

THE WIRE 465 | NOVEMBER 2022

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Tyshawn Sorey | Devin Townsend | Horse Lords | Joyce | Big Joanie

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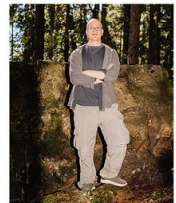
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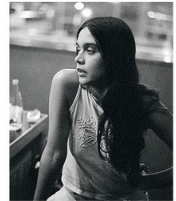
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Cover: Tyshawn Sorey by Hannah Price

The Masthead

Preparing to test new speakers on my hi-fi, I push Pharoah Sanders's otherworldly *Thembi* into the CD player. "Astral Traveling": bassist Cecil McBee's E-string hums in the lower register like the deck of a ship, and Lonnie Liston Smith's phased electric piano revolves slowly above like a constellation of stars. Over the top is Sanders's saxophone, holding long, breathy notes until they break into sensuous overtones or warm tales of breath. As he plays, it pans cosmically across the stereo spectrum – perhaps the first time these possibilities of the studio had been explored on an Impulse! album. The players do not sound in the same room as each other so much as planets orbiting in the same star system.

Sanders, who died on 24 September aged 81, was one of the towering figures of Black music of the last 60 years, and to call him just a jazz musician, improviser or saxophonist gets nowhere near the visionary role he assumed in his music. The way I hear his playing, he rarely improvised in the lineage of tenor players like John Coltrane, Joe Henderson or Wayne Shorter, teasing out the variations and implications of one phrase or melody and carrying it forward into the next. Instead, Sanders explored spaces within the music, filling them out and making them breathe with either elemental force or infinite tenderness. My favourite Sanders piece is "Japan", just three minutes long. A loose bassline and chant are struck up by the band, using bells and other small instruments, and everyone joins in. The sense of togetherness is so intense that nothing needs to be added, and Sanders does not even need to play a note.

If Sanders was a musician who did not even perform on some of his most beautiful creations, what description could possibly sum him up? The role he assumed on his albums was somewhere between a bandleader, session producer and spiritual seer.

The discussion regarding how to label players coming out of, but transcending, jazz clubs and

record labels, has been rolling in the pages of the magazine for decades. In this issue's Paul Steinbeck piece on Black composers, Paul relays how at the first meeting of the Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians, co-founder Muhal Richard Abrams declared, "We're not really jazz musicians." This month's cover artist Tyshawn Sorey, interviewed by Stewart Smith, relays Fred Lerdahl's observation when he was struggling to find his own identity as a musician: "You want your composition to be as logical and as well thought out as how you would approach an improvisation."

As Steinbeck explains in his essay, the term composer has unfortunate connotations of mastery, deriving from a division of labour in Western classical music: those who conceive of the music, versus those who are merely there to perform it. Fortunately, this distinction is being challenged from several angles. Composers, often from the sphere of Black creative music, are increasingly open to the forces of collaboration, chance and chaos in their music. Meanwhile, electronic technology has given anyone with a laptop the kind of moment to moment control and strategic planning of sound which was traditionally the composer's domain.

Composer can feel like an awkward description when music is in a state of flux and indeterminacy, or explores emotional states beyond any kind of calmness or composure. But when you factor in the sense of empowerment and liberty that the term suggests, it's only right that all musicians should be considered composers of their own little worlds. And when it comes to Sanders and Sorey, it's great to see that some creative musicians can still manage to evade all categories entirely.

This month we say goodbye to Ben Weaver, the long-serving head of our design team. Joining us is Guillaume Chuard, co-founder of [Ard.works](#), who we welcome as our new Art Director.

Derek Walmsley

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Rise Of The Super Musicians



Muhai Richard Abrams



Nicole Mitchell

Vai Wilmer (Abrams); Joyce Kim (Mitchell)

After a century of marginalisation through Eurocentric and racist bias
Black composers in the US have created a new context for creative music
through models such as the AACM. By **Paul Steinbeck**

For a very long time, African-American composers struggled to receive recognition, especially for their most innovative work. Scott Joplin's ragtime scores sold well in his lifetime, but his magnum opus, the opera *Treemonisha*, was not staged until 1972, 55 years after he passed away. The compositions of Florence Price are gaining attention only now, nearly a century on, thanks to the work of researchers like Samantha Ege. And Duke Ellington, considered by many to be the best composer in US history, is still waiting for the Pulitzer Prize he was denied in 1965.

Ellington would have been the first Black composer to earn this prestigious honour, and upon learning that the Pulitzer jury had recommended him for the prize, only to have the recommendation rejected by the organisation's board, he remarked wryly, "Fate is being very kind to me; Fate doesn't want me to be too famous too young." The Pulitzer board relented only after his death, giving him a posthumous citation in 1999 – the same award they belatedly offered to Joplin (1976), Thelonious Monk (2006), John Coltrane (2007) and other giants of Black music.

There may be many reasons why timely recognition eluded them, but race was surely a factor. Joplin and Price did not look like the opera and symphony composers of the American popular imagination, and across the Atlantic, the situation was no better – it was not until the 1970s and 80s that African-American classical composers such as Alvin Singleton gained acceptance in Europe. The exclusion of Joplin and Price from classical music was rooted in the belief that the form is essentially European, even though "[classical] music has long [been] multinational and multicultural", as composer George E Lewis observed. Moreover, to classical music's self-appointed guardians, composers like Ellington presented an additional problem. Ellington was a jazz composer, and jazz was not serious music, in the view of classical partisans.

Since the middle of the 19th century, classical music had been defined by the conspicuous absence of improvisation. Virtually every other musical form, in every time and place, included improvisatory moments where the performers spontaneously created music together. But in the classical tradition, improvisation gradually disappeared, and the music was transformed from a performing art to an "imaginary museum", in the words of philosopher Lydia Goehr.

In this imaginary museum, composers were the artists and performers were their instruments, tasked with faithfully playing each note exactly as it appears on the score. Performers' interpretations might differ, but improvising on the score – or setting it aside entirely – would endanger the entire enterprise and was therefore forbidden. From this perspective, jazz represented a thoroughgoing challenge to the classical aesthetic. The best jazz musicians were just as virtuosic as classical performers, but much of their playing was improvised and not reliant on a composer's guidance. And jazz composers seemed less interested in exerting authority over performers and more interested in creating platforms for improvisation.

The collaborative approach to creativity helped make jazz the most inventive and influential music of the first half of the 20th century. But in the US as well as Europe, institutional acclaim eluded composers who hailed from the wrong side of the colour line, or whose music sounded too much like jazz. So in May 1965, the same month that Ellington was denied the Pulitzer Prize, a group of Chicago based African-American composers decided to take the situation into their own hands. They founded the non-profit Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), and dedicated it to supporting the creation of new pieces. The Association worked toward this goal in two ways: by presenting concerts of AACM artists' original compositions, and by building a culture in which all the members helped each other to cultivate highly individual styles as composers and performers.

AACM members could investigate any musical form – or create their own – but one genre seemed to be out of favour. "We're not really jazz musicians," co-founder Muhal Richard Abrams announced at the nascent organisation's first meeting, and everyone in attendance could understand why. Many AACM members had played jazz professionally, but by 1965 making a living as a jazz performer was nearly impossible in Chicago. Jazz composers had it even worse, with poor economic prospects and no hope of being taken seriously by the musical establishment. The artists responded by devising their own form, "creative music", that drew inspiration from American and European experimental music – and countless more styles from around the world.

Crucially, the members of the Association did not erase improvisation from the musical language that they were developing together. Instead, AACM musicians combined composition and improvisation in new ways, going beyond the models provided by jazz and by indeterminate experimental music. Additionally, AACM artists continued to perform at the highest level, rather than retreating into the composer's studio.

They became "super musicians", as Roscoe Mitchell put it, able to compose in any style and improvise fluently in every kind of musical setting. Most importantly, the members of the AACM were committed to teaching younger musicians, so that the organisation's rising generations could freely enter into the musical universe that the Association was creating.

The AACM's ambitions were not realised right away. In 1969, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell and five other members moved from Chicago to Paris, where they found that it was incredibly difficult to have their "notated music ever respected or performed". On one occasion, Mitchell was commissioned to compose a piece for a film soundtrack, but the professional musicians in the studio orchestra refused to play his score, so he had to replace them with students from a Paris conservatory.

Decades later, however, Braxton and Mitchell's scores are regularly performed by orchestras and chamber ensembles in Europe and the US, while other senior AACM members – George E Lewis, Nicole Mitchell, Wadada Leo Smith and Henry Threadgill – are among the most celebrated and highly awarded composers on the planet. And their protégés, from AACM artist Tomeka Reid to non-members such as Tyshawn Sorey and the Swiss composer-percussionist Jessie Cox, have already become major figures in 21st century music.

Every contemporary composer-performer, even in the absence of direct ties to the Association, is indebted to AACM members' extraordinary experiments in sound. Nearly 60 years after their founding, the world of music is a lot more like the Association – more innovative, less beholden to outdated models, and more welcoming to Black composers – and for that we can all be grateful. □ Paul Steinbeck's *Sound Experiments: The Music Of The AACM* is published by the University of Chicago Press