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JAZZIN' THE CLASSICS: THE AACM'S CHALLENGE TO MAINSTREAM AESTHETICS

RONALD M. RADANO

Operating in the marginalized field of jazz, where sheer economic survival often garners praise and admiration, Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) stands as a symbol of the community's hard-knocks, dues-paying credo. Founded as a fledgling operation in spring 1965, the association has now been accorded the stature of "a landmark institution . . . [that] occupies a highly respected position in the ongoing tradition" (Corbett 1990, 61). Significantly, however, interest in the AACM legacy has depended more on the visibility of its most famous former members than on the recent accomplishments of the organization itself. For fans, writers, and publicists alike, Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman (all members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago), Henry Threadgill, Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, and, above all, AACM "founding father" Muhal Richard Abrams pay testimony to the group's integrity, having survived against the odds amid the difficulties attributed to "ghetto life." As one wades through the vast literature on the organization, a larger-than-life portrait emerges that may be likened to a hip version of a Horatio Alger success story: the AACM becomes a vanguard monument to progress and achievement, a creative if not capital accomplishment, full of rags-to-riches glory (for historical background on the AACM, see Wilmer [1977] 1980; Giddins 1981; Litweiler 1984).

Built into this image of the AACM is a set of contradictory assumptions about the aesthetic position from which the artists operate. First portrayed as iconoclastic musical representatives of the cultural nationalist movement, the chief figures of the AACM have been transformed, at various times,¹ into new, community stars who reaffirm the essence of the "art of jazz." At once these musicians appear to be primitive radi-

1. Braxton in the 1970s, the Art Ensemble in the 1980s.

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cals whose “ghetto cries” have recast jazz into a “great black magic” and members of a time-honored tradition who receive high marks in “best of” album lists and talent polls (Smith 1975, 4; Case 1979, 48). The legacy of the AACM and its finest musicians has ultimately become a metaphor for the durability of jazz as a whole, even as the artists themselves challenge, both rhetorically and artistically, classicist labels and style-specific categorization. As such, the AACM is subjected to conflicting reports: on the one hand, it is a radical challenge to the construct of a dominant jazz mainstream; on the other, it is yet another brand of the enduring same.²

An appropriate corrective to these conflicting portraits must begin with the identification of an aesthetic that is consistent with the organization’s original aims—aims that, while no longer couched in the vernacular of the 1960s, refer to an agenda mapped out by Abrams and his circle. To make sense of the AACM aesthetic, then, requires situating the association within the social contexts and philosophic traditions from which it emerged. Doing so will show that the AACM’s intent represented a legitimate challenge to mainstream conceptions of artistic value and stylistic continuity, having based an aesthetic on alternative supports of grass-roots self-help and radical Afrocentricity. These supplied the social framework for a revitalization of the African-American musical sensibility through the oppositional language of modernism. Rather than paying tribute to classicism in its exaltations of race-specific expressions (“creative music,” “Great Black Music”), the AACM has voiced a response to the appropriative tendencies of jazz music’s official culture. In this way, the AACM aesthetic ideology supplied the basis for a grand signifying riff on mainstream valuations, a way of, to extend a pun, *jazzin’ the classics*.

I

No doubt that the founding musicians of the AACM owed much to the tradition of jazz. Most had first fashioned their art against the back-

2. In his review of the Art Ensemble’s *Urban Bushmen*, appearing as part of a compilation of the decade’s top forty jazz albums, Stuart Nicolson (1989–1990, 54) positions the group on a contradictory middleground between vanguardism and the mainstream: “The AEC have continued to hold onto their hard-earned corner of the avant-garde into their third decade; their music simultaneously far-out or accessible—depending on which end of the telescope you view them from. Their ability to rationalise the freedom of the ‘60s with dynamics, form and structure, sprang from a realisation that the great energy of players such as Coltrane in his final period, Ayler and to a lesser extent Shepp, was ultimately destructive.”

ground of hard bop and later worked with reference to the free innovations of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Albert Ayler. As an institution, however, the AACM seemed to refer less to jazz—despite that genre's legacy of close-knit ensembles and "commonwealth" bands—than to the vast network of grass-roots institutions that helped shape the social character of Chicago's South Side. Perhaps most conspicuous among these institutions was the diverse assemblage of black churches. Numbering around five hundred at one count in the late 1930s, many churches had been transplanted from the rural South during the Great Migration (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1962, vol. 2, 381). These organizations provided an anchor in traditional beliefs and culture for recent immigrants as they bridged the gap from farm and town to factory and city. If the strength of the church seemed to falter somewhat during the shift, it nonetheless supplied a moral foundation for a new, modern (urban) way of life, helping the southern-born black "to utilize his religious heritage in order to come to terms with changes in his own institutions as well as the problems of the world" (Frazier [1964] 1971, 136–137). As a forum for musical expression, moreover, the church created a nexus for sacred/sonic linkages, fostering extensions of rural religious music in the form of black gospel, a style and repertory that resonated with the moral certitudes of traditional African-American religion. When these sacred codes were transferred into the popular realm by Mahalia Jackson and other Chicago-based performers, they "project[ed] a sincerity of purpose . . . [of] profound religious conviction" that blurred sacred/secular dichotomies and underscored traditional associations between the sacred world and musical practice (Ellison [1964] 1972, 215). Gospel may have also been instructive as a voice of defiance and self-actualization, especially when civil rights leaders such as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., reaffirmed traditional black associations between protest and the church. Such an association would seem to have been especially important to the AACM, given, as we will see, the moral and ethical centeredness of its art.

While the church provided a sacred model for institutionalizing group perception, there was a diverse range of community operations that brought such organizing efforts into the every day. Having developed against the background of black social clubs in the South, this coalition of neighborhood organizations, professional associations, and formal enterprises transformed community closeness into a politically motivated constellation of grass-roots activism during the civil rights era. Formally organized in Chicago under the umbrella of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) in 1961, the coal-

tion would soon incorporate religious councils and affiliates of national groups such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in an effort to improve social, legal, and educational rights for blacks (Anderson and Pickering 1986, 2). Further, the dual power of secular and sacred institutions would escalate to dramatic proportions when Reverend King established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's headquarters on Chicago's West Side in 1966. Local campaigns such as Breadbasket and People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), along with the CCCO, the Chicago Freedom Movement, and other numerous short-term projects, garnered support from much of the black community, even if some of the more ambitious plans faltered under Mayor Daly's pressure (Anderson and Pickering 1986; Weisbrot 1990, 178–185). For while they may not have attained entirely what they set out to do, these organizations succeeded in reinforcing the sense of solidarity and group sentiment among many black Chicagoans. Given their visibility and status within the community, it is likely that they also inspired the musicians of the AACM, who shared a similar commitment but who worked toward an artistic end, one that they felt would celebrate and ennoble the black musical heritage.

II

The musicians who helped foster the AACM reflected the strength of these communal legacies both in their everyday interaction and in the nature of their music making. Many had been raised in Chicago, typically on the South and West Sides, where "like all dark people," Leo Smith has remarked with only slight exaggeration, they learned to make music at church with their families (Wilmer [1977] 1980, 113).³ Eventually they came to know one another as they entered various music networks or, in some cases, by attending the same colleges and schools.⁴ As a loose assemblage representing disparate tastes, the musicians organized the Experimental Band, a local rehearsal group. After a period of shifting orientations and membership, Abrams assumed principal leadership, and the band became dedicated to free practice (Mitchell 1988;

3. In addition to Smith, whose early musical learning took place in the South, other members have referred to their backgrounds in religious music. For example, Leroy Jenkins notes that he learned to play violin in his family church; Anthony Braxton remembers singing in a gospel choir; Alvin Fielder recalls performing in gospel groups; Malachi Favors lived the sacred life as the son of a preacher. Fielder has remarked about the AACM, "it was like a church—it *was* my church" (Wilmer [1977] 1980, 117).

4. Henry Threadgill, Joseph Jarman, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, and Jack DeJohnette, e.g., were all students at Wilson Junior College.

Townley 1974, 34).⁵ Together, Abrams, Jarman, Mitchell, Threadgill, and others shaped an improvised art that, through incessant rehearsal, could mimic the designs of complex orchestrations. Creating an art that relied on a kind of communal sensitivity, they built "community" into the art itself. Accordingly, community-inspired ideals became a fundamental motivation for the Experimental Band's interactive musical procedures.

According to many participants, Abrams's influence extended beyond musical practice, as he encouraged members to direct their ambitions to specific and productive ends. His home on 67th Street provided a place for musicians to congregate and learn from each other, and his boundless energy offered a model of purposefulness and commitment (Braxton 1983; Mitchell 1988). Abrams's guidance was a recipe for personal development, recalling similar messages being spoken by church and civil rights leaders. It also recalled the ministerial presence that historically characterizes some of the most influential black musicians, including Abrams's contemporary, John Coltrane, who embodied the prophetic character of "the new jazz." Joseph Jarman speaks passionately of Abrams's influence in this frequently cited yet still poignant recollection:

Until I had the first meeting with Richard Abrams, I was "like all the rest" of the "hip" ghetto niggers; I was cool, I took dope, I smoked pot, etc. I did not care for the life that I had been given. In having the chance to work in the Experimental Band with Richard and the other musicians there, I found the first something with meaning/reason for doing. That band and the people there was the most important thing that ever happened to me (Figli 1967).

If Jarman's statement resembles rhetoric as much as an "objective" recollection, it nonetheless identifies the impact of Abrams's teachings as well as the likemindedness of many of the musicians under his influence. There is no doubt that the band, and most particularly, the AACM, had its share of conflicts⁶; accordingly, it is important not to romanticize the organization into a collection of selfless, saint-like individuals. Yet it is also important to recognize that Abrams's influence was a profound one, that his influence would inspire young players

5. Initially (c. 1969), the rehearsal group operated mainly as a casual forum for the "elders" of Chicago's jazz youth: among others, Eddie Harris, Donald Rafael Garrett, Victor Sproules, and Abrams. Younger players such as Wallace MacMillan, Troy Robinson, Gene Dinwiddie, and Maurice MacIntyre (Kalaparusha Ahrach Difa) also joined in, some staying on to form the AACM. After a breakup around 1962, Abrams, Garrett, and Harris revamped the group by turning to Jodie Christian, Steve McCall, and Jack DeJohnette; DeJohnette brought in Jarman, Mitchell, and other Wilson Junior College colleagues.

6. These ranged from varying political and ideological positions to disputes about the admission of white musicians into the organization.

even in the face of an economic decline that left jazz by the mid-1960s on the economic margins of popular music. Abrams succeeded by building upon the traditions of self-help and self-reliance that define the character of Chicago's black community, and indeed, African-American history in general. These models, together with the spirit of black nationalism that had begun to animate the South Side, supplied the principal organizational foundation for the formation of the AACM.

A consideration of the AACM's founding suggests that it had formalized the organizational premises and spirit of cooperation that had first been developed in the Experimental Band. At the initial meetings, thirty-five to fifty musicians formulated a "corporate structure" based on a one-person one-vote decision-making process, with Muhal Richard Abrams as president and John Shenoy Jackson and Lester Lashley as administrators. They also drafted a preliminary outline of intent in which AACM members expressed their principal aim of sponsoring performances themselves. Weekly dues (one dollar) supported concerts and ads in local and underground newspapers; any profits were then paid to the performing musicians. New members could join only after having been nominated by an AACM musician and receiving a majority vote. All members were encouraged to participate in weekly sessions and to play in the AACM big band, an outgrowth of the Experimental Band (Mitchell 1988; "Jazz Musicians' Group" 1966, 11). While members could play in bands outside the organization, they had to maintain a majority of AACM musicians in their own groups (Rout 1967, 139). By 1966 the association boasted a surfeit of bands that maintained fluid memberships, although players tended to cluster according to their stylistic preferences for free jazz (led by Abrams) or more accessible expressions (led by cofounder, Phil Cohran). Performances took place at clubs such as the Blue Gargoyle at 5655 South University, the Hungry Eye on North Wells, and the Phamous Lounge; at the University of Chicago, where the AACM had acquired a significant following; or at Abraham Lincoln Center, a South Side community center on East Oakwood Boulevard ("Performance" 1969, 6; "Strictly Ad Lib" 1966; Mitchell 1988; "Lincoln Centre" 1969, 8).

Published accounts show that the AACM's collective relationship soon transcended specifically musical concerns and began to address social issues that related to the black musician. Abrams elaborated on some of these aims in a 1966 profile ("Jazz Musicians' Group" 1966, 11). After explaining the organization's commitment to "original music" and "genuinely individual expression from each musician," he then outlined some of its other aims. These included a grass-roots fund-raising cam-

paigned to finance the training of AACM musicians and a program offering musical instruction to black teenagers (Litweiler 1975a, 13). Abrams also underscored the AACM's intent to correct the persistent negative stereotypes of the jazz musician, which had defamed the black heritage and hindered artistic growth. Above all, Abrams reported, the AACM sought "to set an example of high moral standards for musicians and to return the public image of creative musicians to the level of esteem which was handed down from past cultures" ("Jazz Musicians' Group" 1966, 11). These aims, together with plans "to stimulate Spiritual growth in Creative artists, . . . to uplift the public image of Creative Musicians," and "to uphold the tradition of elevated, cultured Musicians handed down from the past" originally appeared in the AACM charter and subsequently in the notes to Joseph Jarman's "As If It Were the Seasons" (Delmark DS-417).

The charter's guarded reference to a cultured musical tradition betrayed the centrality of blackness as a defining artistic category. From the start, an affirmation of blackness was basic to the AACM's goals. The organization was founded by blacks to perform "black music." As a self-help organization, it sought to foster a rarefied form of black artistic modernism that could not hope for support from outside sources. Nor did the membership seek such support. At the beginning, at least, the AACM stood decidedly against accepting grants from formal institutions, which they believed would only perpetuate the paternalistic treatment they, as black artists, sought to overturn. The musicians organized and promoted their own concerts. They gained the help of Chuck Nessa, a local record producer, who established a series of AACM recordings on Robert Koester's blues label, Delmark Records. Abrams, moreover, created a music-publishing operation, Richarda Music, to publish the membership's original works (Litweiler 1967, 41). The AACM's commitment to self-direction expressed a tacit condemnation of the performance and production environments black musicians had endured over the years. "The music," Roscoe Mitchell told Terry Martin, "is not a sideline for other people's folly. [But] in the clubs, that's what it [has been]" (Martin 1967, 48). For the more radically black nationalist members, the AACM engendered a form of racial separatism: it would be a microcosm of the new black nation (Rout 1967). Through its own concerts, its own promotional mechanism, its own promoters, its own publishing arm, the AACM hoped to transcend the white-dominated corporate structure on which the music had previously depended. In a special report on the AACM, published in the black literary journal *Black World* in November 1973, Abrams and John Shenoy Jackson spoke openly of

the organization's commitment to cultural nationalism. Referring to the black artist as a "cultural missionary," they wrote:

The Black creative artist must survive and persevere in spite of the oppressive forces which prevent Black people from reaching the goals attained by other Americans. . . . For years the mass-media scavengers have stolen and feasted on Black creativity, literally forcing ersatz art on the total American community in general and the Black community in particular. . . . The AACM is attempting to precipitate activity geared toward finding a solution to the basic contradictions which face Black people. . . . [It] intends to show how the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised can come together and determine their own strategies for political and economic freedom, thereby determining their own destinies. This will not only create a new day for Black artists but for all Third World inhabitants; a new day of not only participation but also of control (Abrams and Jackson 1973, 72-73).

III

If the various civil rights groups provided a structural background for the AACM's self-help platform, its efforts were most directly influenced by the coincidental arts organizations that celebrated Afrocentricity, in some cases in the spirit of political activism. South Side galleries (such as the Afam Gallery and the Art and Soul Workshop) and community centers and organizations (including the Southside Community Center, the Blackyard [House of UMOJA], the Museum of African-American History, and the Afro-American Dance and Culture Club) regularly scheduled presentations that placed the African basis of the African-American experience at the center of their work. On the West Side, Phil Cohran created the Affro [*sic*] Arts Theater, a counterpart to the AACM—known colloquially as "the shrine of blackness"—which sponsored a range of performances, workshops, symposia, radical theater, and political events, including a benefit for Imamu Amiri Baraka in 1968 ("Affro-Arts Theater" 1968, 3, 11; "Benefit Jones" 1968, 3). Most closely resembling the AACM was the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), housed at the Abraham Lincoln Center. Programs on local black artists were sponsored and promoted by OBAC, and, in 1969, a literary journal, *Nommo*, was started as part of OBAC's commitment to the creative expression of the black experience. The OBAC's list of goals recalled those of the AACM. The organization sought to

work toward the ultimate goal of bringing to the Black community indigenous art forms which reflect and clarify the Black Experience in America. [OBAC seeks] to reflect the richness and depth and variety of Black History

and Culture. [It also hopes] to provide the Black Community with a positive image of itself, its history, its achievements, and its possibilities for creativity ("Happenings" 1967, 86–87).

Undergirding the ethos of many of these organizations was the belief in Africa as a viable historical and cultural center. As an aesthetic inspiration, Africa provided proof of the cultural, artistic, and moral superiority of black people. Such "proof," it was believed, could be seen when comparing Africa's tribal cultures to the decaying conditions of the West. According to some, the previously celebrated technological, industrial, and scientific successes of the Western world had led down a path of decline, a sentiment that had been shared by many white intellectuals since the initial crisis of modernity. Pan-African cultural nationalism may be construed as an extension of general intellectual questioning of the West's quest for enlightenment through reason. By seeking to raise humanity above the natural world, Western culture, many believed, had sacrificed the sense of communalism and spiritualism preserved in the Pan-Africanist cultural progeny. In the mythology of Africa—and, for that matter, in the everyday lives of many black Americans—one could identify expressions of the social ideals that America's youths were seeking. The importance of solidarity and the tradition of communalism among blacks contradicted the norm of the fiercely competitive, capitalist state; the role that religion played in traditional African and African-American life suggested an antidote to the atheism and extreme secularism of an alienated urban, white world. Africa and its New-World incarnations, it was believed, offered a way out of the Western European aesthetic cycle. It provided an alternative to mainstream belief systems, while reaffirming the individual's basis in the African-American heritage.

IV

An African-inspired cultural nationalism became the official party line of the AACM, whose members—particularly those aligned with Abrams—envisioned an immutable, Pan-African musical legacy transcending cultural and historical categories. "Creative music" was a dialect of the mother tongue, a creation with African origins that had been spiritually preserved in the slave culture of the United States. Evoking images of the musician-seer of tribal Africa, many AACM musicians spoke in priestly terms of black music's spiritualism, which, they believed, revealed a kinship with the ancient mythmakers, the original cultural guardians of black people. Malachi Favors, the Art Ensemble's

"resident specialist" on Africa, helped to introduce many members to radical Afrocentric conceptions of black history and culture, which he had acquired through years of independent learning (Solothurnmann 1969, 31). It was Favors who inspired the AACM's well-known use of "little instruments" (makeshift and exotic percussion instruments, both hand-held and stationary), which, Muhal Richard Abrams explained, "had to do with our thoughts regarding African instruments" (Giddins 1981, 194). Moreover, Favors's performance makeup, which consisted of colorful facial paints, originally expressed, according to Leslie Rout (1967, 139), the bass player's nationalist commitment to an "Egyptian philosophy" that placed blacks at the center of Western civilization and would lead to the return of black peoples' control of the known world. Afrocentric philosophy helped to raise the status of the black musician in the eyes of the AACM membership. By reviving connections with tribal Africa, the black musician had become, in the words of Askia Muhammad Touré (Rolland Snellings), "[a spiritual] holdover from our ancient past. . . . The major philosopher, priest, myth-maker and cultural hero of the Black Nation" (Touré [1965] 1970a, 447; [1968] 1970b, 454).

The AACM's notion of an African-inspired creativity was intimately linked with a collective concept of aesthetic spiritualism. "Spiritualism" became the foremost aesthetic criterion for identifying greatness in art. In an interview with John Litweiler (1967), Abrams spelled out some of these spiritualist notions that had been developing among the musicians since the early years of the Experimental Band. He told Litweiler that life is a balance between two fundamental aspects, the "concrete" and the "abstract." Musicians who seek spiritual transcendence are drawn more toward the latter aspect, an unknown region beyond the boundary of accepted thought. For Abrams and his followers, "transcendence" referred to a kind of intellectual and emotional catharsis. Yet it also defined something else: devotion to aesthetic spiritualism would improve political awareness. The act of experimental music making would teach musicians about "the lies [black] people have been told," while providing a mechanism for them "to break out of" the mind-set that goes hand in hand with spiritual and cultural oppression. The point of complete transcendence was what Abrams called the "spiritual plane," where, through collaborative creation, intuition and intellect meet.

The AACM's concept of aesthetic spiritualism had ultimately extended from its commitment to black self-reliance. Spiritualism celebrated African notions of community and ritual, revamping them to suit a contemporary American end. A commitment to collective action on both artistic and social levels would, it was believed, improve one's

chances for personal gain. By working together for a common good, the AACM musician, as Roscoe Mitchell put it, would learn "to deal with himself as an individual" (quoted in Martin 1967, 47). Collective improvisation itself offered a pathway toward self-improvement; it served as a kind of musical group therapy during which the performers exposed the depths of their creative psychologies.⁷ Aesthetic spiritualism represented a confluence of observations on African musical practice with a countercultural quest for self-expression and spiritual freedom. Learning to "let go" musically affirmed their African-inspired theories of catharsis through a process that resembled social encounter and mixed metaphors of tribal trance ritual and psychotherapy. Equating spiritualism with free expression revealed, moreover, something about the sensibility of the free-jazz musician who displayed a propensity for change, a willingness to take chances in the name of aesthetic and personal progress. "Change is synonymous with any conception of the deity," Abrams explained to John Litweiler (1975b, 12). As a mechanism for self-discovery, change also lies at the heart of the African-American concept of hip, which is traditionally associated with awareness, cunning, and an inscrutable character.

Spiritualism as an aesthetic category might seem hopelessly subjective to the formalist critic who seeks to put a finger on the musical attributes of artistic greatness. Yet that kind of identification was precisely what the AACM musicians (and many traditional jazz players) were trying to avoid. While recognizing differing levels of technical ability and creative originality, these musicians sought to do away with critical efforts to objectify art, a practice that they considered alien to their Africanist notions of art merging with life. According to the AACM's logic, once the critic isolates qualities of greatness, the life essence of the music is destroyed. Yet such efforts of destruction had been, from the perspective of some members, the aim of criticism all along. Leo Smith argued, for example, that critics have created rules and labels in order to set limits on black musical expression (Wilmer [1977] 1980, 114). Echoing Smith's claim, the Art Ensemble of Chicago suggested to a group of writers for *Jazz Hot* that it was whites who applied labels to black musical genres (Gras, Caux, and Bernard 1969, 18). From the AACM's perspective, acceptance of established critical categories would only perpetuate the in-

7. Mitchell's recollection of his initial turn toward free jazz suggests a struggle with a kind of musical repression: "After I began to really listen to this music, I would be playing and feel the urge within myself to play things I would hear, and I fought it for a long time because I wasn't really sure that this was what was happening. Then after I stopped fighting, it just started pouring out" (quoted in Martin 1967, 21). Abrams, moreover, envisioned his big band scores as "psychological plots" (quoted in Litweiler 1967, 26).

justices and repression that black musicians had had to endure over the years. Accordingly, terms such as "Great Black Music," "creative music," and "spiritual plane" offered a way out of that trap, setting up new boundaries constrained only by the limits of one's own musical imagination.

Recalling the commentary of early free-jazz musicians, Abrams and Mitchell have shown that the AACM had some clear ideas about how aesthetic spiritualism could be expressed musically. According to their view, "spiritualism" and "the spiritual plane" were metaphors for a brand of collectively improvised music that exceeded the constraints of harmony. "Cats that play bop are more concerned with things like chords and changes rather than spirits," explained Mitchell. While acknowledging that spiritualism could surface in harmonic music—and with no apparent sense of contradiction about its occasional appearance in AACM performances—he maintained that "in free music you are dependent on the spirits because you don't want to fool with those chords" (Martin 1967, 47). Abrams offered a similar view when outlining his concept of a concrete/abstract dualism. Equating harmony with the emotional and the "concrete," he proposed the theory that "the concrete can't sustain a progressive-type mind." On the other hand, "melody," which he associated with the abstract, "generates a purely mental atmosphere" that may induce "mind expansion" (Litweiler 1967, 26). Driving melody is rhythm, the second element of the spiritual. Unlike harmony, which in spatial terms translates as "vertical," rhythm is time oriented or "horizontal." According to Abrams and Mitchell, then, harmony stood as an aesthetic barrier that restrained black musicians in their search for spiritual unity. As the principal component of European-based music, it became a metaphor for white cultural dominance and oppression: harmony was a sonic reconstruction of the chains that had bridled blacks, of the rationalism that had stifled African spiritualism. In rhythm and melody, on the other hand, the musicians identified formal attributes that stressed the communal, multilinear orientation of West African musics and traditional African-American styles from antebellum spirituals to blues, jazz, and funk. Aesthetic and social concerns would be joined in a compositional procedure that made group awareness a fundamental part of successful music making.

V

Recorded performances by AACM bands bear out these observations. On the title track of Abrams's first album, *Levels and Degrees of Light*

(Delmark DS-413), slow, sustained melodic improvisations performed first by vocalist Penelope Taylor, then by Abrams (playing clarinet), supply the principal pitched material of the work. Shimmering cymbal rolls and oscillating vibraphone swells accompany the improvised lines, creating a sonic texture that evokes images of Eastern exotica and, in reflecting the musicians' embrace of both modernist and black-based sound worlds, recalls early modern "exotic" works such as Maurice Ravel's *Asie*. On Abrams's "Young at Heart" (from the album *Young at Heart, Wise in Time*; Delmark DS-423), the quiet clatter of "little instruments" and plucked piano strings provides a backdrop for Leo Smith's nontonal and often amelodic trumpet introduction. On "My Thoughts Are My Future—Now and Forever" (Delmark DS-413), a frenetic pulse and Abrams's dense, rhythmically enlivened piano textures support a nontonal, free-jazz improvisation. Linear-oriented, coloristic effects also appear in Abrams's "The Bird Song" (Delmark DS-413), where a wash of percussion sounds and ornithological allusions evoke musical images of Parker, Dophy, and Messiaen. They also evoke the signifying potential of the bird reference in jazz, as outlined in Ellison's famous discussion of the Blue Devils Orchestra's "They Picked Poor Robin Clean" (Ellison [1964] 1972, 231). Underscoring the resistant character of "The Bird Song" is the poetic introduction by Amus Mor (David Moore). Blending references to ancient Africa with poetic images of life on the South Side, Mor's reading transcends the isolation of history to promote an exalted sense of blackness. The performance is cast in a dense, reverberating haze that obviously mimics the acoustics of a church cathedral.

On other AACM recordings, linear and rhythmic emphases are presented in the form of chordless and pulseless group compositions in which the members of the rhythm section become equal partners in collective collaboration. On works such as Joseph Jarman's "As If It Were the Seasons" and "Song for Christopher" (both Delmark DS-417), and Roscoe Mitchell's "The Little Suite," "Sound" (both Delmark DS-408), and "Congliptious" (Nessa N-2), traditional instrumental functions give way to an egalitarian group exploration of sound color, or what Mitchell calls sonic "atmospheres." Through a kind of organic unfolding, textural colors emerge, evolve, fade, and reemerge in a kaleidoscopic panoply of percussion and wind instrumental sounds. Lacking a harmonic platform, the musicians work instead from group example, building their improvisations first from the musical style and the mood that the preliminary written sections or head arrangements set up and, subsequently, in a collective, constructivist fashion, they work according to the rhythmic, motivic, and stylistic character of the ensemble's collabo-

rative ideas. Quiet, percussive sounds inspire gentle bowing or subtle mouthpiece noises; flashes of periodic, rhythmic propulsion lead to hard swinging, energized blowing. Sometimes a particular musician will stand out, during which the others accompany. At other times, all players perform in parallel, creating a noninteractive, multilinear web. Rhythmically, moreover, the performers establish a perpetual state of unpredictability that intensifies motion. The heightened rhythmic sense inevitably suggests an abstraction of swing, reasserting images of dance and bodily motion that inform much of the character of African-American music (Wilson [1977] 1985; Stearns and Stearns 1964; Stuckey 1987, 3–97). One hears another African-American constraint in the AACM's sheer range of percussion. Perhaps more fundamental than exotic allusions to tribal Africa, the AACM's little instruments recall the makeshift sound sources of an earlier time in black history, celebrating through modernist abstraction the black vernacular musical legacy.

Perhaps most remarkable about the AACM improvisations is the process by which coherent structures are produced. The improvisations *work*, and they work because of the performers' uncanny ability to comprehend overall architecture during the moment-by-moment act of creation. The musicians are constantly faced with decisions of where to begin and end phrases and sections, when to play and not to play. And they make these decisions to shape a composite texture while also paying attention to signs of where the improvisation might lead.⁸ Such acute sensitivity developed from years of continuous ensemble playing and perhaps more generally from the collective orientation of African-American musical practice, which has been documented at least as far back as the invention of the spirituals (Levine 1977, 25–30). It also pays tribute to the organization's communal ideal, which may explain the quality of anonymity one hears in some of the early AACM improvisations: at moments of true union, the performers offer convincing evidence that they have achieved their ultimate aesthetic end, having melded together their respective musical personalities into an all-encompassing, spiritually unified whole.

VI

The rejection of harmonic and tonal practices in the name of spiritual and ideological freedom, then, lies at the heart of the AACM's approach.

8. A good introduction to the formal character of AACM improvisations on record appears in Jost ([1974] 1981).

These notions to lead the music away from traditional tonal practices first began with the work of Coleman, Taylor, Ayler, and Coltrane, and then reached an apex with the Chicago movement. The revitalization of jazz through advances in the areas of texture and rhythm reflected a sensitivity to contemporary West African practices and reinforced ideological identification with the recently emancipated African states. Furthermore, the appearance of specific formal traits, notably a linear-oriented textural heterogeneity, suggests that these procedures may relate to early practices transplanted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Wilson 1974; Wilson 1990). Yet regardless of the possible African linkages, what seems most relevant to the present discussion is the music's basis in the deep structures of the African-American tradition. In the *Jazz Tradition*, Martin Williams (1987, 3) contends that jazz, at its root, is foremost a rhythmic-based art that finds its source in the musical legacy of black America. Free players seem to have drawn from the linear orientation of traditional African-American practice embodied in call/response as a way of reasserting qualities of "blackness" in a new form of artistic expression. As musicians seeking to make a new generational statement, they cast an art form that gave voice to black distinctiveness through qualities of rhythm and line, qualities that traditionally eluded imitation by whites. Reflecting their stature as serious artists, moreover, they restyled these elusive features by appropriating the abstract nontonal sound world of modernism. By association, then, free jazz had become both aligned with and, through the act of appropriation, distinguished from modernism's creative intelligentsia, an elite world that has historically stood in opposition to the normative perspectives of the social mainstream.

For the AACM in particular, the embrace of modernism served the musicians' Africanist ideals. Modernism provided an artistic bulwark that reinforced their separatist defenses against the values and aesthetics of the jazz mainstream. In this sense, the early AACM fit Peter Bürger's (1984) description of an avant-garde as a movement that sought to reintegrate art into life by distinguishing itself institutionally from the accepted social and aesthetic position of a dominant class. Ultimately, that hope would be challenged when musicians such as Bowie, Mitchell, Jarman, Braxton, Threadgill, and eventually Abrams left Chicago to advance their careers. Yet ambition and the pragmatic need to move on do not negate the aesthetic integrity of these artists, even if their idealism has been somewhat tempered by the sobering effects of politics and culture in the 1980s. Indeed, many of these musicians have continued to embrace a vision of art consistent with the original AACM philosophy

and to carry that vision with them in their participations with other free artists in New York and Paris in the 1970s and 1980s. “[The AACM] taught us the lesson of unity, the lesson of endurance, and the lesson of respect,” Joseph Jarman remarked at the association’s 15th anniversary gathering, as he offered a prelude to current President Mwata Bowden’s reference to “the spirit” that all members, old and new, “never lose” (Corbett 1990, 61). As such, the spiritualist aesthetic of the AACM has endured as a kind of double consciousness, a mutability that resists binary absolutes and that counters institutional attempts to obscure difference in the name of conventional interpretations of art.

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