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AACM: NEW MUSIC (!) NEW IDEAS (?)

I

A ROOM IN MANDEL HALL, University of Chicago, was the scene of a performance of avant-garde, or "free jazz," by the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

I walked in during an intermission, and after lighting up my pipe began checking out the parties present. In one corner sat a Jesus-looking character who was excoriating the United States position in Vietnam to some five listeners. What struck me is that in about eight minutes of raving he uttered every "Dove" cliché I'd ever heard. A Jewish-looking chick (but really, how is someone Jewish-looking?) was reading Guerrilla, a pulpsheet printed in red and expressing similar views. Three other bearded boys were avidly consuming the I. F. Stone Report, and there were a host of other hippie types looking glib while standing around.

The racial shading of this scene denoted other understandings of a sort. Practically all the Negroes present had barricaded themselves into one corner of the room. About half of them wore some variation of the "natural look."¹ Ties were not to be seen, but the quality of clothing of about half those present indicated that in the not too distant past, a lot of somebodies had dropped mucho bread at a few of "Whitey's" plusher haberdasheries. There were also a few gents present in African garb. With myself, I played a game: Listen to the conversation, and then pick out the African from the Afro-American. There was only one interracial couple in the house, and apparently they made a point of it not

to sit in the Negro section. Miscegenation has obviously lost favor among some segments of the Popsi generation.

Nobody knew when the musicians would return, or whether they would play again. Finally they drifted back to the place where they'd left their instruments, and this AACM-sponsored performance was on again. One saxophonist, Roscoe Mitchell, I'd known from previous years, but this was the first time our paths had crossed for over two-and-one-half. Dressed in a style of jacket I had last seen worn by Indians in Bolivia and Peru, Roscoe seemed the angry young man who wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to be angry about. I asked him how much the musicians were making for this performance. He shook his head. "We're doing this for exposure, man." Well, each to his own choice.

The lights went out, and abruptly, the music began. Generally, in free jazz, there is no central theme, and one of the most cherished freedoms (as seen by some) is the death of chord structures and patterns, which tended to give the music a cognizant form. Sometimes five or six instruments soloed at once, sometimes only one. There were moments of tension, swoops, swirls, squeaks, grunts, euphoria, anger, laughter. Mitchell (saxophone), Charlie Clark (bass) and Rip Riccardo (piano) seemed to have a message they wished to impart; the intents and desires of the other music-makers could not be discerned by this listener.

After the first tune lasted one hour, I became bored and left the room. Making my way toward the door, I couldn't help observing the rest of the audience. Some sat impassive; others appeared groping to discover the great truth they believed the music held. As a musician, I wondered: Most of these people are probably not musically trained, and some of them have had no prior grounding in any form of jazz. How much of this, the most complex form of jazz yet attempted, could they understand? As a student of human nature I thought: If one of the musicians grabbed the mike and stated he supported L.B.J. on Vietnam, how many of this audience would be back for the next AACM affair?

One question I did think I had an answer for. Earlier in the evening, a white fellow had asked Richard Abrams, Association President, what did the initials AACM stand for? Abrams spotted me coming, and answered the Anglo-Sax type, "AACM stands for the Association for the Advancement of Colored---uh---Creative Musicians." When he said it, I thought he winked.

* * *

The sign on Richard Abrams' wall read "Peace, Love, Health to All." I have known Richard Abrams since 1952, when both of us played in Les Johnson's Band. In those days, Richard worked for \$8 a night in the numerous "slash-and-grab" joints on Chicago's 31st Street.² Both of us had come a long way. Now, as President of AACM, Abrams explained how the organization strove to protect its 35 members, and provide a "show-case for musicians who couldn't otherwise be heard."

For almost fifty years, black jazzmen have complained that they made the jazz innovations, but the whites picked up most of the receipts. Sepia-toned performers have long fulminated against the phalanx of bookers, recording company executives, and club owners who determine the musical product presented to the public. Late in the 1950's, Negroes came into their own in jazz, financially as well as artistically, but most of the benefits accrued to the older musicians.

The explosion of Ornette Coleman on the New York jazz scene (1959) set the stage. Free Jazz, or the "New Thing," as it was often called, proved a combination stimulus-catharsis. With the emergence of a new jazz form came new faces prepared to use it as their vehicle for telling the world what they saw, thought, heard, tasted and felt. But free jazz is hardly cocktail music, and even staunch jazz buffs blanched and screamed vile oaths when first exposed to the "new thing." Finding much of the jazz public as well as many of the older musicians hostile, young Chicago jazzmen surrendered some of that near-anarchical independence for which that breed has been noted, and organized. On May 8, 1965, the AACM was born.³

While AACM is not totally committed to the presentation of avant-garde jazz, its members have to present "original music." The Association also sports a laudable list of aims. It intends:

- A. "To cultivate young musicians, and to create music of a high artistic level for the general public through the presentation of programs designed to magnify the importance of creative music.
- B. "...to create an atmosphere conducive to artistic endeavors for the artistically inclined by maintaining a workshop for the expressed purpose of bringing talented musicians together.
- C. "...to provide a source of employment for worthy creative musicians.
- D. "To set an example of high moral standards for musicians and to uplift the public image of creative musicians.
- E. "To increase mutual respect between creative artists and musical trademen (i.e., booking agents, managers).
- F. "To uphold the traditions of elevated cultured musicians handed down from the past."⁴

But, who exactly are these "cultured musicians" which the organization intends to bring together and help? Abrams readily acknowledged that AACM had only one white member, Gordon Emmanuel. To what might be termed reverse tokenism, Abrams stated that chiefly, due to environmental factors,

most whites were neither ready to play or accept avant-garde jazz. The "creative musicians" were blackmen, and AACM hoped to facilitate the emergence of blackmen in general, and the aforesaid musical artists in particular.

About these and other matters, Abrams spoke convincingly. Here was no mere whiner about the evils which "Whitey" had inflicted upon Afro-Americans. Initially, the Association had experienced a variety of crises, but Abrams demonstrated that the number of playing engagements was increasing, the membership had become stabilized, and publicity had taken an increasingly favorable turn.⁵ But, were all the members in agreement concerning the avowed purposes of the Association? Was there not the danger that AACM would become too dependent upon one kind of fan? At this point, Abrams' replies became increasingly vague. Concerning AACM and the universitarians, for example, he declared that in times of stress their support was negligible. However, if this were true, why does AACM play free concerts on a college campus? Particularly on questions regarding finance, Abrams gave evasive replies. Perhaps he felt these matters were, to put it frankly, none of my business.

After ending the interview, I asked Abrams about the significance of the almost triangular blue stone he wore around his neck. Again he smiled---and made a faintly plausible and innocuous reply. I left with the feeling that I had been handed both a box of truths---and a bag of "goods."

II

It was another room in Mandel Hall, another AACM happening (the principals being Roscoe Mitchell, reeds, Lester Bowie, trumpet, Malachi Favors, bass and Phillip Wilson, drums). Little but the season had changed significantly. While the musicians performed, there was no smoking or drinking. After studying the grim looks on the assembled faces, it occurred to me that smiling or showing teeth was also frowned upon. Whatever happened to all the joy that used to be in jazz? Seems as if a lot of people have gotten hung up on observing their own navels.

The concept of Public Relations took another beating. No tunes were announced, there were no programs and aside from an intermission announcement, verbal communication between performers and the audience was kept to an absolute minimum. I suppose the transcendent question to be asked is what was the manner and quality of the musical rapport established between performers and audience. The best I can say is quien sabe, man, quien sabe. For long periods, drummer Wilson's efforts submerged all other sounds, and the room's accoustical qualities left almost everything to be desired.

The performers' appearances were bound to catch the attention of the uninitiated. Multiple reedman Mitchell sported an Indian

headband and a mixed necklace of bangles and beads. Bassist Favors had painted his face Cherokee style,⁶ while trumpeter Bowie's garb was a grotesque caricature of the Mod look.

The quartet's last number was the only one to strike a responsive chord in the psyche of this listener. The Mitchell group presumably strove to recreate neo-New Orleans echoes with a boppish flavor, all within a free jazz framework. Unfortunately, Mr. Wilson's percussive pyrotechnics made it difficult to determine exactly what the other performers were trying to do. Under these conditions, I wondered how much other parties further to the rear (I had a center seat on the aisle) either heard or understood. With the end of this tune, the 50 or 60 collegians and/or would-be scholars clapped it up a bit and speedily departed. (Maybe I shouldn't be so harsh with those people; their hearts are in the right place---maybe).

About two hours later, the young lady who accompanied me to the spectacular got around to expressing how the music had affected her. Her comments were distinctly unfavorable (bear in mind she is hardly what I'd call a jazz fan), but her observations on the prevailing social atmosphere had a much more credible ring. "Gee," she said, "I felt like a federal offender going in there in dress, stockings and high heels." Indeed, she was not the only person who considered herself an invader from bourgeoisville. In Brook Brothers, white shirt and tie, so had I, baby, so had I.

Five days later, Roscoe Mitchell sat across the table sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes. It's always easier to interview someone you know, and critical recognition in his chosen field of endeavor had enhanced Mitchell's self-confidence. Questions that other musicians might have dodged, he answered in a straight-forward fashion:

On free jazz and AACM members:

...It was time for another kind of jazz... Bebop was hacking the new cats... I ain't going to tell you that everybody's (in AACM) a Charlie Parker... Lots of the young cats (Roscoe is 27) got a long way to go...

On the jazz scene today and tomorrow:

...Chicago will be the new music center. This is the only place with a real organization (Reference to AACM)... Musicians in New York (are) just walking the streets.

Mitchell was high on his AACM associates because "they helped me." His enthusiasm aside, the organization had in general inculcated a sense of camaraderie which probably none of the members previously experienced. On the question of race, Mitchell thought the inclusion of one white member advantageous, but stated flatly that black nationalists among

AACM members had drawn contrary conclusions. Was he aware of the kind of audience organization concerts seemed to be attracting? Mitchell declared that he was well aware of the predominance of seemingly alienated youth at AACM presentations, but for him the kind of audience was not important "so long as they drop their bread."

In all, we swapped past and contemporary jazz stories for two hours before I summoned sufficient courage to ask Roscoe about his attire. (He was wearing the same beads and Indian headband he'd worn for the concert previously described.) Were these particular pieces of apparel a symbol of some kind? Mitchell's reply demonstrated that unlike some jazzmen on the rise, he did not yet take himself to be a messiah of sorts: "I like colors, man." All Roscoe Mitchell wants to do is blow his horn. He has no significant interests outside of jazz, and possibly he has the tools to become a jazz giant. Right now, he is both a loyal AACM member, and the association's most celebrated personage. But will the growing fish remain in his relatively small pond? What happens when and if his star eclipses that of the others?

III

On March 25, 1967, AACM members (Joseph Jarman, Roscoe Mitchell, reeds, Lester Bowie, trumpet, Malachi Favors, bass, Thurman Barber and Phillip Wilson, drums) performed a concert for a student group at Washington University, in St. Louis, Missouri. The racially mixed audience was predominantly composed of unkempt youths, but scattered liberally about the small auditorium were a few well groomed parties. Hopefully, most of them were really there to hear jazz.

They all got their money's worth. In addition to playing music, the AACM representatives put on two skits. In the first, while the musicians played "Hail to the Chief," a figure dressed in enlisted man's uniform, Fifth Army arm patch, four stars on each shoulder, and a rubber mask of Lyndon Johnson, strode about the stage waving wildly. When the pseudo-LBJ mounted the platform to speak, one of the musicians hurled a cream pie in his face (wild applause and laughter from the audience).

In a second skit, Joe Jarman read the Gettysburg Address with musical accompaniment. When he intoned the words "... that all men were created equal" he disgustedly threw away the script. (Again shouts, wild applause). It was imaginative but predictable political slap stick. Compared to the skit, the music played was relatively uneventful. Thank goodness though, the tunes were announced. Financially, I was informed that the affair provided the musicians with a much better pay day than they had generally experienced. For all parties (except perhaps any Democratic Party precinct captains who may have been present), it was probably a very satisfying affair.

And what do young jazzmen who are not members of AACM think about that organization and Free Jazz? Joe Boyce, a respected figure among Windy City vibraharp players, saw both the March 25, St. Louis Concert and several other AACM presentations. In addition to being a musician, Joe is now a reporter for the Chicago Tribune. Over a few gin and tonics, Boyce expounded his views on the March 25 concert:

...a lot of the things they (i.e., the musicians) were doing were exciting, some of the things were beautiful. Other things? Man, I wanted to get up and go home.

Boyce's general ambivalence about free jazz and AACM is shared by many jazzmen, young and old, black and white:

Much of the avant-garde (i.e., free jazz movement) is a shadow for cats who can't play. Some of them play well. I may not dig what's done, but I don't oppose their right to do it.

William "Billy" Quinn is a drummer by night, and Associate Editor for Downbeat Magazine, Jazz Americana's most significant voice, in the daytime. He attended the March 25, St. Louis concert and knows many AACM members intimately. He has no sympathy, however, for the indifference to public relations which he feels some Association members have carried to an unfortunate extreme:

AACM will hold a concert at a place where you can't smoke or drink. You can carry the integrity bag too far. If they (i.e., AACM members) want to be abstainers, fine, but.

As Downbeat's man-on-the-scene for several AACM presentations, Quinn has tried to be fair in his coverage of these events. Unfortunately his written remarks have made him persona non grata to some of the Association's members. It was to Quinn an old story: Critics were discerning, intelligent souls when their pens poured forth unalloyed praise. Let them become even slightly critical, and musicians denounced them as tin-eared ogres hypnotized by their own verbosity. Despite the situation, Quinn wished Richard Abrams and his colleagues every success. Why? Because whatever their disagreements, they were all jazzmen, and if they kept fighting among themselves, how would they all wind up?

IV

It was stifling up in Lester Lashley's attic, and his hi-fi system was roaring. Roscoe Mitchell's first album was the source of our concentration,⁷ and the beer I was drinking didn't make the music sound any more coherent. I closed my eyes thinking that might help.

To me, free jazz is like Babe Ruth in the batter's box. The Babe hit 714 home runs, more than any man alive. However, he struck out 1,330 times, and that's also a record. These figures demonstrate that Ruth fanned almost twice for every four-bagger he slapped over the fence. Free jazz can evoke momentous, soul-shattering emotions, but more often to these ears, it's a leap into the dark with the odds against finding anything down below. The mountain labors and labors and--- "Wake up, Les." Lashley was shaking me. The beer, the heat and the music had combined to facilitate a trip by Yours Truly to the Land of Nod. On occasions like this, one puts on his best sheepish grin and says, "I heard a few nice things before I dozed, man. Play the second side again." He did. Five, ten minutes later, I rejoined Morpheus. It's a good thing Lashley was compassionate. "Well, Les, someday you'll hear it. The heat's something else, isn't it?" The moment was propitious to indicate to the owner of the hi-fi system that both of us were in agreement about something. "Say Lashley, how about another beer, man."

Lester Lashley plays trombone, bass, and cello. On numerous occasions, he has tried his hand at painting. His greatest fear is that multiple interests may cause him to spread himself too thin. This could happen, but Lashley's outlook is so much healthier than most jazzmen, one feels confident that he can fashion viable solutions to his problems.

Mr. Lashley is a member of the directing board of AACM and the organization's enforcement officer. In his opinion, the central purpose of AACM is the maintenance of the Negro's historical heritage, and as he puts it, this goal is "always in the back of our minds." Since jazz is seen as the Negro's gift to America, or "our thing" as some prefer to call it, Gordon Emmanuel's election precipitated a major crisis. Lashley observed that once Emmanuel was voted in, a number of AACM members opted out. He further remarked that despite Emmanuel's good record, numerous association members remained markedly hostile.

As AACM's preserver of law and order, Lashley has succeeded chiefly in straining personal relationships with his musical associates. Jazz musicians are notorious for their refusal to abide by any regulations, including those of their own making. AACM rules, for example, state that members must attend all weekly meetings and pay dues of \$1.00. Certain members, bemoaning their impecuniousness, have been allowed to dispense with the payment of these dues. Efforts to collect back dues when the aforesaid members acknowledge solvency have, according to Lashley, met with grudging compliance, obstinancy, and even flat refusal. Association regulations demand the payment of fines by rule infractors. Attempts by Lashley to collect even nominal sums from guilty members have met massive resistance. In discussing his struggles to get the membership as a whole to concentrate on mutual financial and disciplinary problems, AACM's enforcer exhibited an air of resignation:

...Sometimes, I get so mad at the cats, I want to quit.
Then...I go out and have a few beers.

Despite his misgivings about the proclivities of his associates, the immediate future of AACM and Lester Lashley are inextricably entangled. In December, 1966 Lashley resigned his daytime job as an industrial draftsman. Like most AACM members, he now implements his meager musical income with unemployment compensation and various odd jobs. For Lashley to prosper, the association must forge ahead and attain greater critical acclaim. My trombonist-cellist-bassist-painter amigo has taken a calculated risk under hardly favorable circumstances. In this case, I fervently hope that the nice guys will not finish last.

V

Despite the arrival of AACM as a force in jazz, there are some questions about its future. The association's productions are more dependent upon the support of the beard-and-sandal set than its members care to admit. The brothers of AACM may look with disdain upon the jejune be-boppers, but some of the former could learn valuable lessons by playing a few sessions with yesterday's rebels. Quite a number of the AACM membership need to be convinced that no harm is done if they announce the tunes played or introduce the performers. Concerning the payment of fines and the execution of disciplinary action, the young bloods must realize that everyone who says he will obey the rules does not intend to do so; if an organization does not enforce its rules, eventually it must collapse.

All these criticisms while cogent, fall before the fact that AACM is unique. It represents the only successful attempt in the U.S.A. thus far to form an avant-garde jazz cooperative which allows the individual artist to present his music in the manner he deems favorable, have it performed by empathetic cohorts, and receive a payday in the process. Most intriguing is the fact that young Chicago jazzmen have done the impossible without the assistance of the national establishment or the local tastemakers. Psychologically, the gradual emergence of AACM again gives the lie to the suspicion still prevalent among many blackmen, that the Negro can never effectively operate anything on his own.

Paradoxically, this same black determination and drive could destroy the edifice so painfully constructed. AACM can indefinitely produce small affairs in the shadows of the University of Chicago. More than likely, an increasing number of college dates (like that of March 26, 1967 at Washington U.) will come their way. But, such efforts can do little to further the plans of the Association to provide aid for members in financial straits, or create within the Negro people a consciousness of jazz as their cultural heritage. The earnestness of the membership in the pursuit of these goals is not in question. The

difficulty is that attainment of any of them requires the sudden arrival of a mountain of greenbacks in the AACM treasury. When and how will this be done?

I discussed this question with Richard Abrams, who doggedly insisted on discussing nothing but the adequacy of association dues. How far \$1.00 a week from 30-35 members (even if they all decide to pay) will go toward paying a member's medical expenses, renting a large hall or paying for publicity is hardly worth the conjecture. Furthermore, any significant increase in the amount of dues would almost certainly reduce the number of payees. Lester Lashley readily acknowledged the need for outside finance, and asked what ideas I had on the subject. This writer suggested (a) a loan, or (b) a grant from some federal program or private foundation. Lashley smiled and shook his head. Suggestions along this line had already been vetoed. The bulk of AACM members wanted no part of "Whitey's" dirty money because then they might be beholden to or dependent upon either the Caucasian interests or the despised black bourgeois.

Such an attitude may be popular in Negro nationalist circles, but it does not pay the freight. Unless new sources of income are tapped, growth and activity must continue at a relatively low level. Will the Roscoe Mitchells and the others who receive critical acclaim remain active participants in an Association which only inches ahead? This writer thinks not. Bluntly, many AACM members will have to exchange some of their ideological biases for some stiff doses of pragmatism if they hope to make relatively rapid progress. It will be interesting to see whether those who have come so far so fast can make perhaps these last necessary steps toward maturity.

VI

Does this study of AACM possess any relevance vis-a-vis the overall socio-economic condition of the Negro today? Do the principles and practices of AACM give us any penetrating insights into the mood of the urban Negro, circa 1967-68? Discovering similarities and constructing analogies is a traditional game for historians; and on the subject of racial relations, many of the comparisons presented in the past have been rather farfetched. There is, however, one observation upon which this writer would like to expand. Attention has been focused on the determination of the predominant opinion in AACM to oppose the acceptance of any assistance from the established sources of beneficence. The nearly unanimous position taken by adherents of the majority view was that success was not enough. AACM has to succeed without the aid of the white-controlled power structure. "Ofays"⁸ and middle-class blacks may clap hands and buy tickets, for the musicians feel that they should be encouraged and enriched for presenting their artistic talents. To receive a grant or loan, however, is to sell out. Ultimately, then, victory must bring with it vindication.

Closely allied to this ideological concept are the views of the association members on race. It is unlikely that AACM will accept any more whites in the near future. Initially, it was conceivable that the Association's members might be more tolerant of those whites whose views on socio-economic matters were sympathetic, but further observation tended to negate such a contention. One might have a friend in the sense that "some of my best friends are Negroes," but in the final analysis all white men are enemies.

The less sophisticated blackman in the urban ghetto may be ignorant of free jazz but deep inside, perhaps he feels he must smash a store window before he can accept the job the state offers. Could it be that the youth sniping from the apartment house roof may want to present his grievances, but only after he has avenged himself on the nearest available pale face? It is just possible that a Negro mob must first defeat the police in Cleveland, Watts, or Newark before ghetto residents will be psychologically inclined to cooperate with the various state and federal programs. Like AACM, the attainment of self-respect may be viewed as contingent upon Whitey's overthrow.

Those who feel there is a significant quantity of truth in this analysis may also conclude that AACM is an excellent specimen for a more scientific examination. Hopefully, such a study would provide new perception into the racial convulsions that have and will continue to sweep the country.

NOTES

¹The natural look or "Afro" is a hairstyle which expresses a socio-political position. Negro women have for years used hot irons, hair and scalp treatment (i.e., straighteners, relaxers, permanents) to make their curly, kinky hair straight. Negro nationalist sentiment disdains such activities. In particular, straightening the hair is seen as "aping Whitey." Negro women espousing such views wear their hair undressed and unadorned, generally clipped an equal length on all sides. The style has gained some popularity in the last six years, and the nationalist sentiments of some of the wearers may be questioned.

In the last five years a similar style has become the vogue among Negro males of similar views. As in the previous case, using oil on the hair and/or straightening it is viewed as being "Uncle Tommish." Instead, the hair is allowed to grow about equally long on all sides and is not parted.

²The phrase "slash-and-grab" makes reference to a string of taverns (and the clientele which frequented them) on 31st Street, south, between South Park Avenue (400 East) and Wentworth Avenue (200 West) prior to the redevelopment of the area in 1952-54.

Arguments between semi-inebriated customers generally ended in violent altercations between the patrons, many of whom were armed. If the struggles became unusually fierce, musicians stopped playing, packed away their instruments, equipment, etc., and ran for safety as fast as possible.

³The four charter members of AACM were pianist Jody Christian, drummer Steve McCall, trumpeter Phil Cohran, and Abrams. None of the first three named remain leading powers in the organization.

⁴The interview with Richard Abrams took place on June 5, 1967, in Chicago, Illinois. The list of Association goals and statement of purpose was at that time presented to this writer.

⁵AACM regulations provide that in all affairs sponsored by the Association, the ushers, for example, are to be AACM members, and at least half (groups up to four) and sixty per cent (in groups of more than four) of the performers must be members of the Association.

⁶I was unable to interview Mr. Favors. On June 7, 1967, Roscoe Mitchell informed me that bassist Favors painted his face in a particular fashion to indicate his belief in what Mitchell referred to as "Egyptian Philosophy." As far as this writer was able to determine, adherents of this variety of Black Nationalism hold that at one time the Egyptians, a non-white people, controlled the known world. They hope to hasten a return to a situation where non-whites again control the world. If this description of the theory seems sketchy, keep in mind that non-sympathizers are not confided in by partisans of such groups.

⁷The album is called "Sound," (D-408) and the producer is Delmar Records, a Chicago concern.

⁸"Ofay," or pig-latin for "foe," has long been a term employed by jazz musicians to describe whites. In recent years, the "o" has been dropped, and "ofays" (i.e., white people) have become "fays."

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

1. The interview with Richard Abrams took place on June 5, 1967, Chicago, Illinois.
2. The interview with Roscoe Mitchell took place on June 7, 1967, Chicago, Illinois.
3. The interview with Joe Boyce took place on June 4, 1967, Chicago, Illinois.
4. The interview with William Quinn took place on June 6, 1967.
5. The interview with Lester Lashley took place on June 2, 1967.