



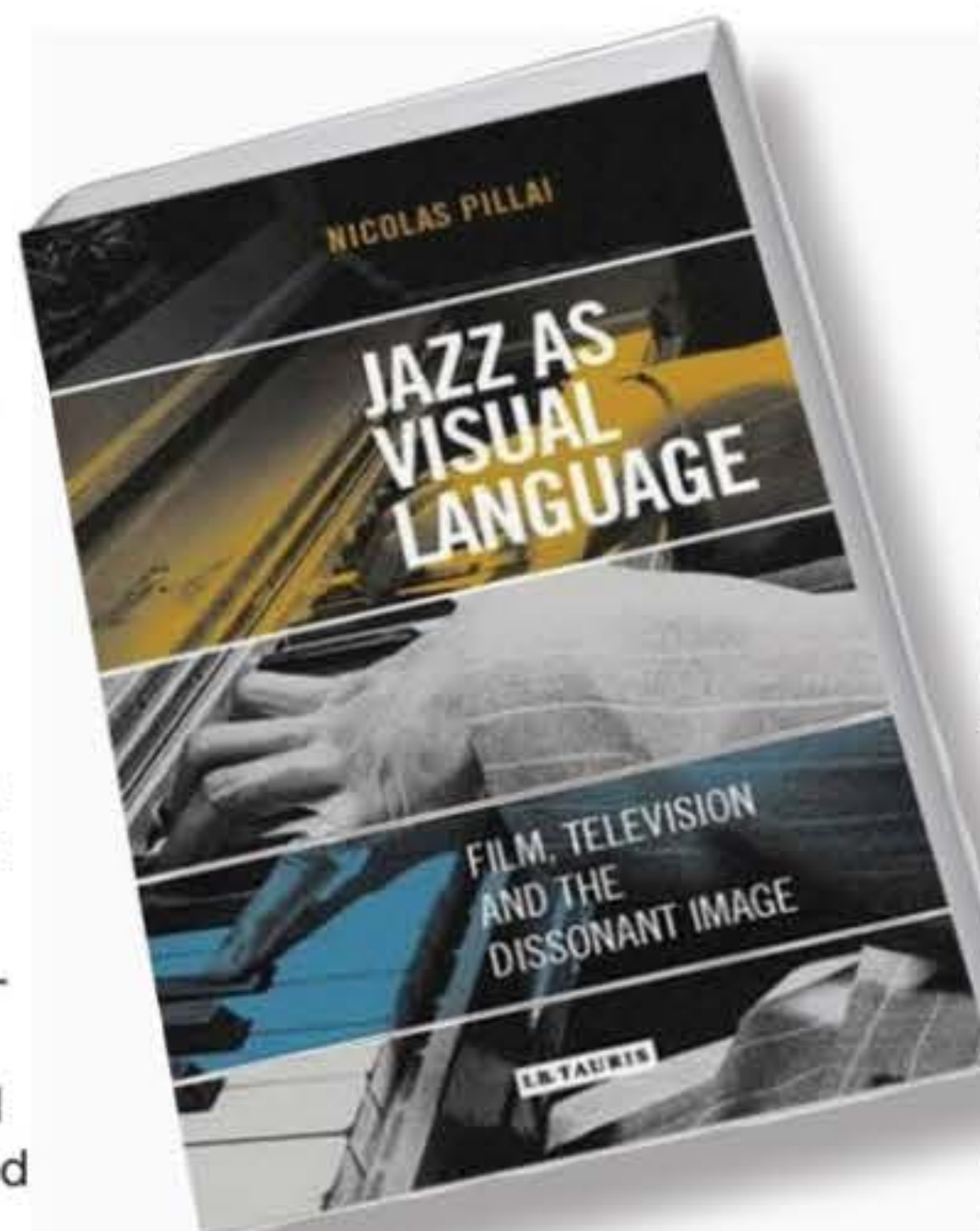
Message To Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago

Paul Steinbeck

The University of Chicago Press
HB 28

Let us count the ways The Art Ensemble of Chicago were an utterly unique proposition in jazz. (1) Their central conception of the music of the black diaspora as one unbroken continuum encapsulating 'Great Black Music: Ancient To The Future'. (2) Their collective multi-instrumentalism, typified by the dizzying array of percussion and 'little instruments' that dominated the stage. (3) Their use of costume, masks, poetry, comedy and theatrics in performance, a parallel development to the 'happenings' of the 1960s. (4) Their radical social and business model, which ensured their financial security and longevity as a band for more than half a century. All of these fascinating characteristics are explored in detail by Paul Steinbeck in his fine and minutely researched history, which traces the Ensemble's journey from their early years in Chicago, the founding of the AACM in 1965 and the Ensemble's emergence as its flagship group the following year, through their hugely fruitful two-year sojourn in Paris at the end of the 1960s and on to their later tenure with ECM and global success. But it's more than just a standard biography. Steinbeck – a bassist, composer and professor of music – also devotes several chapters to microscopically detailed, moment-by-moment analysis of

key recordings, including 1969's *A Jackson In Your House* and *Live at Mandel Hall*, recorded 1972. Here, his painstaking and innovative musical transcriptions reveal both the complexity of the Ensemble's compositions and the astonishing, spontaneous group-think that made their improvisations so thrilling. Clearly, this was intended to be a definitive work, but the Ensemble's playful unpredictability has, predictably, put paid to that notion: Steinbeck finishes his account by suggesting that the group wound to a close in 2010. Recent shows at Cafe OTO by a reinvigorated quartet – and the promise of more to come this autumn – prove that the future ain't over yet. **Daniel Spicer**



Jazz as Visual Language (Film, Television and the Dissonant Image)

Nicolas Pillai

I.B Tauris HB 64

Last year I attended a German WDR Radio Research Conference on the theme of 'Jazz on Film' in which the author presented a confrontational paper defending the *La La Land* director Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash* (2015) against the kind of heavy criticism it was dealt by the jazz press and community in general. He made a reasonable case for its close links to the 'horror' genre as opposed to a certain perceived responsibility it had to represent jazz in an 'authentic' musical or historical sense. The point being that criticisms of this kind appear largely ignorant of visual culture, reducing the role of film in particular to being a "mere conduit

through which jazz is delivered, at best unharmed". As both a jazz fan and Film Studies University lecturer (currently researching jazz broadcasting in the 1960s at Birmingham City University), Nicolas Pillai is well-placed to pass comment. *Whiplash* comes up in the introduction to his new 176-page hardback volume *Jazz as Visual Language (Film, Television and the Dissonant Image)*. At the centre of general criticisms aimed at film's representation of jazz is, as the author puts it, "a failure to consider the cinematic apparatus which mediates the music". He goes a long way to putting this right through a thoroughly interesting trilogy of chapters examining three films, that unlike *Whiplash* are all non-narrative forms: Len Lye's experimental British advertising animation short *In a Colour Box* (1935), a 'direct' film that has abstract shapes and colours dancing to the pre-recorded sound of 'La Belle Creole' by Emilio 'Don' Barreto and his Cuban Orchestra; Gjon Mili's classic soundie *Jammin' the Blues* (1944), which feels like a New Jazz Studies' companion piece to Arthur Knight's essay from Krin Gabbard's *Representing Jazz*; and BBC2's *Jazz 625*, a ground-breaking programme on 'live' music TV as well as jazz, that the author discusses in terms of modernism and state-of-the-art technology rather than as 'authentic' filmed performance. Pillai's text has an engaging tone and finds a natural balance somewhere between an informal eloquence and the nerdy, semi-obscure argot of film and cultural studies, specifically aimed at scholars of those disciplines. But he clearly shows a credible passion for jazz in his analysis. The well-researched, biographical notes on filmmakers Lye and Mili and the backdrop to the BBC's jazz coverage and the 625 legacy will likely be intriguing stuff for jazz-loving bookworms, being elements that are largely neglected in the standard literature. But most significantly, *Jazz as Visual Language* is essentially a lesson on how the perceptive and metaphorical eye of the camera can offer alternative perspectives on jazz. **Selwyn Harris**

When Genres Collide

Matt Brennan

Bloomsbury HB 72

Brennan begins with the plausible

premise of exploring the relationship between jazz and rock via the writings of *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone*. Based on Brennan's doctoral research, the tone is learned but not turgid. This man has read serious truckloads of music magazines. Helluva job and he's the man to do it as an alumni of the admirable Stirling University, with a style and attitude owing much to mentor Simon Frith. However, by setting up such polarities, jazz vs rock, *Down Beat vs Rolling Stone*, under 30s vs everyone, Brennan underplays the messier, but probably more accurate dialogical processes that went on between the mags and musicians who tried to make sense of the music (and political) world of 1967-1971. Which is another problem: Brennan has consciously stopped his book at precisely the time when jazz and rock were profoundly in conversation with each other and indeed found, if briefly, the kind of audiences that jazzers of the early 1960s could only dream of. It also means that the effect of punk on jazz (largely through the utter rejection by Brit punk journos of anything 'jazz') is not part of Brennan's book. Indeed, Brennan is annoyingly one-eyed about sticking to American media: the extraordinary melding of musics in *Melody Maker* and *Sounds* for example, barely gets a mention. Nor is there any meaningful exploration about how this 'collision' between jazz and rock fed into the next 45 years of music. If jazz and rock were so at each other's throats, where is the thread that 50 years later leads to *Jazzwise*, with its mix of respect and irreverence for all kinds of music? As for Django Bates re-imagining *Sergeant Pepper's*, well, he's definitely been reading the wrong books. **Andy Robson**

