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Great Black Music, from Ancient to the Future: a thorough history of Chicago's AACM illuminates the group's achievements and far-reaching influence. By **Stewart Smith**

**Sound Experiments: The Music Of The AACM**  
**Paul Steinbeck**

University Of Chicago Press Pbk 254 pp

The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians is arguably the most important collective in postwar music, providing a platform for the South Side of Chicago's community of composers and improvisors, while exploding preconceptions about what an African-American artist could be. Founded in 1965 by Muhal Richard Abrams, Jodie Christian, Philip Cohran and Steve McCall, the AACM is the most enduring of the autonomous organisations to emerge from the jazz avant garde that decade. As the trumpeter and composer Wadada Leo Smith wrote in 1973, "The contribution of the AACM to creative music is in evidence throughout the musical world."

In *Sound Experiments: The Music Of The AACM*, Paul Steinbeck traces that contribution through ten landmark works, from Roscoe Mitchell's *Sound* in 1966 (the first commercially available AACM recording) to Nicole Mitchell's *Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds* in 2017. While celebrating the genius of individual composers, Steinbeck recognises the importance of the organisation's collective practices to realising their ideas. As Anthony Braxton wrote in his *For Trio* (1978) sleeve notes, "As is always the case with creative music, the actual creativity is an affirmation and testament to all the people participating."

The narrative follows the AACM's adventures in jazz, experimental music, electronic music and computer music, and explores the development of its members' innovative practices in extended forms and multi-instrumentalism, notation and conducting.

Steinbeck also acknowledges the AACM's engagement with Black popular forms, from funk and reggae through to hip-hop and electronic music. He gives a good account of the cultural, social, political and economic contexts from which the music emerged, and is keenly aware of the racialised gatekeeping which has all too often kept AACM composers from getting their due. On the latter point, he is optimistic. "Back in the 1960s," he writes, "the AACM's founders dreamed of carving out a space for African-American composers in the realm of experimental music." With Henry Threadgill being awarded the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Music, he argues, that dream became a reality.

Steinbeck's previous book *A Message To Our Folks* (2017) was a fine musicological study of the AACM's flagship The Art Ensemble Of Chicago. He builds on the approach of that book by combining historical inquiry with detailed musical analysis, all delivered in cleanly descriptive prose. Interviews and archival research further enrich his readings of the music. The author recommends reading the commentaries alongside the music – it can all be streamed from his website – and this proves illuminating, helping the reader to follow the development of ideas and understand the musical decisions being made. Extracts of the scores and transcriptions are provided, alongside charts breaking down key musical events or formal features.

You don't have to be able to read music to get something out of these: Braxton's scores, an idiosyncratic collage of standard notation, colours and shapes, are always fascinating, while the elaborate hand-drawn lines that Nicole Mitchell weaves around the staff give a vivid illustration of

how the musicians might shape their improvisations.

An analysis of Roscoe Mitchell's marathon solo performance of *Nonaah* at the 1976 Willisau Festival draws on the composer's own sketches and Steinbeck's transcriptions, underlining the idea that for the creative musician, composition and improvisation are two sides of the same coin. The chapter on George Lewis's *Voyager*, meanwhile, perceptively situates the interactive computer system within the AACM continuum of orchestral music that started with Muhal Richard Abrams.

As much as the formal innovations of its early members continue to inspire subsequent generations, the AACM's longevity is also down to its strong community ethos. Through its educational programmes, and the activities of bandleaders like Mwata Bowden and venue owners like Fred Anderson, the AACM continued to nurture new talent. As a musician, Steinbeck has firsthand experience of the AACM's social aesthetics as well as its formal practices. His chapter on Anderson's *Volume Two* (2000) is particularly rich in its depiction of the improvised music scene around the saxophonist's Velvet Lounge club in the 1990s and 2000s. The unofficial headquarters of the AACM in that period, The Velvet Lounge hosted legendary Sunday evening jam sessions that were pivotal for a new generation of musicians like Jeff Parker, Tatsu Aoki, Nicole Mitchell and Matana Roberts. Steinbeck doesn't put himself into the story, but his love and respect for Anderson and the wider AACM community shines through.

Ultimately, the reader comes away with a greater appreciation of the AACM's achievements: Great Black Music, from Ancient to the Future. □