introduction

AN AACM BOOK: ORIGINS, ANTECEDENTS, OBJECTIVES, METHODS

Around the fall of 1996, I had been promoted to full professor in the department of music at the University of California, San Diego. I was sitting in the office of my colleague, F. Richard Moore, who probably doesn't realize his role in the creation of this book. Dick had just finished his landmark book, *Elements of Computer Music,*[1] and was busy extending cmusic, his set of software tools for musical experimentation. Dick saw cmusic as an example of a research project blending creativity and science, and pointed out to me that this was the very sort of project that might not receive support outside of the academic environment, even if the underlying ideas were arguably fundamental to the field of music technology. That was an argument I understood, because as an itinerant artist, I had tried to write on planes and trains, in the manner that one imagined Duke Ellington doing during the writing of his memoir, *Music Is My Mistress.* Now, I began to wonder about the kinds of projects I could initiate that would best utilize the strengths of the academic infrastructure in ways that complemented or exceeded my already established career as an itinerant artist. I began to think seriously about writing a biography of Muhal Richard Abrams.

As it happened, that year, 1996, Wadada Leo Smith had invited Muhal for a residency and concert in his program in African American improvisational music at the California Institute of the Arts. Muhal

had invited me to participate in the concert, and so I drove up to Valencia from San Diego with the intention of sounding him out about the project. We went on a long walking excursion in the desert warmth, ostensibly searching for an espresso bar, although Muhal doesn't drink coffee. When I broached my idea, he quickly shook his head—but then said that he would rather be part of a book project on the history of the AACM. That possibility had also crossed my mind, of course, and it seemed completely appropriate, since so many of our dreams as members of the collective had focused on creating a book about that history.

In 1981, Joseph Jarman and Leo Smith interviewed each other with a view toward constructing a general history of the AACM.[2] The project was never completed. In the end, realizing such a work requires considerable infrastructure, by which I mean a network of people who are willing to engage the work—read it, comment on it, publish it, distribute it, and provide the time and funds for the kinds of ethnographic and historical research that the life of an itinerant artist makes difficult, even given the amazing achievements of the early twentieth-century African American historians that the late Jacob Carruthers called "the old scrappers," including J. A. Rogers and John G. Jackson, among others.

I had already begun to realize that the AACM membership would never trust an outsider to construct its history. As AACM cofounder Jodie Christian told me in 1998, "Muhal said that it should be somebody in the AACM, and pretty soon, somebody will write a book; this was four or five years ago. One time I thought he would write one, but he ain't got time to write no book."[3] So Muhal and I began talking about what the book could be, and I came away from the project with a determination to begin writing. At the behest of Samuel Floyd, then the dynamic director of the Center for Black Music Research, I had just completed my first published article for *Black Music Research Journal,* and was ready to proceed with a new project. During a visit to the Midwest in December 1997, I began interviewing musicians, starting (naturally) with Muhal. It quickly became evident that our conversations would range far beyond the biographical orientation that one might expect. Naturally, Muhal was vitally concerned with how the organization would be represented in the narrative.

> If it's going to be a musicology thing, or a thing that includes the AACM and talks about all this other stuff, I'm not going to participate. I'll just cut right out right now. We've waited too long to put out a document. I don't want to be part of that. . . . I didn't spend all these years to be put in

> a situation that didn't have nothing to do with what I did. This book gives an opportunity to do what the musicians say happened.[4]

It became clear, however, that a book that did justice to the work of the AACM would have to move beyond a project of vindication, and would have to include more than just the voices of musicians. My working method necessarily juxtaposed oral histories of AACM members with written accounts of the period, a process that combines the ethnographic with the archival. I performed more than ninety-two interviews with members and supporters, ranging anywhere from two to six hours in duration, and for the older members, two or three such interviews were sometimes necessary. These interviews provided me with important insights, reminded me of things I had forgotten, and destabilized comfortable assumptions I had made. In many, perhaps most, cases, the remembrances I recorded of Chicago, New York, Paris, and other geographical/historical locations were powerfully corroborative of the written histories of these same places and eras. As a complex, multigenre, intergenerational network of people, places, and musical and cultural references began to emerge in my notes, I saw a responsibility to be inclusive, rather than to concentrate on those AACM members with more prominent public profiles. Even so, certain members have achieved more notoriety than others, and I felt that this would naturally come out in the course of the work. In any event, I do regret not being able to interview everyone I would have liked to.

The worldwide impact of the AACM has been amply documented in many countries—in print, on recordings, and in popular and specialty magazines, academic treatises, and books. As a scholar, it would be irresponsible of me to simply ignore this level of paper trail, or to dismiss these additional narratives out of hand. Thus, the book features a very conscious effort to problematize the "creator vs. critic" binary that both inflects and infects critical work in jazz, while at the same time providing unique and personal insights that only orature can provide.

"I was glad that somebody did come on the scene that was in the AACM and knew some of our members and had a little idea about the group itself," Jodie Christian observed in our 1998 interview. "Being in the organization, you had a chance to see some things yourself. You could make those kinds of judgments from that period of time. You can do that because you were there. It wouldn't be something that you surmised, but something that actually happened, and when you say it, it's authentic." As a scholar, however, I want to handle the idea of "authenticity" with extreme care. In

fact, I was not there when the AACM began, though I am always flattered by those of my forebears who, when memories fail, somehow place me at the scene. My construction of the AACM is but one of many possible versions, and my hope is that other scholars will take up aspects of the AACM's work for which a more detailed discussion eluded the scope of this already rather long book.

Truth be told, however, the "real" story, if there is one, will not be captured in a set of recordings or an archive of texts. Here, I take my cue from an unnamed AACM musician's answer to a query from writer Whitney Balliett about "the" AACM sound: "If you take all the sounds of all the A.A.C.M. musicians and put them together, that's the A.A.C.M. sound, but I don't think anyone's heard that yet."[5] Nonetheless, what I am hoping for is that a useful story might be realized out of the many voices heard in this book, the maelstrom of heteroglossia in which we nervously tread water.

Autobiography—factual, fictional, and virtually every variation thereof—has constituted a crucially important African American literary form, both in the scholarly literature, such as Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates's classic work, *The Slave's Narrative,* and in popular works, from James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* to the *Autobiography of Malcolm X,* Alex Haley's *Roots,* and the Delany Sisters' *Having Our Say.*[6] The insistence on autobiography, as Jon Michael Spencer maintains in his book on Harlem Renaissance composers, *The New Negroes and Their Music,* became a weapon in the battle over the historicity of the African diaspora, where issues of credit and vindication were of prime importance.[7] In the 1960s, both people of letters and people in the street were vitally invested in this struggle for history.

It should therefore be not surprising that the historiography of jazz is similarly dominated by autobiography, most often in the form of transcribed and published interviews, as well as the frequent "as told to" ghostwritten efforts. For instance, as historian Burton Peretti has noted, the interviewers for the National Endowment for the Arts Oral History projects of the 1970s were largely drawn from the ranks of "veteran jazz writers." Certainly, historians owe a debt to these writers, who pursued their enthusiasms for their subjects in the face of considerable disapprobation concerning the utility of documenting black music. Nonetheless, for Peretti, "the interviewers tend not to ask the questions that would be of most interest to scholars. They are strong on straight biography, who played with whom,

discographies—and anecdotes, anecdotes, and more anecdotes. They tend to avoid addressing issues of intellectual development, social context, racial conditions, or the subjects' views of culture, history and philosophy."[8]

The effect of these serious omissions is to decontextualize the music, to frame it as outside the purview of both general social history and the history of music. This experience indicated the need for viable alternatives to the journalistic paradigm that, according to Peretti, still dominates the historiographical process regarding black music. My musician colleagues had been looking for these alternatives for many years. In pianist Jodie Christian's experience, "There were a lot of hits and misses with people trying to figure out in their minds what this was about and what that was about. Even though they were interviewing people, they would come up with their own idea about what the AACM was about." On one view, this was certainly understandable; in my experience, the people who were trying to figure out what the AACM was about included, most crucially, AACM people themselves. Thus, my collegial interview/conversations seemed automatically to turn to the very issues that Peretti found lacking in many of the NEA interviews: intellectual development, issues of race, class, and gender, musical form and aesthetics, and the interpretation of history. I began to notice a distinct lack of funny stories and anecdotes, even from people such as the late Lester Bowie, whom we all knew to be given to pointedly ironic jocularity. I imagine that for some readers, these preoccupations could seem unnecessarily dour at times in comparison with other kinds of musicianly texts that rely in large measure on interviews.

Perhaps this serious mien was an inevitable artifact of an interview process that often felt like a kind of collaborative mode of writing history, after the fashion that James Clifford has proposed,[9] even if the adoption of this collaborative ethos seemed to develop spontaneously, rather than as a conscious and studied attempt to address the issues Clifford identified regarding the authority of the interviewer. People felt free to explicitly express their love for the AACM, an organization that in many cases had given them creative birth and nurturing. Interviews served as a form of generational reconnection for some of my subjects, who frequently asked about what had been happening over the years to the people with whom they had been so intensely involved, and about where the organization was headed now. In this way, the book became an autobiography indeed—the autobiography of a collective, a history of an organization that developed into an ongoing social and aesthetic movement. Perhaps at least part of that movement's dynamism was derived from the clarity with which its members realized

that the project could not really be completed; its unfinished nature became its crucial strength.

Historical, autobiographical, and ethnographic processes necessarily cast the historian-ethnographer in the role of intermediary between the subject and the public. The construction of this role during the process of engaging the oral narrative is obviously of prime importance, since the process involves not only transcription, but also interpretation and editorial choices. To pretend that race and gender do not mediate these proceedings is needlessly naïve; at the same time, to claim special advantages based solely on these factors is equally untenable. Thus, a signal factor in the historicization of black music concerns the fact that in the vast majority of cases prior to the late 1960s, as Amiri Baraka pointed out in an important essay from 1963, "Jazz and the White Critic," those doing interviews with black jazz musicians were most often white, male, and of a different class background than the person being interviewed.[10]

In the 1970s, this began to change. For me, and for many musicians, the watershed work of this generation was the drummer Arthur Taylor's book of interviews with his musical colleagues, *Notes and Tones*.[11] Taylor's initially self-published book demonstrated forcefully that the questions that Burton Peretti felt were of most interest to scholars were also of great interest to the important musicians of the period, such as Betty Carter, Max Roach, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, and many others. While Peretti's critique of oral histories does not directly connect the failure of scholars to review these seemingly fairly obvious areas of interest to institutionalized systems of ethnic and class domination, articulated as a form of historical denial, to Taylor and to many of his subjects, this was precisely what was at stake. Thus, Taylor's book functioned as perhaps the sharpest musician-centered critique then available of the racialization of media access, which both for Taylor and his subjects, amounted to a form of censorship. In a self-conscious act of intervention, Taylor used his insider status as a canonically important drummer to allow his subjects wide latitude to critique the discourses and economic and social conditions surrounding their métier, including possible distinctions between being interviewed by white critics and by black colleagues.

Even as so much African American literature, from the slave narratives forward, favored the autobiographical in some way, it was becoming clear to me that what was needed was not only a compendium of personal reminiscences and observations, but also a framing of the AACM in dialogue with

the history of music and the history of ideas. In fact, AACM members who published critical work in the 1970s and 1980s tended to take this approach. Leo Smith's writings, notably his 1973 *Notes (8 pieces) source a new world music: creative music,* and his 1974 "(M1) American Music,"[12] were closely followed by Anthony Braxton's massive three-volume *Tri-Axium Writings,* a work that, while clearly in dialogue with John Cage's 1961 manifesto *Silence,* Amiri Baraka's 1963 *Blues People,* and Karlheinz Stockhausen's 1963 *Texte zur Musik,* extends considerably beyond each of these texts, both in length and in range of inquiry. For me, the works of these AACM members constituted sources of inspiration and instruction for my own research, as did Derek Bailey's influential book, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music.*[13]

With these texts as antecedents, I felt that my goals could be better accomplished by deploying methodologies associated with academic historical inquiry, rather than with journalistic models. Of course, this issue is connected with the writerly voice of the book. Early on, several good friends and colleagues were concerned that the book avoid "academese," or the arcane jargon that these well-meaning people associated with scholarly books. These associates felt that using more accessible language would produce a friendly and nonthreatening introduction to the AACM and its work that would appeal to a wide audience. The jazz writer Stanley Dance was evidently a devotee of this approach, judging from his critique of two jazz studies anthologies published in the 1990s by film scholar Krin Gabbard, *Representing Jazz* and *Jazz among the Discourses:*

> There is original thought here, but the reader is immediately confronted by the language academics apparently use to communicate with one another. Sometimes it reads like a translation from the German, at others that they are merely trying to impress or indulging in a verbal cutting contest. Here are a few of the words you should be prepared to encounter: hermeneutics, commodified, contextualizing, conceptualize, hyperanimacy, taxonomic, metacritical, rhizome, perspectivizing, nomadology, indexical, polysemy, auratic, reification, metonymic, synecdoche, biodegradability, interstitial, valorize, diegetic, allegoresis, grammatology, oracy, centripetality, and esemplastic.[14]

Dance felt that these kinds of words "obviously impose considerable restraint on the transfer of knowledge."[15] Girding against what he saw (correctly) as an attack on his métier, the writer grumbled that "the academics

tend to be critical and rather patronizing about the accepted journalistic standards of jazz writing, which, to judge from their back notes, they have investigated haphazardly." Finally, Dance ventured that instead of drawing from writers such as Gunther Schuller, "Gabbard's people seem more attached to Theodor Adorno and Roland Barthes, of whom the average unscholarly jazz fan has probably never heard." For me, however, the interdisciplinary approaches to black music and improvisation in the Gabbard texts—the work of Nathaniel Mackey, Robert Walser, Lorenzo Turner, John Corbett, and Scott DeVeaux, among others (as well as the references to Adorno and Barthes) were inspiring, announcing a new generation of writers on improvised music who were, first, declining to conflate oversimplification with accessibility; second, asserting common cause with intellectuals in other fields concerning the ways in which music could announce social and cultural change; and finally, seeking liberation from the Sisyphean repetition of ersatz populist prolegomena that seemed endemic to the field.

Another important book that came out around this time was Ronald Radano's *New Musical Figurations,* an account of the career of Anthony Braxton that included a chapter on the AACM that was much closer to my own experience than anything I had read before, and which introduced a new character to the heretofore white-coded historiography of American experimentalism: the "black experimentalist."[16] These texts helped me to realize that in looking for ways to theorize the music I had been trying for so many years to compose, improvise, and perform, I needed to involve myself with the tools, methods, and discourses that had been developed in a range of fields of inquiry. Doing so would not only allow readers less invested in music but familiar with those discourses and debates to find commonalities with the histories surrounding new music, but could also provide musically oriented readers unfamiliar with those discourses with an opportunity to engage them on familiar ground. As I began to publish, I discovered a rapidly developing, questing new literature, a group of wonderful new colleagues, an exciting crop of graduate students, and an international reading public, including many musicians, who were eager for a new kind of writing about music that did not patronize the reader or assume his or her ignorance of the matters under review. Perhaps most gratifying of all, in these new texts, complex ideas were worked out at sufficient length and in detail in a manner that seemed compatible with my experience as an artist.

Thus, as I told an interviewer/friend in 2002 regarding the progress of this book, "I've made some concessions to narrativity. Someone else can

write the Cliffs Notes later." Indeed, in the nine years since I began this project, a new generation of progressive musicians has come out of Chicago, whom I can mention only in passing, such as cellist Tomeka Reid, guitarist Jeff Parker, trombonist Steve Berry, and rapper Khari B; trumpeters Robert Griffin and Corey Wilkes; singers Dee Alexander and Taalib'Din Ziyad; drummers Chad Taylor, Mike Reed, and Vincent Davis; saxophonists Matana Roberts, Aaron Getsug, and David Boykin; bassists Darius Savage, Josh Abrams, Cecile Savage, and Harrison Bankhead; and many others. Perhaps one or more of those people will create a sequel, after one fashion or another. For now, one of the aims of this book is to help those younger artists in dealing with the richness of the legacy that they carry, as well as in understanding what has been achieved, what was shown to be possible, and what remains to be realized.

The stakes are quite high in this endeavor, as I realized when a friend alerted me to a letter in the British magazine *Wire* from the African American experimental musician Morgan Craft, living in Italy at this writing. I found his remarks both poignant and terribly telling:

> So here we are in the year 2005 and I actually agree to sit down and write about being black, American and experimental in music. The genesis springs from looking at a magazine devoted to challenging, progressive musics from around the world, and seeing their top 50 list for last year (*The Wire* 251) and the only black Americans were rappers (three) and old jazz era men (one living, one dead). So I bring up this observation about the lack of a black American presence on the avant garde scene under the age of 50 just to see if maybe I'm not paying attention. I'm constantly fed this steady stream of future thinking folks from Germany, Japan, UK, Norway, etc, but when it comes to America all I hear about is the genius that is free folk or if it's black it must be hiphop, jazz, or long dead. How many more articles on Albert Ayler do we really need?[17]

In fact, black artists on both sides of the age-fifty divide shared Craft's dilemma, and the analysis of this issue is central to this book. Literary critic Fred Moten has expressed this issue so well and so succinctly that I want to preview his remarks here before redeploying them in another chapter:

> The idea of a black avant-garde exists, as it were, oxymoronically—as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand, each depends

> for its coherence on the exclusion of the other. Now this is probably an overstatement of the case. Yet it's all but justified by a vast interdisciplinary text representative not only of a problematically positivist conclusion that the avant-garde has been exclusively Euro-American, but of a deeper, perhaps unconscious, formulation of the avant-garde as necessarily not black.[18]

Part of my task in this book, as I see it, is to bring to the surface the strategies that have been developed to discursively disconnect African American artists from any notion of experimentalism or the avant-garde. This effort, as Craft seems to have noticed, has now moved into the international arena. If Craft—and Ayler, for that matter—exist simply as oxymorons in an international consensus based on the presumption of pan-European intellectual dominance (a dynamic extending beyond the individual phenotypical to the collective institutional), the histories and analyses that I recount here are meant to shepherd young African American artists such as Craft through the convolutions and contortions that were needed to construct this ethnically cleansed discourse; to encourage younger African American artists to see themselves as being able to claim multiple histories of experimentalism despite the histories of erasure, both willful and unwitting; and to reassure young black artists that if you find yourself written out of history, you can feel free to write yourself back in, to provide an antidote to the nervous pan-European fictionalizations that populate so much scholarship on new music.

The set of issues Craft identifies was also rather well symbolized in a lecture I attended by a scholar who insisted that if academics hoped to have any real effect on the culture, the only music worth studying and writing about was music that "everybody" listened to. As an example, this well-known speaker referred to an even better-known rapper who, despite his misogynistic lyrics, was someone who needed to be "dialogued" with so that scholars could reach young African Americans in particular with more "enlightened" ideas. I was struck by the superficiality of this understanding of the many ways in which music exercises cultural impact. First of all, in my experience, young African Americans are generally particularly pleased to discover the depth and breadth of the cultural artifacts created by their forebears. I write these words directly to those young people who, along with those ancestors, are participating in the development of a most influential panoply of expressive voices, not all of which will be heard by ma-

joritarian culture. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that much of the most influential music of the twentieth century—music that will probably never appear on any major U.S. television network—was nonetheless being avidly attended to by the heroes of rock, the early rappers, and techno's originators—or was it purely coincidental that so many early Mothers of Invention fans absorbed Edgard Varese's manifesto, strategically placed on the back of the albums: "The present-day composer refuses to die!"

On that view, it should come as no surprise that the impact of music on culture cannot be meaningfully investigated simply by reviewing Soundscan figures or tuning in to *Dancing with the Stars.* Moreover, advocating the neglect of "unpopular" sonic constituencies in favor of yet another safe valorization of corporate-approved cultural production—this time disguised as "critique" or "dialogue"—seemed to revoke local musical agency, even as the term "local" moves beyond its original, geographically centralized meaning toward a technologically mediated articulation of diaspora. As scholars, we ignore at our peril the networks that carry the flows of new musical ideas, since it's so easy to miss nascent musical phenomena while they are still growing—in other words, the trajectory of hip-hop culture itself, not to mention its heir apparent, reggaeton, a phenomenon that like its predecessor from the Bronx, flows across borders of class, race, geography, and language.

This is not a version of the standard, hopeless rejoinder to those who point out the obvious lack of mass audience for some kinds of new music—that "one day," this music will be vindicated by ending up in everyone's ear. Rather, I wish to point out that naturalizing this kind of vindicationism as a goal may be misdirected. African American culture has produced a vast array of musical practices, which have been taken up to varying degrees by a diverse array of constituencies. Some of these practices, however, remained indigestible to powerful players such as modern media corporations, whose products, in economist Jacques Attali's 1977 formulation, were recursively reinscribed through a powerful "economy of repetition" that drowned out alternative voices. For Attali, "Free jazz created *locally* the conditions for a different model of musical production, a new music. But since this noise was not inscribed on the same level as the messages circulating in the network of repetition, it could not make itself heard."[19]

This observation seems to evoke a special need for vigilance on the part of music scholars. As Attali wrote, "Conceptualizing the coming order on the basis of the designation of the fundamental noise should be the central

work of today's researchers. Of the only worthwhile researchers: undisciplined ones. The ones who refuse to answer new questions using only pregiven tools."[20] Thus, if we wish to avoid the appearance of positioning not only the musical production of entire cultures, but also our own research, as wholly owned subsidiaries of corporate megamedia, we will be obliged to tune our discourses to the resonant frequencies of insurgent musical forms around the world, to make sure that we can hear Attali's "new noise."