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Book Review: A Message To Our Folks (The Art Ensemble Of Chicago) by Paul Steinbeck

Posted on 28/04/2018 by Matt P (movingtheriver.com, soundsofsurprise.com).



If the 1980s saw the full flowering of PR and image's influence on the music world, it's sometimes forgotten that jazz was an unlikely beneficiary of this trend too.

The Art Ensemble Of Chicago, that important unit whose line-up went unchanged for almost 30 years until trumpeter/co-founder Lester Bowie's death in 1999, were a massive live draw during the early '80s, particularly in France, where they were welcomed more like rock stars than avant-garde jazzers.

Image and stage presentation were undoubtedly big factors. Paul Steinbeck's fine new biography of the band 'A Message To Our Folks' is a scholarly, forensic study, tracing their origins from the South Side of Chicago through their controversial move to Paris in 1969, return to the States in 1971 and commercial peak in the early 1980s.

He analyses key albums, talks to living members and dissects the Ensemble's cultural importance. Despite the sometimes frivolous onstage 'antics', musically the collective was as serious as your life, to borrow the title of Val Wilmer's groundbreaking book. Drummer Don Moye remembers Bowie taking him aside after his successful audition and saying: 'Don't even mess with us or get any more involved if you can't commit to playing Great Black Music at a very high level, becoming famous and taking our place in the history of jazz.' The stakes were high.

ART ENSAMBLE OF CHICAGO - Charlie M



They were ahead of their time with the use of slogans, labelling their sound Great Black Music to distinguish it from jazz; according to Bowie, 'Never before were we even allowed the dignity of selecting a name for our own music.' They also described their music as 'Ancient To The Future'.

The band would pick up various celebrity fans: in 1975, Bowie took a trip to Nigeria and became Fela Kuti's 'guest of honour' when he wowed him with an impromptu trumpet solo: 'I played this blues... After I played a couple of choruses, Fela said, "Stop. Somebody go get this guy's bags. He's moving in with me..."' David Bowie also famously employed his namesake for the *Black Tie White Noise* album as did Danny Wilson for their acclaimed debut *Meet Danny Wilson*. (<https://movingtheriver.com/2015/02/19/gary-clark-talks-marys-prayer-and-classic-debut-meet-danny-wilson/>)

The Art Ensemble Of Chicago would also open doors for other instrumental groups with their onstage presentation, verging on dramatic performance – face paint and stage personas were the norm at a time when 'jazz' was becoming extremely bland.

'Message To Our Folks' is a fairly brief, fairly serious but highly effective biography, a must for general fans and a good companion piece to other key books on Free Jazz: 'As Serious As Your Life', Graham Lock's '*Forces In Motion*' (<https://soundsofsurprise.com/2018/01/24/book-review-forces-in-motion-the-music-and-thoughts-of-anthony-braxton-by-graham-lock/>), and Ben Watson's 'Derek Bailey'.



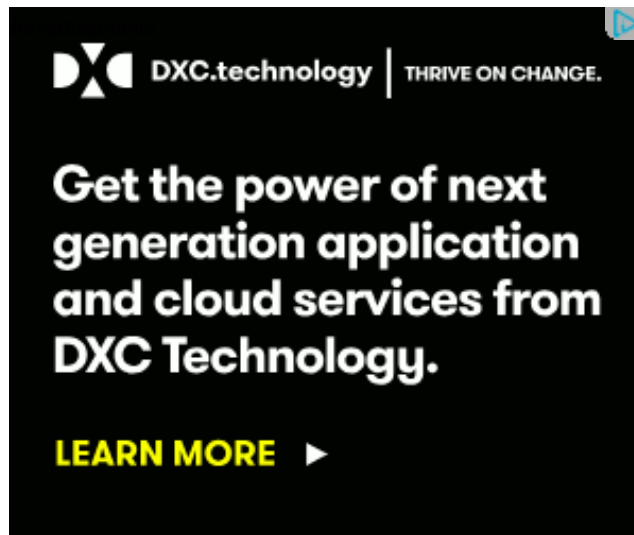
Don Moye in 2017

'A Message To Our Folks: The Art Ensemble Of Chicago' is published now by The University Of Chicago Press (<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/index.html>).

Art Ensemble Of Chicago live with Cecil Taylor (1984)

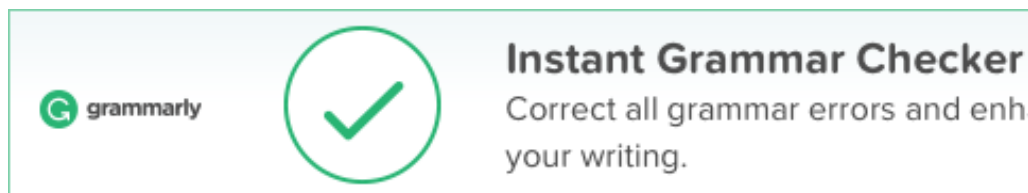


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