

Block's detail-rich history with other scholars from those perspectives.⁵ Nonetheless, survey course instructors, students seeking background on these particular film adaptations, and readers interested in these musicals will enjoy the detailed analyses of the similarities and differences between the stage and screen versions, and will likely find this book to be a helpful resource and a gratifying read.

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Sound Experiments: The Music of the AACM

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During a recent duo performance with the pianist Angelica Sanchez, the Pulitzer Prize finalist Wadada Leo Smith—a trumpeter, composer, and longtime member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM)—paused in the middle of an intricate passage and quietly whispered the words “slow down,” presumably a note to himself.¹ A quiet gesture surely as audible to Sanchez as it was to the audience seated nearby, it appeared to have an immediate impact on the musical performance. Smith's phrasing became more paced, with elongated, slowly unfolding melodic passages matched with nearly equal amounts of silence. Sanchez's piano gestures immediately transformed as well, with the duo creating a slow motion soundscape of impressionistic melodic fragments and carefully calibrated, suspenseful resolutions.

Paul Steinbeck's recent book, *Sound Experiments: The Music of the AACM*, was on my mind as I experienced the performance. Smith's music is the subject of chapter 8 where Steinbeck mainly focuses on the incredible *Ten Freedom Summers*—a massive five hour long multi-movement work with a score of more than 250 pages that was premiered over three evenings at REDCAT Theater in Los Angeles in 2011, and featured the classical ensemble Southwest Chamber Music and Smith's Golden Quartet.² Among other notable elements, Smith's piece illustrates the ways in which AACM artists often deploy an aesthetic that traverses the boundaries of so-called “classical music” and the multitude of other musical traditions that, taken together, support what Smith calls an inclusive “world music” practice.³ Steinbeck's analysis focuses on “Emmett Till,” the fifth movement of *Ten Freedom Summers*, and includes excerpts from the score and examples of Smith's Ankhration notation, along with a

⁵See for instance: work on Paul Robeson in *Show Boat*, see Shana L. Redmond, *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). Deborah Paredez addresses the legacy of the 1961 film adaptation of *West Side Story* among Latina/o audiences in “‘Queer for Uncle Sam’: Anita's Latina Diva Citizenship in *West Side Story*,” *Latino Studies*; *London* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 333–52. Juliana Chang considers identity, modernity, and empire in “I Dreamed I Was Wanted: *Flower Drum Song* and Specters of Modernity,” *Camera Obscura* 29, no. 3 (87) (2014): 149–83. Raymond Knapp covers several of these musicals in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹Presented by Pioneer Valley Jazz Shares, the performance took place on Friday, March 10, 2023, at Buckley Recital Hall at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

²Wadada Leo Smith, *Ten Freedom Summers*, Cuneiform Records RUNE 350/351/352/353, 2012, 4 compact discs.

³See (Wadada) Leo Smith, *Notes (8 Pieces) Source a New World Music: Creative Music* (self-published, 1979).

helpful focus on the ways that the Golden Quartet and Southwest Chamber Music interact with one another. Steinbeck also offers an overview of Smith's career, explaining, among other musical ideas developed by the composer and improviser, Smith's concept of the "rhythmic unit"—an approach likely at play in the concert with Sanchez described above. Indeed, Steinbeck's book is a caring and careful guide to hearing transformative musical ideas from AACM composers in performances and on recordings.

The Art Ensemble of Chicago, one of the AACM's marquee groups, was the subject of Steinbeck's first book, *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago*.⁴ The benchmark of the literature on the AACM is George E. Lewis's *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, a far-reaching insider's ethnography and history written by an important "second wave" member of the organization.⁵ Steinbeck's second book, *Sound Experiments*, adds to the literature on the AACM by presenting a model for analyzing recordings and compositions from several generations of AACM musicians. In this way, it reveals a broad range of rich compositional complexities from various composers while celebrating landmark recordings and ensembles within the organization's development since its founding in Chicago in the 1960s.

The book is organized around analyses of ten works by AACM artists spanning three generations of its musicians. The first chapter focuses on two landmark recordings from the 1960s: Roscoe Mitchell's *Sound* and Muhal Richard Abrams's *Levels and Degrees of Light*.⁶ As important primary documents from AACM's first decade, the albums were released on the Chicago-based Delmark label—a fruitful relationship that introduced listeners around the world to the music of first generation AACM artists. Steinbeck's useful and illuminating analytical approach emerges during this first chapter, through which he provides transcriptions of melodic and rhythmic phrases of select passages, and gives concise time-based overviews of the pieces' forms using charts with minute and second markings that assist the reader while listening to the recordings. He also provides historical context for how we might understand the aesthetic strategies that make up this music. While revealing the rich compositional and performative choices by Mitchell, Abrams, and their collaborators, Steinbeck's simple yet effective analytical approach—select transcriptions, discussions about the overall timing of key structures and approaches in the music, and broader historical framing—offers a readymade set of materials for those of us who teach and study contemporary music.

In chapter 2, Steinbeck examines Mitchell's enigmatic solo recording of his composition *Nonaah*, performed live at the Willisau festival in Switzerland on August 28, 1976.⁷ An accident of sorts, Mitchell's performance was an unscheduled replacement for a group led by his AACM colleague Anthony Braxton, who had been held up by travel delays (Mitchell had just performed with the Art Ensemble of Chicago as the festival opener two days prior). More than 22-minutes long, Mitchell's legendary alto saxophone performance of *Nonaah*—a piece he recorded several times for varying ensembles over the years—was astounding for its meticulous use of repetition and gradually unfolding melodic content. Steinbeck helps the reader to understand the performance's use of repetition and its carefully developed three part form. The author also describes the intense give and take between performer and the large audience audible on the recording, who initially seemed disappointed by Braxton's absence but was subsequently won over by Mitchell's showstopping performance.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on two other important AACM recordings from the 1970s: Braxton's 1978 release *For Trio* and the album *Air Time* by the trio Air, comprised of reed player Henry Threadgill, bassist Fred Hopkins, and percussionist Steve McCall.⁸ Steinbeck focuses extensively of Braxton's piece *Composition 76*, composed in 1977 and included on his *For Trio* album. Transcriptions by the author are combined with examples of graphic notation from Braxton's score to offer a textured reading of the

⁴Paul Steinbeck, *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁵George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁶Roscoe Mitchell, *Sound*, Delmark Records DS-408, 1966, LP; [Muhal] Richard Abrams, *Levels and Degrees of Light*, Delmark Records DS-413, 1968, LP.

⁷Roscoe Mitchell, *Nonaah*, Nessa Records N-9/10, 1977, 2 LPs.

⁸Anthony Braxton, *For Trio*, Arista Records AB 4181, 1978, LP; Air, *Air Time*, Nessa Records N-12, 1978, LP.

compositional and performative elements of this formative piece, revealing features of the artist's compositional development in the 1970s and '80s. As for *Air*, Steinbeck's analysis in chapter 4 provides useful insights into the trio's relationship to ragtime, noting how it positioned the group in a unique historical matrix that was simultaneously traditionalist and expansionist, and how the group transformed historical ragtime forms into broader suite-like approaches that offered seemingly endless creative possibilities. Together with Henry Threadgill's recent autobiography, Steinbeck's analysis contributes to a growing literature on the acclaimed Pulitzer Prize winner's music.⁹

In chapter 5, Steinbeck turns toward the "second wave" of AACM artists who joined the organization during the 1980s, and focuses on MacArthur Fellow George Lewis and his enigmatic composition *Voyager*, a software-based, algorithmic piece that suggests interesting issues around agency, artificial intelligence, and creativity, while a computer is effectively transformed into an improvising musician. While *Voyager* has been performed many times with varying ensembles (from duo to orchestra settings), Steinbeck analyzes a September 1995 performance on an AACM concert featuring Lewis alone with the improvising software, a recording that was included on his album *Endless Shout*.¹⁰ Steinbeck draws interesting parallels between Lewis's performance and those of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, revealing how elements of orchestration, organization, interaction, and other stylistic devices exist across AACM groups and between human and computer, sounding the kind of "emotional transduction," "multidominance,"¹¹ and other conceptually thick issues that emanate from Lewis's composition. "The AACM's ideals were at the core of *Voyager*," Steinbeck explains, "even though the piece involved a human improvising with a computer rather than an in-person encounter between multiple human performers" (119).

Steinbeck's chapter 6 turns to the work of Fred Anderson, an influential saxophonist and club owner who was part of the *mélange* of AACM's first years in the 1960s, and who remained in Chicago during the ensuing decades, unlike some of his initial AACM counterparts. Among Anderson's many important contributions were his two music venues—the Birdhouse and the well-known and long lived Velvet Lounge—that served as important laboratories to develop his music and ensembles, but that also served as a home for many other AACM artists and a heartbeat of the local creative community. "Under Anderson's stewardship," Steinbeck explains, "the venue came to have one of the most inclusive stages in a notoriously segregated city" (125). Following his useful historical framing, Steinbeck shifts to an analysis of *Volume Two*, a 1999 recording by Anderson's long time quartet with guitarist Jeff Parker, bassist Tatsu Aoki, and percussionist Hamid Drake.¹²

Chapters 7 and 8 bring us closer to the present by focusing on recordings from 2009 and 2011. The AACM Great Black Music Ensemble's album, *At Umbria Jazz 2009*, is the subject of Steinbeck's seventh chapter.¹³ Formed to perform at the fortieth anniversary of the AACM's founding, and led by multi-instrumentalist, composer, and conductor Mwata Bowden, the group draws from a rich ensemble legacy in the AACM that started with the Experimental Band, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and others, while benefitting from Bowden's extensive experience as a bandleader. Together with his analysis of Smith's *Ten Freedom Summers*—discussed above and the subject of chapter 8—Steinbeck captures the significant breadth of music developed by two important first and second wave AACM artists both in and beyond Chicago.

Chapter 9 presents the book's final example, Nicole Mitchell's *Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds*, a ten-movement suite featuring her Black Earth Ensemble that premiered in 2015 and was subsequently published as a live recording on the FPE label.¹⁴ Inspired by the work of author Octavia Butler, Mitchell's piece employs a dystopian fantasy narrative that builds on her earlier

⁹Henry Threadgill and Brent Hayes Edwards, *Easily Slip Into Another World: A Life in Music* (New York: Knopf, 2023).

¹⁰George Lewis, *Endless Shout*, Tzadik Records TZ 7054, 2000, compact disc.

¹¹See George E. Lewis, "Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in 'Voyager,'" *Leonardo Music Journal* 10 (2000): 33–39.

¹²Fred Anderson, *Volume Two*, Asian Improv Records AIR 0054, 2000, 2 compact discs.

¹³AACM Great Black Music Ensemble, *At Umbria Jazz 2009*, Musica Jazz MJCD 1226, 2010, compact disc.

¹⁴Nicole Mitchell, *Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds*, FPE Records FPE 012CD, 2017, compact disc.

2013 companion piece “Mandorla Awakening.”¹⁵ A flutist, composer, and author, Mitchell is part of the AACM’s “third wave,” and served as the organization’s Chicago chair from 2006 to 2011. The recording features a remarkable version of the Black Earth Ensemble that includes AACM “fourth wave” cellist and MacArthur Fellow Tomeka Reid. Steinbeck’s detailed analysis highlights key structural elements of the suite and includes examples from Mitchell’s score.

Sound Experiments is a splendid addition to the growing literature on the AACM. Skillfully combining historical context and structural analysis, Steinbeck provides valuable analytical approaches to a broad range of noteworthy examples over the organization’s nearly 60-year history. For this reviewer, it is also obvious that Steinbeck’s book is a readymade set of analytical studies that can and should easily be incorporated into reading lists for undergraduate and graduate analysis, composition, and history courses. The AACM’s music traverses stylistic contexts, often residing simultaneously in and across traditions of experimentalism and traditionalism. In bringing together such a broad set of examples, Steinbeck also celebrates the kind of inclusive community building that has seemingly fueled the AACM’s vitality and continuity over the years. The “very history of the AACM,” explains Steinbeck,

can be understood as an open improvisation writ large. Establishing a new musical community on Chicago’s South Side, advancing the practice of multi-instrumentalism, carving out territory for African American composers on the experimental-music scene—all of these AACM accomplishments were without precedent and could only have been achieved by a group of artists working together to create order spontaneously, without relying on existing models (120).

By now there is no mistaking the importance of the AACM to American music and its history.

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¹⁵This earlier piece has not been released as an album. See Michael Ricci, “Nicole Mitchell Premieres Collaborative Multi-Arts ‘Mandorla Awakening’ November 22–23, 2013,” *All About Jazz*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/news/nicole-mitchell-premieres-collaborative-multi-arts-mandorla-awakening-november-22-23-2013>. Also see Nicole Mitchell Gantt’s book, *The Mandorla Letters: for the Hopeful* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).