown" New York scene, and the institutional landscape of the late-twentieth-century art world. Lewis's text is also distinguished by the nearly one hundred interviews he conducted with AACM artists and their colleagues, an ethnographic research technique that he describes as a "collaborative mode of writing history" (xxvii). At times *A Power Stronger Than Itself* reads like a family history, and—given the occasionally hermetic social politics of the association—the text could only have been written by an insider like Lewis, who joined the AACM in 1971.¹

The author wishes to acknowledge Harald Kisiedu for his contribution to this review.

¹ In the interest of disclosure, I should mention that I have professional and personal relationships with several AACM members, including Lewis, who was my adviser at Columbia University. Also, the extensive photo-plate section

midway through *A Power Stronger Than Itself* contains a page-long excerpt from a method book for improvisers that I coauthored with AACM saxophonist Fred Anderson (Anderson and Steinbeck 2002, 31).

As a musical and social history, the significance of *A Power Stronger Than Itself* will be apparent to musicologists and cultural-studies scholars, as well as to the nonacademic public of musicians, listeners, and journalists who avidly consume books on jazz and experimental music. The music theory and music analysis community, I believe, can also benefit from a close examination of Lewis's text—a nonobvious claim that I will attempt to justify in the balance of this review.

Music theorists may be disappointed to find that there are no “detailed musical analyses” in *A Power Stronger Than Itself* (xvii), although Lewis's discussion of the 1966 recording sessions that produced Roscoe Mitchell's album *Sound* borders on the analytical (141–43). Lewis explains that the inclusion of a few analytical episodes would have “inappropriately exemplif[ied] the work of particular individuals as emblematic of the AACM as a whole” (xvii).² This stance is consonant with the collective social orientation of the AACM as portrayed in *A Power Stronger Than Itself*—a collectivity both practical and philosophical that has characterized the association's approaches to self-governance, economic organization, and community relations, and that has been audible in AACM performances from the 1960s to the present. “The AACM itself, as an organization,” Lewis writes, “would confound attempts to ground either its genesis or its apotheosis in the work of any single AACM individual” (194). Indeed, the AACM's survival over more than forty years can be attributed to the association's consistent embrace of uncompromising pluralism: “a mobile, heterophonic notion of the possibilities for unity” (214). While Lewis's decision to withhold his analytical perspective from *A Power Stronger Than Itself* is regrettable, enterprising scholars of post-1965 experimental music can consider this omission to be an opportunity.

Some music theorists may perceive a connection between the absence of analyses in Lewis's book and the recent turn away from analysis in certain spheres of interdisciplinary research that intersect with musicology (broadly defined)—namely, jazz studies and improvisation studies.³ In the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars in the United States and abroad began publishing analyses of jazz improvisations and compositions, contributing to a diverse literature that also included biographies, discographies, and other historical research. Early analytical work on jazz and improvisation seems to have been intended primarily to bolster the case for an African American music—alternately apprehended as earthy and experimental—as a legitimate subject for academic inquiry, for instance, Gunther Schuller's valorization of “thematic and structural unity” in his well-known analysis of a quartet performance by Sonny Rollins (1958, 6). Later generations of jazz analysts, emboldened by the

² There is also a pragmatic explanation for the absence of analyses in *A Power Stronger Than Itself*. Lewis's book is quite long, and adding analytical sections (plus scores and transcriptions) would have made it even longer.

³ Lewis situates *A Power Stronger Than Itself* in the fields of jazz studies and improvisation studies, as well as experimental music history and African American music history (ix–xvi).

growing acceptance of jazz in the academy after the 1960s, sought to bring jazz scholarship closer to mainstream music theory by using orthodox theoretical tools such as motivic analysis, Schenkerian analysis, and set theory to analyze jazz performances.⁴ By the late 1990s, however, music-analytical work on jazz and improvisation seemed to fade with the advent of the “new jazz studies,” an interdisciplinary field blending cultural studies, English literature, American studies, performance studies, visual art studies, and musicology.⁵ Perhaps new-jazz-studies musicologists thought that the technical vocabulary and reliance on music notation that typify much music-analytical writing would inhibit cross-disciplinary exchange with nonmusicologists. Undoubtedly, many jazz scholars writing from multiple disciplinary perspectives felt that a number of previously neglected topics surrounding jazz music demanded their attention (beyond the “old” jazz-studies preoccupations of ii–V–I chord progressions and “who played with whom”)—from class, gender, and race to the failure of most twentieth-century researchers to regard improvising musicians (particularly African Americans) “as intellectuals in the world not as mere vessels of . . . cultural transmission,” in Robin Kelley’s memorable formulation (1997, 16).

The field of new jazz studies is closely connected to the emerging improvisation-studies field, another interdisciplinary research area that shares with the new jazz studies a historical bent as well as a commitment to framing research questions in ways that integrate and critically interrogate musicians’ perspectives. Music analysis is, of course, largely absent from improvisation studies. In the present interdisciplinary environment, conventional music-analytical research is orthogonal, at best, to the fundamental concerns of the new jazz studies and improvisation studies. The foregrounding of practitioners’ perspectives in current improvisation research, moreover, has emphasized by contrast the methodological conservatism of diehard jazz theorists: despite the proven utility of Schenkerian analysis and mathematical music theory in the analysis of certain Western art music styles, these theoretical models have little to do with how jazz musicians and improvisers actually make music. Still, the increasing detachment of music theory and music analysis from research on jazz and improvisation should be understood as a mutual intellectual impoverishing of both sides of the disciplinary divide. If the new jazz

4 In addition to Schuller, Michael Cogswell (1994–95), Barry Kernfeld (1983), Clifford Korman (1999), Thomas Owens (1974), Frank Tirro (1974), and many others have written motivic analyses of jazz performances. The primary exponents of Schenkerian jazz analysis are Steve Larson (1999, 2003, 2005) and Henry Martin (1996, 2006); their predecessor Milton Stewart (1974–75) must also be mentioned. Finally, Steven Block (1990, 1993, 1997), James Kurzdorfer (1996), Jeff Pressing (1982), Matthew Santa (2003), and Keith Waters (2005) have applied Forteian set theory to jazz improvisations. Recently, two music theorists—Karim

Al-Zand (2005) and Robert Hodson (2007)—have published in-depth analyses of mainstream jazz performances that are not overly reliant on any of the theoretical apparatuses listed above. In this context, the work of Ekkehard Jost (1994) stands out: his analytical writings on “free jazz” are adventurous in repertoire choice as well as in methodological diversity.

5 Robert O’Meally, Brent Edwards, and Farah Griffin gave this field a name with the subtitle of their edited volume *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (2004).

studies and improvisation studies have helped convince some music theorists of the vitality and importance of research situated “among the discourses,” to quote Krin Gabbard (1995), it falls to those music theorists to actively reengage with contemporary improvisation research by creating innovative music-analytical paradigms that are informed by historical inquiry, musicians’ perspectives, interdisciplinary scholarship, and actual improvisatory practice.

More than any other recent new-jazz-studies or improvisation-studies monograph, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* draws clear connections between the collective history and aesthetics of a community of improvisers and the musical procedures they have employed. As such, Lewis’s book has the potential to inspire music theorists to take a closer look at the work of AACM musicians and other experimentalists, contemporary composers, jazz practitioners, improvisers, and multimedia artists—and thereby strengthen the link between music theory and the robust disciplinary intersection around the subject of improvisation.

The first two chapters of *A Power Stronger Than Itself* function as prehistories of the AACM and of postwar experimentalism on the East Coast. Chapter 1 explores the shared identity of AACM cofounders Muhal Richard Abrams, Jodie Christian, Phil Cohran, and Steve McCall (plus other early members of the association) as “sons of the Great Migration,” the mass exodus that brought several million African Americans from the South to the urban North during the first half of the twentieth century (223). Lewis also examines the sites of musical learning on Chicago’s South Side—churches, drum-and-bugle corps, family gatherings, nightclubs, schools, social clubs, and theaters—and shows how these African American community institutions contributed to an endogenous autodidactic tradition that decisively shaped future AACM experimentalisms. In the second chapter, Lewis looks eastward, detailing instances of racial integration on the postwar New York experimental art scene (which have tended to disappear in histories of the period) and contrasting the integrated, bohemian East Coast art world with the contemporaneous “hypersegregat[ed],” working-class milieu on the South Side of Chicago—an alternative social “model for the emergence of new music” (xxxviii).

In Chapter 3, Lewis chronicles the early-1960s founding of a workshop ensemble (led by Abrams and others and later known as the “Experimental Band”) that enabled young and established musicians alike to explore new compositional ideas, free from commercial pressures and the demands of their regular gigs. Lewis also discusses Abrams’s devotion to Joseph Schillinger’s algorithmic compositional system—an important historical datum that should factor in any analyses of Abrams’s compositions and performances, or the work of the many musicians (from John Stubblefield to Jason Moran) for whom Abrams served as a composition teacher. Chapters 4 and 5 cover the founding of the AACM, the association’s first concerts and recordings, Joseph Jarman’s 1965 collaboration with John Cage, and the multimedia events staged by Jarman and Roscoe Mitchell. Here Lewis cites the

“conduction” techniques that Abrams developed for conducting improvisatory performances by the Experimental Band (135).⁶ This performance-directing methodology seems to have predated Lawrence “Butch” Morris’s celebrated conduction system by at least a decade and continues to be employed by various AACM members such as Mwata Bowden, director of the intergenerational Great Black Music Ensemble. Near the end of chapter 5, Lewis explains how AACM understandings of performance and composition departed from their received meanings in the domains of jazz and concert music, despite the importance AACM artists placed on composing “original music” and claiming the historically privileged composer title for themselves. In many early AACM performances, according to Lewis, “the predominance of personal virtuosity as the measure of musicality is removed, and . . . individual style is radically devalued in favor of a collective conception that foregrounds form, space, and sonic multiplicity” (155).

Lewis’s ethnography-informed accounts of AACM compositional methods and performance practices have multiple implications for music analysis. At a minimum, music theorists engaged in analyzing an AACM performance should attempt to (1) determine with maximum precision the nature of the compositional, conduction, or additional performance-directing information that the performers are drawing on, and ascertain the relationship (if any) of this model to other known compositional procedures, musical idioms, and multimedia forms; (2) personally interview the musicians when possible, to investigate their perspectives on the performance being analyzed and to uncover information about their musical and intellectual development that could be utilized analytically; and (3) notate all of the performers’ contributions when transcribing a passage instead of just the notes played by individual soloists, so as to reflect the “collective conception” and “multiplicit[ous]” nature of many AACM performances. By modifying their analytical approaches, music theorists and other scholars working on the music of the AACM can construct new methodologies that are as “boundary-crossing” and experimental as the performances being studied (511).⁷

Chapters 6 and 7 of *A Power Stronger Than Itself* trace the emergence of a “postmodern sensibility” in the multigenre, multimedia experimentalisms of AACM musicians (193). This postmodern ethos was heralded by the “fragmentation and collage strategies” employed in the late-1960s compositions

6 In a “conduction” performance, a conductor guides an ensemble of improvisers using a system of hand signals and other physical gestures to initiate changes in musical parameters. For example, a conductor might slowly raise his hand to direct a saxophonist to play a drawn-out, ascending glissando, or he might close his hand into a fist to tell a section of trumpeters to fall silent. Some conduction pieces draw on scores and predetermined compositional elements; others are created spontaneously by the conductor and the improvising ensemble with which he interacts.

7 A few music theorists have devised new analytical methodologies for the study of recorded performances by AACM artists—chiefly, the Art Ensemble of Chicago. See Borgo 2005, 110–13; Kiroff 1997; Pfeleiderer 1997; Steinbeck 2008a, 2008b. A brief analysis of Anthony Braxton’s composition “489M . . .” appears in Block 1990, 193–94.

and improvisations of Roscoe Mitchell's band with Malachi Favors and Lester Bowie, which grew into the Art Ensemble of Chicago, perhaps the most influential and widely respected AACM group (195). The Art Ensemble's distinctive performance practice contributed to their strongly positive reception by French listeners and critics when they and several other members of the association relocated to Paris in 1969, introducing the AACM to a "global audience," in the words of Bowie (217). During the Art Ensemble's two years in Western Europe and for the next four decades, the group "radically exemplified the collective conception of the AACM as a whole" by adopting a consensus-based decision-making paradigm (in their performances as well as in their organizational and business strategies) that drew strength from the considerable aesthetic, methodological, and ideological diversity among the members of the band (227). Lewis's metaphorical descriptions of the dynamics of collectivity evident in the work of the Art Ensemble and in the AACM generally—"commonality in multiplicity and individuality within the aggregate" (511)—suggest that in many AACM performances a few identifiable core musical processes persist among and coexist with an array of surface expressions.⁸ Music theorists can build on Lewis's insight by designing particularistic analytical techniques specifically for one ensemble (an AACM group or otherwise) that capture the elemental phenomena present across that ensemble's performances as well as the unique characteristics exhibited in discrete performances. One promising site for analytical and theoretical investigation is "Ahkreation," the compositional philosophy and graphic-notation system that AACM trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith developed for scoring improvisational performance in fundamental units of rhythm, sound, and silence.

In chapters 8 and 9, Lewis chronicles the AACM "invasion" of New York in the 1970s (325). The first-generation AACM members who left Chicago for New York encountered an art world in flux, where "the border between 'experimental jazz' and 'contemporary music' was routinely being crossed in the 'downtown' environment," as Lewis reports (331). Additionally, AACM artists' newfound proximity to the East Coast network of arts presenters and major funding organizations helped members of the association "and other black experimentalist composers . . . receive limited exposure in some of the same venues, and support from some of the same sources, as white experimental composers" (383). During this period, AACM composers explored hybrid methodologies, including "electronics and computers, graphic scores and traditionally notated works (with or without improvisation)" (354), collaborated with contemporary-music figures such as Musica Elettronica Viva, and "articulated a definitional shift away from rigidly defined and racialized notions of

⁸ The phrase "individuality within the aggregate" originated with Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. See Floyd 1995, 228.

lineage and tradition, toward a more fluid, dialogic relationship with a variety of musical practices” (343). The 1970s compositions and performances of Abrams, Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, and Lewis himself certainly merit closer attention from researchers; an analysis of Mitchell’s percussion-octet composition “The Maze” (1979), for instance, would be a welcome intervention in the existing literature on twentieth-century percussion music and experimental instrumentation.

The final three chapters of *A Power Stronger Than Itself* concern the activities of the AACM since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Chicago and New York branches of the association began operating independently. While the creative efforts of most New York-based AACM composers/improvisers were overshadowed by Wynton Marsalis and his Jazz at Lincoln Center cultural juggernaut, Chicago-based members of the AACM were increasingly perceived as globally esteemed hometown heroes, a rather remarkable achievement for an association of experimental musicians dedicated to creative expression and self-determination, as a collective and as individual artists. As Lewis writes in summation, “After . . . forty years of a living AACM presence, the significance of what these new musicians have done up to now, as well as what they might create in the future, is only now beginning to be understood” (511). This incipient understanding of the AACM’s experimentalisms cannot but be expanded by incisive music-analytical work contributed by the music theory community.

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