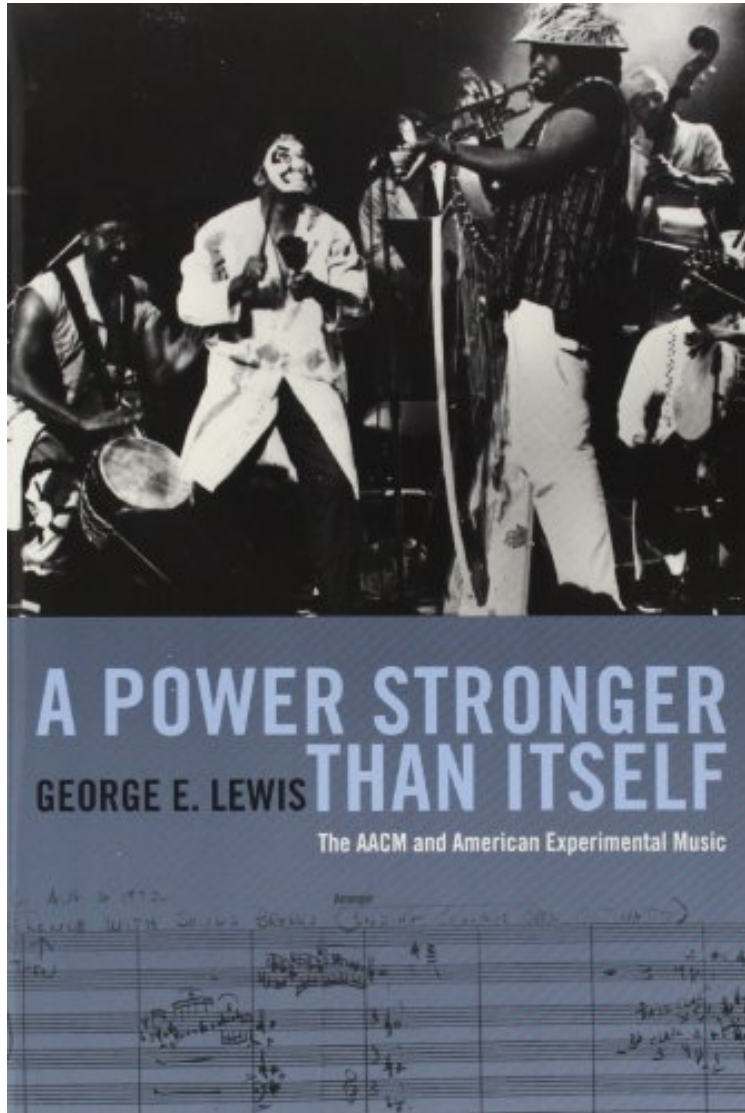


A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music

George E. Lewis

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George E. Lewis : A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Definitive AACM history by one of its greatest members By Anthony C. Alexander George Lewis has written one of the great books about music. He interviews virtually every

AACM musician of consequence and tells the story of the organization that transformed "jazz" only to be rejected by the jazz police of the 80s and 90s. As a Chicago native who followed this music from my first exposure to it in the early 70s, buying records, attending concerts, reading interviews, etc., I was astounded, upon reading this book, to discover how much I did NOT know about the AACM. These days, Threadgill, Braxton, Wadada, etc. are accorded elder statesman status, time having vindicated their musics, while Nicole Mitchell and others are making exciting new music. This book plays a major part in that vindication. Be warned: it's length is epic, as befits the story. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. his rigorous scholarly approach is more arm's length analytical than what could easily have become cheerfully self-congratulatory

By Glen S. Hall George Lewis should get a medal for his insightful, comprehensive book on the AACM. Although Lewis has the benefit of being an insider in the organization, his rigorous scholarly approach is more arm's length analytical than what could easily have become cheerfully self-congratulatory on behalf of this staggeringly creative collective, many of whose members have become iconic, world renown artists. Full of details and personal anecdotes from and about AACM members, this is not a bloodless academic tome. It is made alive with accounts of the social and political realities that were the soil in which the AACM planted its seeds. 13 of 14 people found the following review helpful. This is an awakening we're trying to bring about.

By greg taylor George Lewis has given us a monumental gift. His history of the AACM is a combination of scholarly work that runs to over 500 pages and 70 plus pages of notes with the best kind of historical narrative. Lewis has written a group biography with the framework of an institutional history. He situates the origin of the AACM within the biographical stories of how the founders and members tried to address issues of resources, education and performance opportunities. He is relating all this within a history of Chicago's black community, a history of creative improv, a history of the struggle to control the definition of what the artists were doing and a history of how the AACM addressed issues of gender, class and race within its own structure and within society at large. He writes as a participant, as a listener, a friend, a biographer, a historian, a sociologist. As a theoretician who is, again, trying to control the definition of what he, his friends and his community were doing. That last sentence is a point that is worth reflecting upon. Lewis' story, I believe is centered around his large theme of the struggle of the black experimental artist to control the definition of what they are doing- what tradition(s) their work came from, what it means and how it is to be presented. He largely explores this theme in a three-sided conversation between the musician's own reflections on their artistic practise, the history of the critical reception of music produced by AACM artists and a metareflection on that history of criticism wherein Lewis unleashes a considerable body of lit and critical theory. Sometimes this results in small brilliant essays like the section entitled, "Beyond a Binary: The AACM and the Crisis in Criticism" (pp353-369). I also want to emphasize the humanity of the book. Lewis' history is reliant on interviews that he did with 65 members of the AACM. Some of them he interviewed multiple times (Muhai Richard Abrams spoke to Lewis on seven different occasions). These interviews are the basis for much of the historical narrative of the book. Lewis gives us brief biographies of dozens of artists- we learn about artists like Abrams, Lester Bowie, Anthony Braxton, Jodie Christian, Gene Dinwiddie, Chico Freeman, Julius Hemphill, Steve McCall, Roscoe Mitchell, Amina Claudine Myers, Henry Threadgill ad infinitum. I grew up with this music. For some reason, when I was about 16, I started buying the early AACM stuff as it became available in Portland. Probably because it was on Delmark which also put out a ton of great Chicago blues which I was, am, will always be crazy about. So for me, all these interviews are insightful, funny, painful and revelatory. Their individual stories speak to what I see as two other major themes in this book. It is obvious from reading Lewis that certain individuals were essential to his story. One example is Walter Dyett who taught music at Phillips and then DuSable High. He was the teacher of a vast number of musicians of the caliber of Dinah Washington, Nat King Cole, Richard Davis, Gene Ammons, John Gilmore and many others(just go to Lewis' index and follow the citations). This history of Chicago music, heck, of American music changed because of Dyett's teaching. As for the AACM, without the central presence of Muhai Richard Abrams in the early parts of the book, it is impossible to imagine how the rest of the history would have unfolded. He comes across as a remarkable and inspiring teacher- demanding so much from those who worked with him. And much of what he demanded is that no one accept anyone else's limitations on who they were. As an example, when Abrams set up his Experimental Band, from the get-go Abrams wanted the members to bring their own compositions to be played. That composer would then lead the band in the practise of the composition. Abrams was trying to get people to explore all of their musical, personal and spiritual possibilities. Occassionally, throughout Lewis' book there are comparisons made between Sun Ra's Arkestra and the AACM. The difference always comes down to the fact that what Abrams and the other founding members created was a collective. Which leads me to Lewis' other great theme- the story of how an institutional framework served to mold and support a diverse, opinionated, and occassionally competitive group of artists in all of their various projects. The AACM was always underfunded and was sometimes rift by internal controversy. Lewis has a detailed section on how they decided to only have black members which actually led to the expulsion of their one white member. He also talks about the struggles that the women members had to be accepted as equal artistic contributors. In spite of, or maybe because of these struggles, the organization survived and continued to further the education and projects of its members. I could easily go on with things I liked or learned from this book but I have gone on too long as it is. Other reviewers will emphasize the learnings that I did not write about. Get the book,

get thru the long (and interesting) first chapter of methodological reflections. Get out your AACM CDs and LPs and listen to the music as Lewis discusses it. I was finishing up my copy last night while listening to Braxton's For Alto. Those early days in Lewis' history were interesting. The journey for the members of the AACM from the 60s to the 21st century is an inspiring one. My thanks to George Lewis for the education.

Founded in 1965 and still active today, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) is an American institution with an international reputation. George E. Lewis, who joined the collective as a teenager in 1971, establishes the full importance and vitality of the AACM with this communal history, written with a symphonic sweep that draws on a cross-generational chorus of voices and a rich collection of rare images. Moving from Chicago to New York to Paris, and from founding member Steve McCalls kitchen table to Carnegie Hall, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* uncovers a vibrant, multicultural universe and brings to light a major piece of the history of avant-garde music and art.

Written with the eye of an ethnographer, the ear of a performer, and the heart of a hometown dweller, George Lewis' account of the development of the AACM is an engaging story, a romance in which several generations of musicians triumph to create a music that travels around the world, yet is completely unique to their experiences. Reinscribing Chicago as a city of enormous artistic vitality and tough aesthetics, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* brilliantly redraws the map of jazz and widens the horizon for new and experimental music.