

BOOK REVIEWS

The Art Ensemble of Chicago's Free-Wheeling Style Shines In 'Message to Our Folks'

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KEVIN WHITEHEAD



Message to Our Folks

The Art Ensemble of Chicago

by Paul Steinbeck

Hardcover, 346 pages

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Paul Steinbeck's new book chronicles the antics, both on and off stage, of the storied jazz ensemble. Critic Kevin Whitehead says *Message to Our Folks* celebrates the band's success on their own terms.

DAVE DAVIES, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. In Chicago in the 1960s, a group of black composers formed the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians dedicated to making original music that freely crossed genre lines. The AACM's flagship band was the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Jazz critic Kevin Whitehead says a new book about the Art Ensemble explains how well they took care of business onstage and off.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "GET IN LINE")

THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO: Get in line (unintelligible). Get in line.

KEVIN WHITEHEAD, BYLINE: The Art Ensemble of Chicago was a freewheeling, anything goes kind of band. But as Paul Steinbeck stresses in his illuminating book "Message To Our Folks: The Art Ensemble Of Chicago," its four founding members were all ex-military and ran their low-budget, audience-building tours with military discipline. They crammed their heavy vehicles with equipment, did their own cooking and slept in tents. That mobility and cooperative spirit let the young band move their operation to Paris in 1969. That trip made their reputation. They stayed two years and recorded a boatload of albums that showcased their stylistic range and flashes of theatrical humor.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO COMPOSITION, "A JACKSON IN YOUR HOUSE")

WHITEHEAD: The diverse backgrounds of the Art Ensemble's founders fed their polystylistic music. Malachi Favors was an established jazz bassist who'd come up playing in church. Joseph Jarman was well-versed in theater, poetry and John Cage's random procedures while fellow saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell explored abstract structures. Lester Bowie was a natural comedian who could make the trumpet talk. He also had a head for business having already run his then wife Fontella Bass's rhythm and blues band. She sang on a couple of the Art Ensembles French records.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "THEME DE YOYO")

FONTELLA BASS: (Singing) You're fanny's like two sperm whales floating down the seine. Your voice is like a long fart that's music to your brain. Yeah.

WHITEHEAD: Bassist Malachi Favors had introduced the idea of playing so-called little instruments for added color, never mind that the Art Ensemble's percussion array was enormous. They had no drummer for a while, so everybody pitched in. In Paris, they acquired a fifth member, Famoudou Don Moye. A jazz drummer well-versed in traditional African rhythms, he brought more focus to the band's percussion jams.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO COMPOSITION)

WHITEHEAD: In his book "Message To Our Folks," Paul Steinbeck examines a few recordings in great detail, looking at ways the Art Ensemble of Chicago flowed between composition and collective improvisation and among the sound worlds of jazz, experimental music and more. Steinbeck also describes their shrewd business sense. Their management targeted performing arts networks that paid better than jazz clubs. And they courted the prestigious ECM label, which recorded the band's atmospheric beautifully. That late-'70s ECM deal raised their profile and got them out on the road even more.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO COMPOSITION, "JA")

WHITEHEAD: Author Paul Steinbeck doesn't say the Art Ensemble peaked in the 1980s, but he speeds through their later years. Longtime improvising bands can start to repeat themselves. The Art Ensemble changed up the set list from night to night, but you weren't surprised if they began a concert with atmospheric percussion and ended with a heavy swing.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO COMPOSITION, "DREAMING OF THE MASTER")

WHITEHEAD: In the 1990s, Joseph Jarman took a long sabbatical, weary of the road. Lester Bowie died in 1999 and Malachi Favors Maghostut in 2004. A few last albums, with or without replacements, mostly lacked the old magic. But a decades-long hot streak is nothing to sneer at. Paul Steinbeck's book reminds us the Art Ensemble of Chicago got gratuitously trashed in Ken Burns' "Jazz" series as a misguided band without an audience. But Steinbeck's message to our folks demonstrates how well they succeeded on their own terms. They made just the uncompromising music they wanted to, and they made it pay.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO COMPOSITION, "HAIL WE NOW SING JOY")

DAVIES: Kevin Whitehead writes for Point of Departure and TONEAudio and is the author of "Why Jazz?" He reviewed the new book "Message To Our Folks: The Art Ensemble Of Chicago" by Paul Steinbeck.

Coming up, quotations and misquotations are everywhere thanks to the internet. Our linguist Geoff Nunberg talks about getting them right and whether it matters. This is **FRESH AIR**.

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