

The Art Ensemble of Chicago's 'Get in Line': Politics, Theatre, and Play

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Abstract

The music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago was often considered to be politically oriented, and many of their performances addressed controversial political issues. However, these political moments were counter-balanced by public pronouncements in which the members of the group denied that their music was motivated by politics. I interrogate this seeming contradiction by analysing the Art Ensemble's 'Get in Line', a musical-theatrical piece from their 1969 album *A Jackson in Your House*. 'Get in Line' critiques Vietnam-era militarism and racism, and simultaneously proposes that African Americans respond to these issues in politically unconventional, oppositional, even playful ways. In so doing, 'Get in Line' challenges essentialist views of black experimental music and shows how the Art Ensemble – like their colleagues in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) – prioritized pluralism and individual agency over orthodoxy, whether in politics or in aesthetics.

We were doing four nights at the Public Theater. Load-in would be at one o'clock, soundcheck would be at three o'clock, and around 1.30 I got a call from Lester [Bowie]. This was around the time the Ayatollah took over in Iran. He said, 'We need you to get something in time for the soundcheck [...] I need an official New York Mets uniform, I need a midget dressed up as the Ayatollah, I need two shotguns, ten bags of confetti, and fifty firecrackers.' I said, 'Lester – listen, man, I've got an hour and a half before soundcheck, how am I going to get all this stuff?' He said, 'No man, you can do it! You can do it.' So I called the Public Theater and said, 'What are the rules about shooting off firecrackers and shotguns in the Public Theater?' And the guy said, 'Oh no, it's completely against the rules. The Fire Department will close us down.' So I called Lester and said, 'Can't do it, man, the Fire Department will close us down.' He said, 'OK, never mind.' Who knew what conversation was leading to this? I assumed that at some point during the performance, a midget was going to run across the stage dressed as the Ayatollah, two guys were going to pull out the shotguns and fire, they were going to set off the firecrackers, and bags of confetti were going to fall from the ceiling. What the New York Mets uniform was for, I'm not sure. Maybe Lester just needed it for his kid.¹

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1 Marty Khan, telephone interview by the author (17 October 2006, Tucson, AZ, private tape recording).

The music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago was often considered to be politically oriented, for understandable reasons.² The band emerged from the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a Chicago-based African-American artists' collective that was deeply committed not just to musical innovation, but also to community activism and social transformation, as were several other musicians' organizations founded during the nationwide Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s.³ Additionally, many of the Art Ensemble's performances included compositions or theatrical sketches that addressed controversial political issues, both domestic and international. During a concert at the Harper Theater in Chicago around 1967, one musician danced across the stage with a life-size Raggedy Ann doll while another member of the group 'trail[ed] after them with a shotgun', in a parody of societal anxieties about integration and interracial romance.⁴ The Malachi Favors piece 'Immm', performed at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, alerted the audience to the dangers of air pollution:⁵ 'The air you is a-killing me; I can't feed my children in the sea; and the flowers, they cry all day.'⁶ And of course there are countless stories, such as the above anecdote told by former Art Ensemble manager Marty Khan, about the group's penchant for using absurd humour to create new forms of political critique.

However, all the political content in the Art Ensemble's music seems to be counter-balanced by public pronouncements in which the members of the band expressly denied that their work was motivated by political convictions. In a 1971 interview with John Litweiler, Joseph Jarman explained that 'I used to be into the Student Peace Union, that kind of thing, during [college]. I've always been interested in politics, but now I'm more toward the left in a nationalistic way, black nationalism. But we, the Art Ensemble, we're not about politics.'⁷ Some years later, Lester Bowie reaffirmed this distinction between individual political beliefs and the group's ostensibly apolitical stance, while offering a broad theorization of why the Art Ensemble's music was perceived as political, particularly during their European sojourn from 1969 to 1971:

The music is universal, our politics is the politics of the planet. [...] Our politics transcends religions, race and language, so we're dealing in another area. They all made it look like that, if you were black, you were political. That's all they would ask you about, you were put into it. Some cats like it, Joseph Jarman was a little speechmaker anyway, he likes that kind of stuff, so he would do it. Everyone in the Art Ensemble has the right to do whatever they want to do.⁸

2 As one review of a June 1969 Art Ensemble concert in Paris stated: 'Parler des musiciens de Chicago, c'est toujours employer les mêmes expressions: *black music*, *black power*, *agression*, *happening politique et musical*' (Alessandrini, 'Jazz on the Grass', 9).

3 The definitive history of the AACM is Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*.

4 John Litweiler, interviewed by the author (21 February 2006, Chicago, private tape recording). Significantly, 1967 was the year of the Supreme Court's unanimous decision for the plaintiffs in the case of *Loving v. Virginia* (388 U.S. 1).

5 See Malachi Favors's remarks in Rusch and Ryan, 'Malachi Favors', 14.

6 'Immm' can be heard on the Art Ensemble of Chicago's LP *Bap-tizum*.

7 Joseph Jarman, quoted in Litweiler, 'There Won't Be Any More Music', 23.

8 Lester Bowie, quoted in Coppens and Lagerwerff, 'Lester Bowie', 14.

Like most of Bowie's provocative utterances, this quotation demands to be unpacked. Bowie begins by attempting to distance the Art Ensemble's performances from politics, including any sectarian or nationalist ideology that cannot be reconciled with 'universal' principles. Next, he contrasts the band's aesthetic aims with their reception, claiming that critics and audiences consistently and wilfully misinterpreted the Art Ensemble's work, because of how they looked or what their political views were expected to be as African-American artists. Finally, he acknowledges that one of his bandmates could be outspoken, but then explains that Jarman's politics are his own, and not the Art Ensemble's. Or, to paraphrase:

We aren't a bunch of political activists.

If you think we are, you're mistaken.

And if anything about our performances seems political, it was Jarman's idea, not mine.

Bowie's statement, intriguing as it already is, becomes even more fascinating if it is read alongside an actual Art Ensemble performance from the time period to which he refers. For instance, 'Get in Line' – which appeared on the band's 1969 LP *A Jackson in Your House* – appears to contradict almost all of Bowie's words.⁹ 'Get in Line' progresses through a series of musical styles and sonic structures that could represent the military or the experience of war (see Figure 1). To listeners in late 1960s Chicago, where the piece was composed, or in 1969 Paris, where the recording session took place, these sounds would evoke the Vietnam conflict, certainly the most divisive geopolitical issue in both the United States and France, not to mention Southeast Asia.¹⁰ Furthermore, 'Get in Line' also includes a theatrical 'script', made up of verbal texts and vocal sounds, that depicts the US Army as thoroughly afflicted by an institutional racism that causes harms within both American society and the international arena. This portrayal of the military would undoubtedly register as a political critique, especially for Americans who followed the public debate about Muhammad Ali's induction, or for French listeners who sympathized with 'third-worldist' accounts of Vietnam as an imperialist incursion by Northern powers on a Southern nation.¹¹

The apparent inconsistency between 'Get in Line' and Bowie's remarks about politics and the Art Ensemble points to another way in which to understand the piece. In this article, I place Bowie's words in dialogue with the musical and theatrical content of the performance, in particular a dramatic conflict between two characters, played respectively by Joseph Jarman

9 Elsewhere I analyse the title track from *A Jackson in Your House*, showing how the members of the group comment on the history of jazz and articulate a number of cultural critiques regarding the social politics of race, the performer–audience relationship, and the reception of black experimental music (see Steinbeck, 'Intermusicality, Humor, and Cultural Critique').

10 According to Roscoe Mitchell, 'Get in Line' and the other titles on *A Jackson in Your House* were 'written before departing to Europe in 1969. Likely 67 and 68.' Roscoe Mitchell, email to author (15 September 2007).

11 For more on the "'third-worldist' analysis of global politics' and its significance in French culture after May 1968, see Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 8–11.

| | |
|---------------------|-------------|
| march music | 0'00"–0'35" |
| intensity structure | 0'35"–4'19" |
| percussion texture | 4'19"–5'47" |

Figure 1 'Get in Line' formal diagram.

and Roscoe Mitchell. What results is an analysis that alternates between musical and theatrical frames of reference.¹²

This analysis will lead to three interrelated conclusions, each of which maps onto one of Bowie's contentions. First, 'Get in Line' is not an apolitical work, nor is it political in the ordinary sense (party activism, policy advocacy, etc.). The musical and theatrical layers of the piece form an intermedia narrative that critiques militarism and racism, while demonstrating how African Americans can respond to these issues in a politically unconventional way. Second, the Art Ensemble's political critique strategically departs from the rhetorics of Vietnam-era protest songs and contemporaneous black experimental musics, such as free jazz. In this respect 'Get in Line' also functions as a cultural critique that allows the group to navigate and even reshape the distinct reception environments they encountered in the United States and abroad. Third, the performance contains an additional meta-narrative about the social practice of pluralism, which dramatizes the diverse aesthetic and political viewpoints among the members of the Art Ensemble as well as within the broader African-American community. This is consistent with the Art Ensemble's philosophy, inherited from the AACM, which valued multiplicity and individual agency over allegiance to an orthodox agenda, whether in politics or in music.

Analysis: 'the fight inside'¹³

'Get in Line' begins with a two-note ostinato played by Malachi Favors on the double bass (see Example 1). This ostinato is based on the preceding track – the title track of the album, 'A Jackson in Your House' – and the immediate impression is that 'Jackson' has returned at a rather manic tempo. Four bars later the rest of the band enters: Roscoe Mitchell, the composer of 'Get in Line', plays a blistering chromatic melody on alto saxophone, which is doubled by Lester Bowie on trumpet; Joseph Jarman, also playing alto saxophone, starts with a slower counter-melody and then joins Mitchell and Bowie for the final two bars of the phrase (see Example 2). Considered together, the upper-register melody, the simultaneous counter-melody, and the 'oom-pah' bass line implies that 'Get in Line' is a march, somewhat reminiscent of the angular, stylized marches that permeate the twentieth-century modernist

¹² Another persuasive (if brief) analysis of 'Get in Line', politics, and text-music relationships can be found in Jost, *Sozialgeschichte des Jazz in den USA*, 193.

¹³ Jarman, *Black Case Volume I & II: Return from Exile*, 68.



The musical score consists of eight staves. The first four staves (LB, RM, JJ, MF) represent the first system, and the next four (LB, RM, JJ, MF) represent the second system. The JJ staff in both systems contains the text: "Left! Right! Left! Right! Left! Right! Left! Right!". The notation includes various rhythmic figures, including triplets and accents, and rests.

Example 3 *Continued*

The second theme statement ends abruptly, with all the performers playing a three-note figure in a cleanly articulated *one-and-two* rhythm. Like the 'stinger' accents heard at the end of many marches, this gesture provides musical closure as well as a vivid visual image of marching soldiers coming to a halt, *left-right-left*. However, the sense of resolution achieved by the Art Ensemble proves to be short-lived.

After two seconds of silence the musicians launch into an extraordinarily brief group improvisation, lasting only as long as it takes Bowie, Jarman, and Mitchell to release a single breath through their instruments (see Example 4). Another silent moment leads to more 'short subjects'; then the process repeats again.¹⁷ Some of these improvised fragments draw on the idiomatic march rhythms from the previous section, but because Favors has abandoned his 'oom-pah' ostinato, they never coalesce into a proper march. Instead, all four musicians play independent melodic lines, while staggering their phrasing and breathing to

¹⁷ I am indebted to AACM composer Mwata Bowden for the term 'short subjects' as a description of miniature, episodic improvisations lasting a few seconds or less.

create the impression of a continuous sonic texture. The members of the Art Ensemble are getting *out of line*, theatrically speaking. In musical terms, they are gradually progressing towards an improvisation style that they would describe as an 'intensity' structure – complex, dense, and highly energetic.¹⁸ Or, to quote the poetic formulation offered by Jarman in the album liner notes, the former servicemen are 'marching through the intense flood of the military world that surrounds us'.¹⁹

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Short subjects" starting at [0:35]. It consists of four staves, each with a different instrument and a specific notation style:

- LB (trumpet):** Treble clef, three triangles on the staff. Labels: "short subjects" and "short subjects".
- RM (alto saxophone):** Treble clef, three triangles on the staff. Labels: "short subjects" and "more continuous".
- JJ (alto saxophone):** Treble clef, two triangles on the staff. Labels: "short subjects" and "more continuous".
- MF (bass):** Bass clef, three triangles on the staff. Labels: "short subjects" and "more continuous".

Example 4 Short subjects, assembling the intensity structure. The triangles are graphic notation symbols used by AACM composers to mean 'improvise(d)'.

The intensity structure that is materializing at this point in the performance contrasts strikingly with the opening march music, a dynamic that can best be illustrated with a brief conceptual exercise.²⁰ Military marches, like the precision drills that they accompany, are defined by a few key characteristics. They possess rhythmic *regularity*: a steady, uninterrupted metre and a narrowly circumscribed range of tempos, optimized for walking or running. They are *stratified*, with instrumental groups performing specific and non-overlapping functions (for instance, the bass and percussion instruments that imitate the footfalls of marching infantry). And, finally, they are *coordinated*, with strict style norms that mirror the command structure and meticulous protocol governing every aspect of military routine, from training activities and daily life on base to actual combat. This careful scheme is overturned when the members of the Art Ensemble approach the intensity structure. Suddenly there is no regular metre or tempo; each musician determines his own pacing independently of the others. They also shift from register to register, and from one timbre to another,

18 For more on intensity structures in the Art Ensemble's music, see Steinbeck, "'Area by Area the Machine Unfolds'", 414–15.

19 'En marche dans le flot intense du monde militaire qui nous encerle' (Joseph Jarman, liner notes to *A Jackson in Your House*).

20 See Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music*, 63–95, for an in-depth theorization of cross-domain mapping, conceptual blending, and conceptual-integration networks.

with impressive speed, replacing stratification and top-down coordination with a non-hierarchical structure that is 'extremely dense, fast-moving, [and] ultimately static', as George E. Lewis phrased it.²¹ If, during the two theme statements, the performers were marching or otherwise moving in formation, the music now conveys that their ranks have been broken, and that the Art Ensemble soldiers are operating in a chaotic, unpredictable environment – like the fields and forests of Vietnam. Jarman responds by putting down his saxophone and shouting at the men under his command, in an attempt to gain control of a rapidly deteriorating situation (see Example 5).

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: LB (trumpet), RM (alto saxophone), JJ (alto saxophone), and MF (bass). Each instrument's part is represented by a staff with a treble or bass clef and a triangle symbol. The LB staff has the label 'trumpet' and 'police whistle, shouts'. The RM staff has the label 'alto saxophone' and '"intensity"'. The JJ staff has the label 'alto saxophone' and '"Said get in line, n----- n-----!"' and '"Get in line!"'. The MF staff has the label 'bass' and '"intensity"'. A time signature of [1:40] is present. Arrows indicate interactive relationships: one from RM to LB, one from JJ to LB, and one from JJ to MF.

Example 5 Intensity structure, Mitchell solo. The arrows denote an audible interactive relationship.

Jarman's latest verbal eruption seems to be triggered by developments in the music, specifically Mitchell's increasing prominence at the front and centre of the texture. For this reason Mitchell's saxophone playing does not have to be heard as an improvised 'solo' that contributes only to the musical layer of the performance. Instead it would be more accurate to analyse this moment in theatrical terms. Here, Mitchell emerges as a distinct *character* who provides a dramatic foil to Jarman's officer persona. Furthermore, one can regard Favors and Bowie's instrumental sounds, siren noises, and police whistles as sonic backdrops that establish a theatrical change of scene, and set the stage for the mounting conflict between the characters played by Jarman and Mitchell.

In another effective dramatic touch, the performers decide to let the exact nature of the dispute remain ambiguous. Mitchell could be protesting against the dehumanizing conduct of his superior, or expressing solidarity with other soldiers so treated. Another interpretative possibility draws on a story that Jarman related to me about his combat experiences as a paratrooper in the US Army, 11th Airborne Division.²² In the mid-1950s, Jarman and his

²¹ Lewis, 'Singing Omar's Song', 76.

²² Jarman contributed theatrical and political content to the other tracks on *A Jackson in Your House*, and it is reasonable to conclude that he helped shape the central dramatic conflict of 'Get in Line'. See Steinbeck, 'Intermusicality, Humor, and Cultural Critique', 137.

fellows Pathfinders were deployed in Southeast Asia, where they conducted secret operations prior to official American involvement in Vietnam. On one nightmarish occasion Jarman's platoon was dropped near a Vietnamese village suspected of being a Communist hideout. Eighteen paratroopers were killed in the landing, but Jarman and eleven others survived, and they were ordered to destroy the village. The incident was incredibly traumatic for Jarman, and not just because of the leg wound he sustained while retreating. He was subsequently unable to continue in a combat role.²³ As he told Jamil Figi, 'I had to get out of the line.'²⁴ Jarman requested a transfer to the division's concert band, and he spent the remainder of his enlistment playing the saxophone in Augsburg, West Germany, an assignment vastly preferable to dangerous paratrooper jumps.²⁵ With this personal history in mind, Mitchell's performance can be interpreted as a conscientious soldier rebelling against unlawful orders. Jarman himself might hear an echo of his own escape from Vietnam, saxophone in hand.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: LB (trumpet), RM (alto saxophone), JJ (alto saxophone), and MF (bass). The score is divided into four staves. The trumpet staff (LB) has a measure marked [2:13] with notes G4, A4, and Bb4. The alto saxophone staff (RM) has a measure with a note G4 and a dynamic marking 'intensity'. The alto saxophone staff (JJ) has a measure with the text 'Get in line! That's soldiering!' and a dynamic marking 'intensity'. The bass staff (MF) has a measure with a dynamic marking 'intensity'. A large triangle is placed above the trumpet staff, and another large triangle is placed above the JJ staff. A line connects the Bb4 note in the trumpet staff to the second triangle in the JJ staff. The word 'out' is written at the end of the RM staff.

Example 6 Intensity structure, transition.

Thirty seconds into Mitchell's 'solo', the members of the Art Ensemble create another musical-verbal exchange that reinforces this character-based analysis of 'Get in Line' (see Example 6). Jarman calls out the soldier once more, and now Bowie reacts, playing a cadence gesture on trumpet. His bandmates answer immediately, as they often do in response to what George E. Lewis called his 'brass witnessing' and 'signifying punditry'.²⁶ Mitchell drops out, and Jarman re-enters on saxophone, transforming his verbal assault into an energetic instrumental monologue.

²³ Joseph Jarman, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Joseph Jarman, quoted in Figi, 'Art Ensemble of Chicago', 44.

²⁵ Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, 65.

²⁶ Lewis, 'Singing Omar's Song', 76.

During the opening stage of Jarman's saxophone performance Mitchell rests. Then, as Jarman's lines increase in volume, timbral complexity, and other markers of 'intensity', Mitchell returns with a handheld bicycle horn, playing a series of beeps and bleats that imitate Bowie's trumpet exclamations.²⁷ A few more soldiers, it seems, have joined the rebellion. The dramatic conflict culminates about half a minute into the passage (see Example 7). Mitchell shapes his bicycle-horn chatter into a steady rhythmic pulse, which sounds like an alarm or emergency signal cutting through the dense texture generated by the other musicians. Shortly thereafter, Jarman reaches the peak of his saxophone improvisation, and Mitchell answers – not with a bicycle horn, but with his voice: 'Yah – yah, yah!'

The image shows a musical score with four staves labeled LB, RM, JJ, and MF. Each staff has a triangle symbol above it, indicating intensity. The LB staff is labeled 'trumpet'. The RM staff is labeled 'bicycle horn' and shows a sequence of notes with an 'accel.' marking and the vocal cry 'Yah = yah, yah!' at [2:46]. The JJ staff is labeled 'alto saxophone' and has 'intensity' written below it. The MF staff is labeled 'bass' and has 'intensity' written below it. An arrow points from the 'intensity' label on the JJ staff to the 'Yah = yah, yah!' text on the RM staff.

Example 7 Intensity structure, Jarman solo.

Mitchell's vocal cries have two important consequences for this analysis. The first stems from how they illustrate the continuity between verbal texts, vocal sounds, and instrumental music in 'Get in Line', as well as other theatrical pieces performed by the Art Ensemble. The interchangeability of these sounds greatly expands the group's compositional and improvisational resources, while adding depth to characters and dramatic scenarios. The second analytical consequence of Mitchell's 'yah, yahs' hinges on how their semiotic meaning is interpreted. Mitchell could be shouting encouragement to his bandmates, catalyzing Bowie, Favors, and Jarman at an exciting musical moment. Alternatively, Mitchell's cries might carry some dramatic weight, as rejoinders to the commanding officer or as expressions of a soldier's anguish and distress during combat. Any dramatic interpretation, however persuasive, must nonetheless take into account the clearly comical tone that Mitchell adopts during this section of the piece. Here Mitchell's performance registers not as genuine defiance or distress, but as a purely *ludic* response that foregrounds the subjectivity of black soldiers.

²⁷ For a discussion of how musical sounds can convey intensity, climax, and tension, see Steinbeck, 'Urban Magic', 149–50.

This is trickster logic, a kind of 'meta-play' intended to be 'disruptive of settled expectations', in the words of Brian Sutton-Smith.²⁸ Mitchell's ludic response is a critique of the asymmetrical power relationship between the officer and the soldier, and simultaneously a creative, improvisatory move that establishes a 'place where the "writ does not run"', where military protocol does not apply.²⁹ The put-upon soldier realizes that he cannot beat the officer at the officer's game – so he creates a new game, a new ludic space with himself (and his agency) at the centre, and the abusive officer at the periphery. This kind of 'subversive play' – according to bell hooks, whose theory of the ludic resonates with Sutton-Smith's – is characteristic of artworks informed by 'radical black subjectivity'.³⁰ '[I]t seems to me a practical gesture', hooks observed, 'to shift the scene of action if in fact the location of one's political practice does not enable change.'³¹

Mitchell's ludic response is one of the primary factors distinguishing 'Get in Line' from many 1960s anti-war compositions, which tended to employ various combinations of mobilizing rhetoric, earnest pleading, and world-weary cynicism.³² In contrast, the members of the Art Ensemble are articulating what Aldon Nielsen called 'the dada of the black experimentalist', a declaration that if the American "power structure" [...] is reasonable, then we prefer not to be reasonable'.³³ This very conviction is at the core of Jarman's poem and artistic manifesto 'AS BLACK/AND WILD AS IT CAN BE-', which reads in part:

LEAVE
 the war to those who NEED that

 WE MEAN TO DANCE AND SHOUT
 TO HOLLER like damn mad fools
 (some will say)³⁴

In the wake of Mitchell's ludic moment, Jarman leaves the 'stage', so to speak, and Bowie's trumpet becomes the temporary focal point of 'Get in Line' (see Example 8). The musical texture is noticeably less dense than when the saxophonists were playing – not because Favors's vigorous bass lines are slowing down, which they are not, but on account of Bowie's sparse phrasing.³⁵ Mitchell and Jarman soon return, though, playing some of the Art Ensemble's characteristic 'little instruments': a train whistle and a ratchet, then rattles and a slide whistle.³⁶

28 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 147–8.

29 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 212.

30 hooks, *Yearning*, 22.

31 hooks, *Yearning*, 20.

32 See the well-known analysis of Vietnam-era protest songs in Rosenstone, 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', 135–6.

33 Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 244.

34 Jarman, *Black Case Volume I & II*, 93.

35 Art Ensemble intensity structures 'usually involved the saxophones as primary participants' (Lewis, 'Singing Omar's Song', 76).

36 For more on the role of 'little instruments' in Art Ensemble performance practice, see Steinbeck, 'Urban Magic', 74–7, and Steinbeck, 'Intermusicality, Humor, and Cultural Critique', 137–8.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: LB (trumpet), RM (saxophone), JJ (saxophone), and MF (bass). The score is divided into two sections by time markers [3:07] and [3:23].

- LB (trumpet):** Features a triangle symbol above the staff. Below the staff, the text "short subjects" is written between [3:07] and [3:23], and "Ow!" is written after [3:23].
- RM (saxophone):** Features the text "out" at [3:07], "train whistle" between [3:07] and [3:23], and "rattles" after [3:23].
- JJ (saxophone):** Features the text "out" at [3:07], "ratchet" between [3:07] and [3:23], and "slide whistle" after [3:23].
- MF (bass):** Features a triangle symbol above the staff and the text "intensity" below the staff.

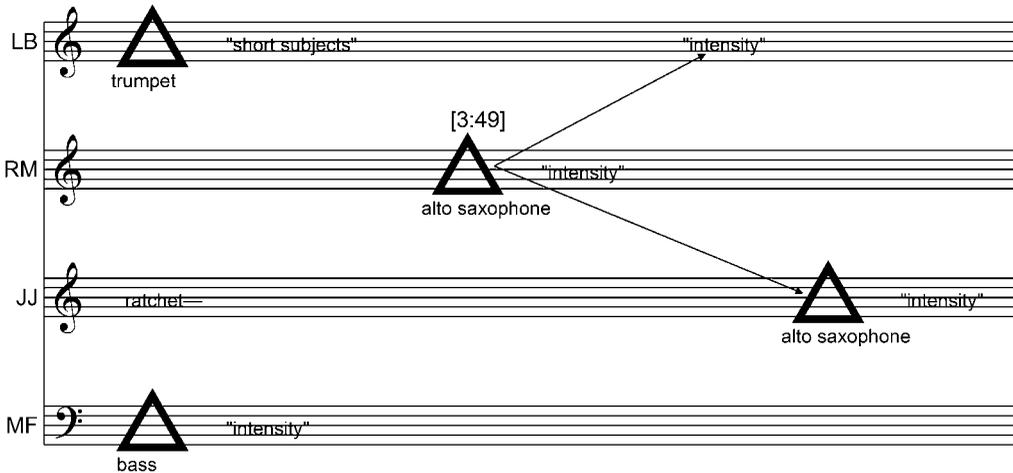
Example 8 Intensity structure, Bowie solo.

In the early part of this analysis it made intuitive sense to interpret 'Get in Line' as mimetic or representational. A military march was followed by a one-sided verbal dispute between an abusive officer and an African-American enlisted man; the intensity structure seemed to represent soldiers breaking out of formation and then contending with either their superior officer or the sheer chaos of war. At this point in the performance, however, it is less obvious how to analyse the little instruments played by Mitchell and Jarman. Ratchets and slide whistles do not belong in a proper march, and neither do they contribute sounds ordinarily identified with a theatrical battle scene, or even a standard Art Ensemble intensity structure. These are the instruments of slapstick, animated cartoons, and a foley artist's studio. Perhaps the whistles, rattles, and ratchet are functioning as another instance of the ludic response – 'subversive play' that deconstructs the tense theatrical scenario as well as the intensity structure itself. Tellingly, the only vocal sound heard during this passage comes from Bowie, who pauses between trumpet phrases to holler at no one in particular, or at *himself*, confirming the subjectivity of Mitchell's ludic response. For a moment at least, the officer–soldier conflict has yielded to 'the dada of the black experimentalist', a phenomenon found not only in 'Get in Line' but in any number of Art Ensemble compositions, where the performers transform meaningful music into 'serious fun', as Bowie used to say.³⁷

Eventually Mitchell returns on saxophone, playing fast-paced melodies that consume the silences between Bowie's trumpet phrases. Jarman adds a few more ratchet sounds, as if to blur the textural transition that is occurring, and then enters on saxophone once again. The members of the Art Ensemble have reconstituted the intensity structure that began three minutes earlier, creating a formal 'arch' that spans the entire middle section of the piece (see Example 9). This passage clearly recalls the early stages of the intensity structure, but

³⁷ See his album of that title, *Serious Fun* (1989).

the verbal texts and vocal sounds are missing. Jarman is not yelling invective, and one hears no comical cries or vocal calls from Bowie, Favors, and Mitchell. Due to the temporary absence of the theatrical layer, the Art Ensemble's multifaceted music is no longer explicitly joined to a dramatic scenario, or to the images of disintegration and wartime chaos that emanated from the march at the beginning of the piece. Consequently, the intensity structure is now ready to be re-examined for new meanings.



Example 9 Re-assembling the intensity structure.

One sonic connotation is immediately apparent: the close resemblance between this intensity structure and the so-called 'energy-sound' performance mode associated with 1960s free jazz.³⁸ The reception of free jazz was extremely contested, as many scholars have observed in recent years. Audiences and critics heard this unmistakably experimental music as either aligned with or totally opposed to their cultural politics, generating a polarized and sometimes racially charged atmosphere around a musical style that is – even today – described as a 'permanent avant-garde', always new and always radical.³⁹ On the American scene, particularly in East Coast cities such as New York, one faction viewed free jazz as a corruption of the venerable jazz tradition in the service of half-baked agitprop; another faction saw it as a bourgeois pursuit that was insufficiently committed to the revolutionary aims of the Black Arts Movement. As bell hooks wrote, 'avant-garde jazz musicians, grappling with artistic expressivity that demanded experimentation, resisted restrictive mandates about their work, whether they were imposed by a white public saying their work was not really music or a black public which wanted to see more overt links between that work and political struggle'.⁴⁰

38 See the discussion of 'energy-sound' approaches to saxophone playing in Shepp, 'A View from the Inside', 41, and also Willener, *The Action-Image of Society*, 238–9.

39 One of the many treatments of the 'permanent avant-garde' trope can be found in Salim Washington, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now'", 28.

40 hooks, *Yearning*, 109.

These critical currents were somewhat less treacherous in Chicago, the home of the Art Ensemble. They were the beneficiaries of favourable press coverage in a cross-section of local publications, from *Downbeat* and the *Chicago Tribune* to the *Daily Defender* and the Nation of Islam weekly *Muhammad Speaks*.⁴¹ Additionally, the Art Ensemble's place in the Black Arts Movement was secure, owing to their affiliation with the AACM. (Lester Bowie was the Association's president in 1968 and 1969, and his bandmates were founding members.) Furthermore, the Art Ensemble's politically themed performances were frequently leavened with a sketch-comedy humour that disarmed sceptical listeners. At a 1967 concert, for example, one of the musicians donned an army uniform and a Lyndon B. Johnson mask, and then attempted to give a speech, which ended abruptly when one of his bandmates hurled a pie in his face. 'For all parties (except perhaps any Democratic Party precinct captains who may have been present), it was probably a very satisfying affair.'⁴²

The Art Ensemble's critical and popular reception changed markedly when they crossed the Atlantic in 1969. French critics who encountered black experimental musicians, including the Art Ensemble, considered free jazz to be both culturally and politically transgressive, the sonic manifestation of an essential black identity.⁴³ One widely held assumption was that all African Americans, musicians or not, were active in the Black Panther Party.⁴⁴ This is the precise context for Bowie's claim: 'They all made it look like that, if you were black, you were political.'⁴⁵ Although such misperceptions gave the Art Ensemble a certain cachet among credulous Paris leftists, the Chicagoans understood the real risks of appearing to be radical, given their precarious social position as non-white immigrants to France, a body politic still reeling from the events of May 1968. In one famous case, the African-American trumpeter Clifford Thornton was denied entry to France in retaliation for the organizing he had done on behalf of the Black Panthers.⁴⁶ As Bowie remembered, 'Everybody was gaining reputations as powerful nationalists, but this [...] stopped a lot of cats from making it. Clifford Thornton for instance, I remember he couldn't get back into France, he was arrested, put back on the plane. I have no time for that kind of stuff.'⁴⁷ Decades later, Bowie's recollections support an analysis of 'Get in Line' – especially the intensity structure – not just as a political protest against war and institutional racism, but also as a cultural critique of how the Art Ensemble's music was received. By denying that pieces like 'Get in Line' were politically motivated, Bowie and his bandmates could resist essentialist perceptions of their work while opening up a space for expression that 'continually opposes

41 Anderson, *This is Our Music*, 146.

42 Rout, Jr., 'AACM: New Music (!) New Ideas (?)', 133.

43 Drott, *Music and the Elusive Revolution*, 111–54. See also Lehman, 'I Love You with an Asterisk', and Steinbeck, 'Intermusicality, Humor, and Cultural Critique'.

44 Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 274.

45 Lester Bowie quoted in Coppens and Lagerwerff, 'Lester Bowie', 14.

46 Cotro, *Chants Libres*, 63. See also Trombert, 'Soirée de soutien au Black Panthers Party', 9, for an account of a speech given by Thornton at a Black Panther Party benefit concert held at Mutualité in Paris.

47 Lester Bowie quoted in Coppens and Lagerwerff, 'Lester Bowie', 14.

re-inscribing notions of “authentic” black identity’, as bell hooks phrased it.⁴⁸ Instead of choosing sides in the contentious debate on black experimentalism, the members of the Art Ensemble cultivated a discourse around their own music that would be as ‘oppositional and liberatory’ as the sounds they played.⁴⁹

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: LB (trumpet), RM (alto saxophone), JJ (cymbal), and MF (bass). The score is divided into two time segments: [4:19] and [4:22]. In the [4:19] segment, each instrument has a triangle symbol labeled "intensity". In the [4:22] segment, the instruments play percussive sounds: the trumpet plays "short subjects", the alto saxophone plays "steel pan", the cymbal plays "cymbals, gongs", and the bass plays "log drum". Arrows indicate the transition from the intensity phase to the percussive phase for each instrument.

Example 10 Percussion texture, metallic sounds.

Four-and-a-quarter minutes into ‘Get in Line’, Jarman suddenly pivots away from his microphone and starts crashing a cymbal with considerable force (see Example 10). Within seconds, the other musicians also switch to various percussion instruments: gongs, steel pan, and a log drum. This rapid transition ends the intensity structure, and marks the final formal division of the piece. As often happens in Art Ensemble performances, the musicians have produced a ‘confrontation of various [...] expression[s] and style[s], in which the expressive power of one level is relativized by the other’, to quote Ekkehard Jost.⁵⁰ That is to say, the members of the Art Ensemble are deliberately disrupting and drowning out the intensity structure, along with everything that accompanied it – the dramatic conflict and the combat scene, as well as the political turmoil over Vietnam and the ‘culture war’ around free jazz.

As the percussion texture unfolds, Bowie continues to play trumpet, but the dominant instruments here are gongs, cymbals, and other large, metallic sound-makers. All these instruments share a sound envelope in which the waveform peaks quickly and then slowly decays. Unlike the dense and complex intensity structure, where a single second of musical time might contain dozens of notes, the present texture consists of massive, discrete events that resemble nothing more than a series of deafening explosions: ‘total pandemonium’, in

48 hooks, *Yearning*, 28.

49 hooks, *Yearning*, 29.

50 Jost, *Free Jazz*, 178.

Ekkehard Jost's description.⁵¹ These sounds can be analysed mimetically, like the sirens and police whistles earlier in the piece that evoked a defiant soldier engaged in battle. However, when the Art Ensemble effectively dismissed the intensity structure, all of its associated meanings also began to recede. The new percussion texture, therefore, may not be composed of combat depictions, or explosions as such. Instead, these are explosive *sounds*, abstracted from their original theatrical context and redeployed towards other ends. The listener is reminded of Jimi Hendrix's 'The Star-Spangled Banner', performed at Woodstock eight weeks to the day after 'Get in Line' was recorded. Like Jarman, Hendrix was a former army paratrooper, and his solo rendition of the US national anthem includes a quotation from 'Taps', feedback noises, and guitar gestures called 'divebombs', repurposed as expressions of tragic beauty.⁵² Of course Hendrix's anthem would not end the Vietnam War or the military draft, as many at Woodstock surely wished, but he could offer his audience the feeling of aesthetic transcendence through music, if only for a few moments. Indeed, the power to 'transcend reality', according to Brian Sutton-Smith, belongs to playful interpreters such as Hendrix, because 'one can never quite lose while still at play'.⁵³ Jarman, too, envisioned performative experiences that would prepare the way for psychological, social, and political transformation. In his poem 'HATEWAR-', Jarman wrote about music that liberates and heals:

not becoming
 warriors we are that already the fight
 inside to have strength to create LOVE.
 Liberation music "... one of these days
 y'all gona have to play
 music to blow a
 hundred thousand years
 of jive outa my head;
 and jack it just better
 make it."
 we sing looking to ALL the past future masters
 to give us clear vision
 healing music.GREAT BLACK MUSIC⁵⁴

A minute before the end of 'Get in Line', the members of the Art Ensemble construct one more textural shift (see Example 11). Favors and Jarman vigorously strike a pair of resonant log drums while Bowie crashes a set of cymbals, loudly and enthusiastically. The musicians

51 Jost, *Free Jazz*, 179.

52 Nicholas Cook heard another one of Hendrix's anthem performances as 'condensing onto a pre-existing musical object and being mentally reconfigured as a flood of associations and connotations' (Cook, 'Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance', 9).

53 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 212–13.

54 Jarman, *Black Case Volume I & II*, 68.

seem to be playing with complete abandon – ‘un *jeu total*’⁵⁵ – an impression that is confirmed seconds later when they start shouting and ‘HOLLER[ing] like damn mad fools’, to quote Jarman once more.⁵⁶ This time, though, the performers’ vocal sounds do not communicate any of the moods previously heard in ‘Get in Line’. Instead they convey boundless joy, the ludic response no longer subversive and now re-imagined as exultation. Mitchell reacts by moving from steel pan to bell lyre, playing little melodic ideas that diverge, both sonically and emotionally, from the rapturous contributions of his bandmates.

action could provide a solution to these problems, but only if it prioritized 'personal freedom, mobility, and individuality'.⁵⁸ For this reason George E. Lewis characterized the 'AACM project of collectivity' as 'diversity within unity', a concept that is exemplified by the musical and social practices of the Art Ensemble.⁵⁹

Example 12 shows a musical score for percussion texture conclusion. The score is divided into four staves: LB (Cymbals, gongs), RM (Steel pan, bell), JJ (Cymbals, gongs), and MF (Cymbals, gongs). The time signature is 5/7. The LB staff shows a trumpet line starting at 5:07. The RM staff shows a steel pan line and a bell line. The JJ and MF staves show cymbal and gong sounds.

Example 12 Percussion texture, conclusion.

The members of the Art Ensemble conclude 'Get in Line' with another salvo of gongs, steel-pan strokes, and cymbal crashes (see Example 12). The thunderous resonance of all these metallic instruments creates the single loudest moment in the performance, overwhelming the recording-studio signal chain and forcing the audio engineer to adjust the mixing board on the fly. As this climactic passage unfolds, the musicians keep shouting in a final, definitive articulation of the ludic response and its power to transform one's situation – musically, dramatically, and in the political sphere. The last sounds heard are a cryptic trumpet line, followed by six pulsations from a small bell, quietly reverberating as the percussion texture fades away.

Conclusion: *Fanfare for the Warriors*

Some forty years after its recording, the Art Ensemble's 'Get in Line' remains a profoundly compelling performance situated at the intersection of musical sound, theatre, and political critique. When faced with militarism and institutional racism, Bowie, Favors, Jarman, and Mitchell offer a remarkable ludic response that stands toe-to-toe with the enormity (and the absurdity) of prejudice and essentialism. Additionally, while 'Get in Line' is certainly rooted in Vietnam-era debates, the absence of specific textual references to the Vietnam conflict

⁵⁸ Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, 101. See also the discussion of Anthony Braxton, the AACM, and Isaiah Berlin's theory of negative freedom in Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, 23.

⁵⁹ Lewis, 'Gittin' to Know Y'all', 19.

also invites contemporary listeners to propose their own disruptive responses to twenty-first-century political issues. Finally, from the intensity structure to Mitchell's contrasting bell lyre, one hears the Art Ensemble's collective play becoming more and more pluralist in nature, in a real-time illustration of the group's practices for accommodating differences in aesthetics and in political orientation.⁶⁰ It is not coincidental that Jarman, who was a peace activist during his years as a music and drama student, portrays the character responsible for converting a march into political street theatre, while his politically circumspect bandmate redirects the dramatic conflict back into the realm of musical sound. As Mitchell observed, 'Jarman has definitely incorporated concepts related to theater and politics [...] and, yes, I *do* insist on structure.'⁶¹

These pluralistic musical and social practices are present in every Art Ensemble performance, and they also account for the group's exceptional longevity and creative output, which spans the better part of five decades. Whether in 1969 or today, the Art Ensemble's legacy is a testament to the power of multi-voiced music and critique, as well as an eloquent answer to bell hooks's call for 'cultural production' that reflects 'multiple black experience [and] the complexity of black life'.⁶²

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60 See, for instance, this exchange between Bowie and Jarman, prompted by French journalists' inquiries about the Art Ensemble's connections to nationalist movements such as the Black Panthers. Bowie: 'Nous sommes en contact avec toutes les organisations noires.' Jarman: 'Nous n'avons d'affiliation avec aucune association politique, cela est étranger aux desseins de l'AACM. Bien sûr, nous avons des relations, des amitiés dans ces mouvements, mais tout cela demeure sur un plan strictement personnel' (Lester Bowie and Joseph Jarman, quoted in Gras, Caux, and Bernard, 'A.A.C.M. Chicago', 17).

61 Roscoe Mitchell quoted in Davis, 'Roscoe Mitchell', 28. Bassist Jaribu Shahid, a longtime associate of Mitchell, offered further clarification: 'he is political, but his way of being political is to stay on his s---. I know him, it ain't like he don't care about that. It's just a waste of time to sit around talking about it when you could be doing your s---. His way of contributing is that' (Jaribu Shahid, telephone interview by the author, 23 October 2006, Long Beach, NY, private tape recording).

62 bell hooks, *Yearning*, 107–8.

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