preface

THE AACM AND AMERICAN EXPERIMENTALISM

Since its founding on the virtually all-black South Side of Chicago in 1965, the African American musicians' collective known as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) has played an unusually prominent role in the development of American experimental music. Over more than forty years of work, the composite output of AACM members has explored a wide range of methodologies, processes, and media. AACM musicians developed new and influential ideas about timbre, sound, collectivity, extended technique and instrumentation, performance practice, intermedia, the relationship of improvisation to composition, form, scores, computer music technologies, invented acoustic instruments, installations, and kinetic sculptures.

In addition to these already ambitious achievements, the collective developed strategies for individual and collective self-production and promotion that both reframed the artist/business relationship and challenged racialized limitations on venues and infrastructure. In a 1973 article, two early AACM members, trumpeter John Shenoy Jackson and cofounder and pianist/composer Muhal Richard Abrams, asserted that "the AACM 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."[1] This optimistic declaration, based on notions

of self-help as fundamental to racial uplift, cultural memory, and spiritual rebirth, was in accord with many other challenges to traditional notions of order and authority that emerged in the wake of the Black Power movement. The AACM is part of a long tradition of organizational efforts in which African American musicians took leadership roles, including the early-twentieth-century Clef Club, the short-lived Jazz Composers Guild, the Collective Black Artists, and the Los Angeles-based Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, or Underground Musicians Association (UGMAA/UGMA). The AACM, however, became the most well known and influential of the post-1960 organizations, achieving lasting international significance as a crucial part of the history of world musical experimentalism.

The corporate-approved celluloid description of the AACM in the Ken Burns blockbuster film on jazz contrasts markedly with the situation in the real world, where the AACM's international impact has gone far beyond "white college students—in France."[2] Musicologist Ekkehard Jost called attention to both the economic and the aesthetic in summarizing the AACM's influence. "The significance and the international reputation of the AACM," Jost maintained, "resulted not only from their effectiveness in organizing, but also, above all, from their musical output, which made the designation AACM something like a guarantee of quality for a creative music of the first rank."[3]

While most studies that extensively reference the AACM appear to be confined to an examination of the group's influence within an entity putatively identified as the "world of jazz," the musical influence of the AACM has extended across borders of genre, race, geography, and musical practice, and must be confronted in any nonracialized account of experimental music. To the extent that "world of jazz" discourses cordon off musicians from interpenetration with other musical art worlds, they cannot account for either the breakdown of genre definitions or the mobility of practice and method that informs the present-day musical landscape. Moreover, accounts of the development of black musical forms most often draw upon the trope of the singular heroic figure, leaving out the dynamics of networks in articulating notions of cultural and aesthetic formation. While individual musicians are certainly discussed at length in this volume, the focus is on the music, ideas, and experiences emanating from the collective. On this view, the AACM provides a successful example of collective working-class self-help and self-determination; encouragement of differ-

ence in viewpoint, aesthetics, ideology, spirituality, and methodologies; and the promulgation of new cooperative, rather than competitive, relationships between artists.

In that regard, I am reminded of how, a few years ago, my former student Jason Stanyek (at this writing a professor of music at New York University) called my attention to a very vital aspect of U.S. slave communities that proved fundamental to my conception of the questions that this project could address. In an important revisionist work, anthropologists Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price ask how, in the face of their radical ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, "such heterogeneous aggregates of men and women could compose a social order for themselves, within the boundaries of maneuver defined by the masters' monopoly of power."[4] The philosopher of music Lydia Goehr poses a related question in expressing her "sense of wonder at how human practices come to be, succeed in being, and continue to be regulated by one set of ideals rather than another."[5] Speaking of the birth of African American culture, Mintz and Price seem to answer both Goehr's question and their own, in probing the ways in which slave communities promulgated "certain simple but significant *cooperative* efforts," that is, communitarian institution-building that was undertaken in order "to inform their condition with coherence, meaning, and some measure of autonomy."[6]

As if in illustration of this point, Famoudou Don Moye, the longtime percussionist and member of the AACM collective, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, has affirmed the necessity of acting in concert in order to move beyond simple strategies of resistance. "Along with defiance you have organization," Moye declared. "There have been moments of defiance throughout the history of the music, but the strength of the effort and the strength of the cooperation between the musicians and their unity of effort is what enables us to survive. Anytime the musicians are not strong in their unity, the control factor goes over to the *other* side."[7]

The anthropologist John Szwed, who has written extensively on jazz in recent years, maintains that

> The esthetics of jazz demand that a musician play with complete originality, with an assertion of his own musical individuality. . . . At the same time jazz requires that musicians be able to merge their unique voices in the totalizing, collective improvisations of polyphony and heterophony. The implications of this esthetic are profound and more than vaguely

> threatening, for no political system has yet been devised with social principles which reward maximal individualism within the framework of spontaneous egalitarian interaction.[8]

In fact, the pursuit of individualism within an egalitarian frame has been central not only to the jazz moment, but also to African American music before and since that moment. For example, Samuel Floyd has spoken of the ring shout as featuring "individuality within the aggregate."[9] Indeed, it seems fitting that in the wake of the radical physical and even mental silencing of slavery (as distinct from, say, an aestheticized silence of four minutes or so), African Americans developed an array of musical practices that encouraged all to speak. As a socially constituted scene, the AACM embodied the trope of individuality within the aggregate, both at the level of music-making, and at the level of the political organization of the collective, thereby providing a potential symbol for the new, utopian kind of sociopolitical system that Szwed describes.

To the extent that AACM musicians challenged racialized hierarchies of aesthetics, method, place, infrastructure, and economics, the organization's work epitomizes the early questioning of borders by artists of color that is only beginning to be explored in serious scholarship on music. The late Harvard musicologist Eileen Southern, who single-handedly placed African American musical history on the academic map with her important general account, *The Music of Black Americans,* was invested in an instrumental view of historical research as fostering social change. As Southern saw it in a 1973 article in *Black World,* "Conventional histories of music and style-analysis texts generally ignored the Black man's contribution to music. . . . White-oriented histories, the white-oriented dictionaries, bibliographies . . . were amazingly silent about the activities of Black musicians."[10]

Echoing the critiques of countless jazz musicians, Southern goes on to assert that regarding African American music, "the quality of much of the writing is extremely poor, done by amateurs with little knowledge about the folkways and traditions of Black people." This was harsh criticism indeed—from which, moreover, black writers were not spared. "The output of a pitifully few Black writers has helped somewhat to fill the abyss," she wrote. "However, a half-dozen or so books hardly constitute a bibliography of respectable proportions."[11] Southern's call to action was certainly not aimed only at academics: "If we Black folk are serious about our commitment to the rediscovery and the redefining of our heritage in the fine arts, our scholars must take upon themselves the responsibility for developing an

appropriate and exemplary literature. . . . Unless there is documentation, the names of Ulysses Kay, Duke Ellington, Isaac Hayes, Leontyne Price, Sarah Vaughan, B. B. King—to cite a few—may mean nothing to readers in the 21st century."[12]

As people who have read my article on post-1950 improvised and indeterminate musics know, I have a central interest in the issues that Southern identified—in particular, the failure of many journals and histories devoted to experimental music to publish articles in which African American experimentalists discuss their processes, ideas, and forms.[13] Even when the subject under discussion is improvisation, the discourse consistently (and sometimes militantly) erases African American artists and cultural tropes.[14] Thus, a major interest for me in writing this book was documenting, through both historical and ethnographic work, the fact that experimentalism in music can have many different histories. Following a far different path to experimental practice than most members of the white American avant-garde, the influence wielded by AACM musicians overflowed the banks of the jazz river, confronting whiteness-based new music histories with their self-imposed, race-based conundrums. At the same time, histories of post-1960 African American experimental music, which developed in the midst of one of the most turbulent and unstable periods in U.S. history, also tend to confound standard narratives, which may account for why so few of these stories have actually been told to date.[15]

The development of a notion of "experimental" and "American" that excludes the so-called bebop and free jazz movements, perhaps the most influential American experimentalist musics of the latter part of the twentieth century, is highly problematic, to say the least. The continuing development of this discursive phenomenon in the music-historical literature can be partly accounted for in terms of the general absence of discourses on issues of race and ethnicity in criticism on American experimentalism.

Thus, for some time, historians of experimentalism in music have stood at a crossroads, facing a stark choice: to grow up and recognize a multicultural, multiethnic base for experimentalism in music, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions, and methods, or to remain the chroniclers of an ethnically bound and ultimately limited tradition that appropriates freely, yet furtively, from other ethnic traditions, yet cannot recognize any histories as its own other than those based in whiteness. Thus, following Southern, I see my work on the AACM, as well as my work on experimental music more broadly, as an interventionist project, an activity aimed at encouraging the production of new histories of experimentalism in music.