

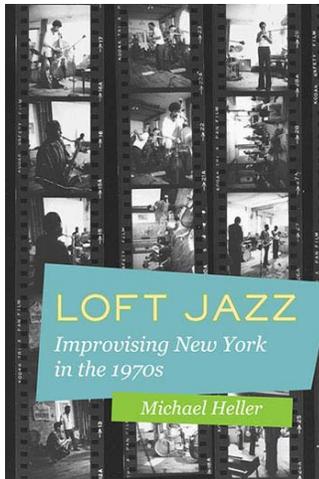
These '70s Avant-Garde Jazz Musicians Blew Freely, Fiercely, and Reverently

by **Mark Reynolds**

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Art Ensemble of Chicago



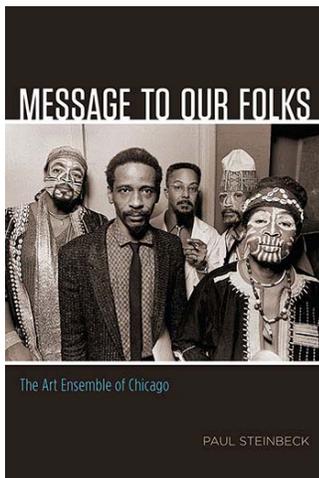
LOFT JAZZ: IMPROVISING NEW YORK IN THE 1970S

MICHAEL C. HELLER

(University of California Press)

US: Dec 2016

[Amazon](#) | [University of California Press](#)



MESSAGE TO OUR FOLKS: THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO

PAUL STEINBECK

(University of Chicago Press)

US: Feb 2017

[Amazon](#) | [University of Chicago Press](#)

Charles “Bobo” Shaw’s passing was the kind that snaps you back to a special time, reminding you how special it was.

Shaw, a drummer and activist who joined the ancestors in January at 69, was a foundational figure of an era that still gets the short shrift, despite its continuing importance and influence. He was part of the post-John Coltrane wave of avant-garde jazz in the late ‘60s and ‘70s and a member of one of the key artist-driven collectives that fueled the movement.

In 1968, he co-founded Black Artists Group (BAG) in St. Louis, a collective of avant-garde musicians and other artists styled after Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). After BAG, Shaw and other BAG musicians toured Europe and eventually made their way to New York City by the mid-‘70s.

There, they became part of the city’s avant-jazz scene. The music happening there took its influences from the previous decade, both artistically (Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman and other forward thinkers) and culturally (an extension of the Black Arts Movement that flourished parallel to the Black Power era). But it sounded nothing quite like what came before it. These musicians were respectful of the jazz lineage, but not beholden to it.

They blew free, unencumbered by song structures or chord changes. They blew fiercely, reeling off long passages of sound and fury. They blew reverently, with copious use of African percussion, wardrobe, and nomenclature. They blew with whomever was available, thus creating new possibilities for how jazz ensembles could be configured—or ended up giving solo performances if that’s what the moment dictated. They blew all night and day a new, astonishing page into the jazz lexicon.

What they weren’t able to do was get gigs in jazz clubs. Many of those venues were drying up, as jazz’s receding from mass awareness was in full swing (save for the electric work of Miles Davis and bands formed by members of his various aggregations, and popular jazz-funk hits), and those that were hanging on weren’t having all that caterwauling in their establishments. So the avant-jazzers made their own infrastructure, using vacant buildings in Manhattan as rehearsal, performance and, for some, living spaces.

These spaces, with their wide-open floor plans, were repurposed from their former lives as factories and warehouses. Sometimes the actual owners knew about it, but that doesn’t seem to have always been the case. From this turf, musicians staged their own concerts, held their own jam sessions, and forged their own micro-economy. Eventually, word got out, and as is often the case, someone felt inspired to label this new thing. As is also often the case, the people being labeled weren’t all that happy with the label that stuck: “loft jazz”.

Now 40 years later, the label still sticks, and not only to the loft scene but also to all of ‘70s avant-garde jazz, loft-related or otherwise. So does the era’s rep for producing some of the most extreme and polarizing jazz ever made. The lot of it was famously excluded from Ken Burns’ 2001 documentary *Jazz* (along with, to be fair, just about all the jazz of the previous 30 years). The proclaimed face of jazz in the early ‘80s, Wynton Marsalis—an artist at the polar opposite of everything the avant-garde crowd was about—treated the ‘70s vanguard with disdain for not sticking to jazz’s established orthodoxy, which rapturous media coverage ceaselessly informed us he was steadfastly maintaining. Many still hold their noses at loft-era avant-garde jazz, preferring sounds far

less complicated and knotty. The CD reissue boom mostly passed the movement by, in large part because major record labels recorded so little of it in the first place.

But that moment in jazz's life still resonates, as two new books document. *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* and *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago* recall some of the era's artistic and structural vitality, shedding new light on how jazz, in fact, didn't die on the abrasive edge of the '70s after all. In fact, much of today's jazz traces back to those edgy days, and often in subtle and surprising fashions.

Both books explore how creative musicians forged opportunities for themselves on their own artistic and economic terms, building upon previous attempts at self-determination among jazz musicians. In their own ways, they tell the stories of what would become models for future musician-driven communities and ventures working outside traditional commercial infrastructures.

Michael Heller was part of one such venture. In the early '00s, he worked for the Vision Festival, an annual New York concert series showcasing improvising musicians. Heller heard many stories about loft life from musicians playing at the festival, whose roots lie in the efforts of a loft-era musician, bassist-composer William Parker, to bring improvisers together for concerts and collective ventures.

Heller's curiosity led him to conduct formal interviews with loft-era musicians, and eventually to a motherlode: one of them had kept an archive. Percussionist Juma Sultan had extensive records of the loft scene's activity, including performances at Studio We, one of the first lofts of the period. His archive, from funding proposals to manifestos to hand-drawn flyers, had not been accessed by a researcher until Heller came along. The result is *Loft Jazz*, the first book covering '70s avant-garde jazz focused on how the lofts operated and a community flourished for a brief few years.

The flourishing began in earnest in 1972, when Sultan, Studio We founder James DuBoise, saxophonists Sam Rivers (who also had a loft, Studio Rivbea) and Noah Howard, percussionists Rashied Ali and Milford Graves, and others formed a collective to respond to the lack of black involvement in bringing the Newport Jazz Festival to the city. All the events were to be at expensive venues, none in the black community. Its proposed lineup was heavy on well-known players, with no opportunities for emerging or avant-garde talent. The musicians, no strangers to collective organizing, sent the festival producers a ten-point list of demands (one of the many fascinating documents of Sultan's archive).

With no response to the demands, the musicians did for self and organized a counter-festival, the New York Musicians Jazz Festival, to run opposite Newport. Events were held throughout the city, including at some of the early lofts, and many of them were free. The counter-event was so successful that the group, now formally the New York Musicians Organization, received state and city funding for future events. Although the group would soon splinter, Heller asserts it set much of the tone for the collective nature of the evolving loft community.

In time, several lofts would be operating, and performances were often overlapping with each other. Lofts competed with each other for prime flyer space on telephone poles, the primary mode of publicity. Studios We and Rivbea were among the most ambitious spaces, building stages and small recording stations for capturing live performances. Ali's Studio 77 loft eventually became Ali's Alley, a full-blown nightclub.

Word soon spread about this now-music scene happening in a neglected part of Manhattan. In 1976, producer Alan Douglas persuaded an upstart record label called Casablanca, flush with revenue from top sellers KISS and Donna Summer, to cash in on the scene by recording performances at Studio Rivbea during its annual festival (Rivers, reports Heller, had by far the most successful loft operation). With minimal fanfare, the label released the five-album series *Wildflowers: The New York Loft Jazz Sessions*. Hearing it now, it's a fascinating time capsule of styles and musicians: high-octane blowing, abstract mood pieces, percussion-driven Afro-grooves, a solo sax cover of "Over the Rainbow". Rivers and Randy Weston were the best-known performers included in the series; most of the others had recorded only for small indie or foreign labels, if at all.

While New York media were warming to the scene, *Wildflowers* did little to spread the news any further. Its music was unfamiliar to most folks (and at times stridently so), and it was released with no contextual information about the scene and a similar amount of promotion. Not surprisingly, it headed straight to the cutout bins. It's still the most evocative document available commercially of how the loft scene sounded. But no other label ventured there to capture it.

The lofts weren't around much longer anyway. Foreshadowing a pattern cities have seen time and again since then, the avant-garde jazz artists popularized the spaces they turned into centers of arts, and developers swooped in to make them centers of lifestyle living, thus pricing out the people who had created their potential in the first place. Also, musicians began to question the loft model's economic viability, especially since many were beginning to make real money on club gigs (at last) and European tours. Rivers closed Studio Rivbea in 1978, and the loft scene was essentially over by the turn of the decade.

It's not that the loft story hasn't been told before. Rivers is a central character in Will Hermes' *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York that Changed Music Forever* (2011), taking his place alongside Patti Smith, Meredith Monk, Hector Lavoe, Kool Herc and many others—but no one else from the lofts—in a breathless rundown of the music scene across the five boroughs in the mid-'70s. Jazz journalist Bill Shoemaker discussed Studio Rivbea and the *Wildflowers* sessions in a [two-article series](#) on Rivers in 2016 for his Point of Departure website. But the access to Sultan's rich archive allows Heller to tell a more insightful story about the life of the loft moment than just its basic chronology. Clearly, it was more than just one person.

The lofts became spaces where musicians could reconstruct their artistic and cultural identities. Heller notes how many musicians of the era took on African- and Arabic-influenced names (although this trend wasn't confined to the loft folks) and explored alternate religions. They established not only a community within themselves, but also ties with the broader community through free concerts and clinics. Because many lofts were also living spaces, Heller brings family dynamics and the role of wives and mothers into the discussion, making *Loft Jazz* one of the few places in jazz studies to explore such matters.

But while musicians report warm memories of the loft era after the passage of time, all wasn't completely rosy back then. Heller talks with many musicians who became quite resourceful at living off-the-grid and/or devoted their time and energy to running their lofts, which wasn't ideal for concentrating on their art. There were significant tensions when the AACM and BAG musicians arrived on the scene, and discovered their ideas weren't always welcome (even though, writes Heller, AACM was an early inspiration for the loft scene's model). The defiant stance of the original loft crowd towards the mainstream jazz world didn't help them make their case within it; it's not an

accident that the scene's profile grew when the better-known musicians from Chicago, St. Louis and elsewhere came east. And no one was getting rich by playing in the lofts, a point further underscored by the sense of professionalism and organization the newcomers brought with them.

More Than the Music

The commercial success of the '80s well-hyped, polished jazz conservatism made it easy to dismiss the loft scene's under-promoted, unruly advances.

The heart of *Loft Jazz* is Sultan's archive, and the relationship he and Heller forged while sifting through it. Prior to this project, it had not been professionally stored or catalogued. Boxes of tapes, papers and whatnot were sitting in his upstate New York barn, and had been sitting untouched for 25 years. Heller and Sultan worked for five months to put a degree of order to the collection, pausing to talk about their discoveries (for example, when Sultan's memory informed him the list of players on a tape box was incorrect). Instead of chronicling the richness of the archive as a thing unto itself, however (one could argue the existence of this book helps do just that), Heller detours from the loft scene narrative to consider the nature of archiving and self-documentation. He also notes initial skepticism from Sultan's wife about his motives, relating that she'd encountered unscrupulous collectors in the past, looking mostly for some morsel of Sultan's brief time in Jimi Hendrix's band.

But why does this archive even exist? For that matter, why do other musicians from the scene have lots of old documents and recordings as well? Heller begins *Loft Jazz* by pondering one of the objectives of the New York Musicians' Organization, as written by Sultan in a 1975 letter to Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts:

To preserve the cultural heritage of all forms of jazz music, which will disappear unless the traditions of the music are passed along from one generation to another through sheet music, recording and other mechanical devices, training and listening.

The musicians at the core of the loft scene were neither culturally nor politically naïve. They knew the importance of keeping a record of the work they were doing—not just the art, but also the business. They likely knew all too well the stories of visionary musicians who never received the credit they were due, and efforts to write certain people and movements in or out of “official” histories. They wanted future generations to understand what had come before them—in its proper, lived context.

It may be the case, as Heller points out, that some private archives from this (or any other) moment might be held too closely for the owner to allow an outsider to peruse them, or to donate them to an institution, without certain conditions (the framing of the story, perhaps, or the exchange of a fee). But if *Loft Jazz* is any indication, our understanding of the music and its surrounding culture could be further enhanced if more such archives could be made available to sympathetic researchers.

In any event, the musicians had a point. As it turned out, this brief moment of creative and cultural possibility might have been consigned somewhere beyond history, save for the memories of those who lived it, without some semblance of a record. The commercial success of the '80s well-hyped, polished jazz conservatism made it easy to dismiss the loft scene's under-promoted, unruly advances. Aside from the *Wildflowers* set's release on CD in 1999, precious few recordings from the scene are

commercially available (some from Sultan's archive have been released, after the original tapes were delicately transferred to digital).

There's been more written over the years about some of the individual musicians, than about this moment when they came together and created opportunities for themselves and each other. Heller's work is the first serious effort to delve into and understand the scene's history, and give it a measure of one thing the musicians were seeking all along: respect.

But the story of '70s avant-garde jazz is much bigger than the loft scene. For starters, its most famous band already had an international following by the time the lofts emerged.

The Art Ensemble of Chicago did not make its first official recording under that name until 1969, but its initial members had known each other for years. Three of the original members grew up in Chicago, and a fourth spent significant time there. All of them were AACM members, which shaped their approach to both the art and business of music. By the mid-'70s, they already had more than 20 albums in their catalogue, individually and collectively, including two on big-time Atlantic Records. The Art Ensemble would continue for another 30 years beyond the loft era, with their singular mix of musicianship, stagecraft and ritual.

Paul Steinbeck's *Message to Our Folks* tells the story of one of the longest-running bands in jazz history. Much of it is drawn from George Lewis' magisterial *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (2008) and previous Art Ensemble-specific works, but that doesn't lessen the importance of having a volume exclusively focused on the group and its methods.

Saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell was the first AACM artist to record an album, *Sound* (1966), with an ensemble including bassist Malachi Favors and trumpeter Lester Bowie. Saxophonist Joseph Jarman wasn't far behind, with his group's *Song For* (1967). But sudden deaths claimed two of Jarman's bandmates, leaving him distraught. Mitchell, Favors and Bowie talked him into signing on with them, and in 1969 the quartet, known by then as the Art Ensemble, lit out for Paris, bankrolled by Bowie's earnings on the r&b road with his wife, singer Fontella Bass ("Rescue Me").

Going to Paris wasn't a romantic venture. Stateside gigs were few and far between, Bowie was getting antsy about seeing the group amount to something more than a glorified rehearsal band, and a Paris promoter/record producer had gotten wind of the AACM and lobbied for AACM musicians to set up shop there. During their two years based in Europe, the Art Ensemble (which added "of Chicago" to their name while in Paris) recorded 15 albums, performed across the continent, and helped establish a beachhead for a new generation of American jazz musicians seeking work and a more hospitable life. They also, in true band-of-brothers style, added a drummer/percussionist, Famoudou Don Moye, who had already relocated to Paris after a Detroit-based band broke up there.

By the time they returned to America in 1971, both their lineup and performance template were set, and would remain so for a long time. In addition to their primary instruments, the Art Ensemble deployed a dazzling array of "little instruments"—gongs, small percussion, bike horns, you name it—that radically expanded their sonic palette. Favors, Jarman and Moye took to face-painting, and Bowie to his trademark white lab coat. While they could easily blow a straight-ahead jazz arrangement or even a funkish groove, they could also go abstract at the drop of a cymbal, into a long improvisatory excursion, which could be either loud or soft, or both. Their sardonic sense of humor

could also be injected into the mix at any moment. They called the whole sh-bang “Great Black Music—Ancient to the Future”.

In the same year that Rivers closed Studio Rivbea, the Art Ensemble signed on with ECM Records, the German label that had made its name throughout the ‘70s for its championing of spare, spacious jazz and contemporary music (and its money from phenomenally successful Keith Jarrett solo piano concert albums). Conveniently for all, ECM had just signed a distribution deal with Warner Brothers, giving its acts additional firepower in reaching American audiences. The Art Ensemble took full advantage, with the back-to-back *Nice Guys* (1979) and *Full Force* (1980) representing high-water marks for the era’s avant-jazz in both artistic achievement and critical reception.

The Art Ensemble continued through the ‘80s and ‘90s, expanding its interpretations of Great Black Music through collaborations with, among others, South African musicians and avant-jazz elder Cecil Taylor. For a time, they persevered after the deaths of Bowie in 1999 and Favors in 2004, bringing on talent from Mitchell’s solo project to round out the group in the mid-‘00s.

Steinbeck supplements the basic band bio with deep musicological studies of three Art Ensemble sessions: *A Jackson in Your House* (1969), their first recording as a quartet (and first in Paris); their 1972 concert recording *Live at Mandel Hall* in Chicago; and a 1981 concert video. In each study, Steinbeck isolates key moments in the performance, supplementing his analysis with interviews of the musicians explaining the theories and methods behind their unconventional approaches.

Steinbeck also discusses the band’s business model, which helped sustain the enterprise for 40 years. By pooling their earnings from band projects and contributing money from their solo work (and they all took on solo work, as leaders and/or side players, when the band was on hiatus), they created financial self-sufficiency for the band, even as they pursued their far-flung individual projects. At one point, there was even an Art Ensemble of Chicago Organization record label, an identity preserved in the song title “Funky AECO”.

Message to Our Folks (the title of one of those 15 early albums recorded in Europe) may not compile swaths of new information, but calls attention to just how staggering an achievement the Art Ensemble of Chicago accomplished. Both of Miles Davis’ classic quintets lasted only a few incandescent years. Art Blakey kept the Jazz Messengers brand alive for decades, but he was the only constant throughout that time. By comparison, the same five people of the Art Ensemble recorded and performed as a quintet for nearly 30 years, and permutations of that lineup were active for significant stretches before and after those years.

Further, its members’ numerous solo projects (Mitchell’s groups, Bowie’s Brass Fantasy, and others) helped extend the band’s profile, and arguably its longevity. On top of all that, they were the standard bearer of a grass-roots collective that influenced the shape, sound and practice of creative music worldwide. While other musicians have incorporated many a lesson from the band into their own works, no one has ever matched, or could hope to match, the Art Ensemble’s audacious execution of its singular, collective imagination.

While the Art Ensemble may no longer be active, Mitchell himself sure is. Over the last few years, he’s recorded frequently, and with stellar improvisors of the moment like Tyshawn Sorey and Craig Taborn. That’s just one way in which the legacy of ‘70’s avant-jazz is still having the last laugh after Burns’ dis.

Numerous musicians from the era would loom large over jazz throughout the '80s and beyond. That number includes saxophonists and former BAG members Hamett Bluiett, Julius Hemphill and Oliver Lake, who joined forces with David Murray, a young hotshot who'd hit the loft scene upon arriving from California (along with drummer/writer/future Marsalis acolyte Stanley Crouch). The four of them did a workshop at Southern University and performed together without a rhythm section, at which point the combination clicked. They became the World Saxophone Quartet, and recorded a vast range of music over the years for Elektra/Nonesuch and other labels.

It also includes trumpeter/composer Wadada Leo Smith, an early AACM member whose momentous suite *Ten Freedom Summers* interpreting the Civil Rights Movement was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Music. One of his AACM colleagues, saxophonist Henry Threadgill, received the Pulitzer in 2016 for the album *In for a Penny, In for a Pound* by his current quintet Zooid, the latest in a long line of iconoclastic ensembles articulating his intricate approach to both composition and improvisation.

Speaking of the AACM, it's still going strong. Its legacy was honored with the *Made in Chicago* concert at the 2013 Chicago Jazz Festival, by a quintet including Threadgill, Mitchell, and AACM guiding force Muhal Richard Abrams. It celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2015 with events throughout Chicago, including an exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago that featured a set-up of all the Art Ensemble's little instruments. And it continues today in the work of younger artists like flutist/composer Nicole Mitchell and her Black Earth Ensemble.

Shaw for his part, had a prolific run leading his Human Arts Ensemble, and played alongside many stalwarts of the era. He was beset by health issues in his later years, but still drove the beat when able. One of his last appearances in the drum chair was with Bluiett's Telepathic Orchestra during the 2015 Vision Festival—the same institution where Heller first learned about the loft scene.

Perhaps it's a natural function of time that those who were once dismissed as firebrands get to be regarded as elders if they live long enough, and paid nice tributes like Shaw received when they pass. But here, it appears that the '70s naysayers won the battle but lost the war. The same tributaries that flowed through Murray's sax 40 years ago are flowing through Kamasi Washington's sax today. The softer moments of the *Wildflowers* sessions echo in Mary Halvorson's chamber-esque excursions. Many innovations and breakthroughs from those days, from ensemble configurations to compositional approaches, can be found in today's jazz with a dose of informed, careful listening.

But it wasn't just the music that marks the continuing influence of '70s avant-jazz. The structures, both physical (the lofts) and organizational (AACM, BAG and others), that allowed those many bold souls to develop their art, craft and resilience were a major factor in why that time has turned out to be pivotal.

The backstories of that era live on most profoundly in any group of creative, anything-but-pop musicians forging a vehicle for shared artistic passion, activity, and community. Such structures of mutual reliance and inter-dependence may be more needed now thanks to the economics of the music industry, but they're also more enabled thanks to social media and other technology. The equation, however, has not changed from the days of Shaw and BAG, the Art Ensemble and AACM, and the lofts where folks blew all night and day: connected people plus shared resources equals critical mass, which leads to the potential for music that can amaze, even generations after the fact.



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