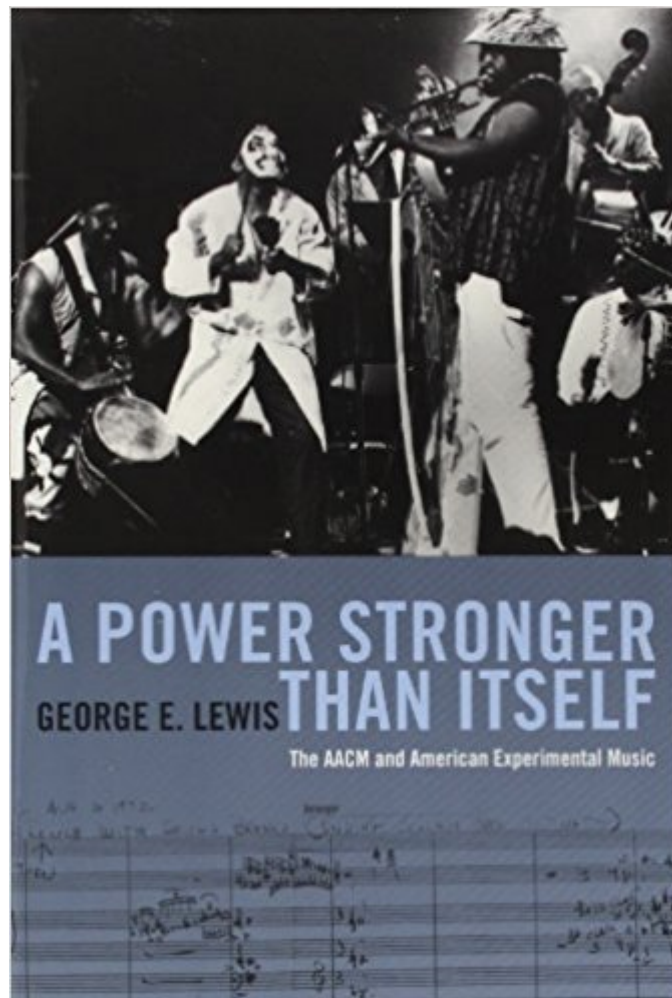




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A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM And American Experimental Music



Synopsis

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 McCall's 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Written with the eye of an ethnographer, the ear of a performer, and the heart of a hometown dweller, George Lewis's 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.” (John Szwed, author of *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* 2007-03-20) “George Lewis has outdone himself with this extraordinary volume. His unrelenting intelligence and ear for detail have produced a challenging compendium of late

twentieth-century African Americana. This is not only a study of the AACM, it is a hope-drenched encomium to modernist creativity and the oppositional imagination. (Paul Gilroy, author of *Postcolonial Melancholia* and *The Black Atlantic* 2007-12-11)

"The AACM is one of our great cultural inventions. This extraordinary book embodies its principles, for George Lewis draws on multiple traditions: scholarship, reportage, testament, analysis, theory and criticism come together with virtuosity and scrupulous discipline. *A Power Stronger Than Itself* remaps the landscape of American experimental music. Academics, critics and musicians will have to reconfigure such terms as jazz, classical, soulful, avant-garde, black and white. Now the past yields unexpected wonders; the future unexpected possibilities. (Margo Jefferson, author of *On Michael Jackson* 2008-01-09)"

"A remarkable book, not just for corralling an enormous amount of information—interviews, critical reviews, music charts, news reports (the bibliography runs 35 pages)—but for making the result a digestible and thoroughly entertaining 500-page read. (Time Out Chicago 2008-04-10)"

"With *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, Lewis exceeds expectations. For rather than merely recount the ascent of the AACM, he elegantly sets it against the backdrop of cultural, racial and social changes that shook the twentieth century. . . . Lewis unreels this tale with dramatic flourish and scholarly authority, in effect telling the story of not only the AACM but also the city where it's centered, Chicago." (Howard Reich Chicago Tribune 2008-04-13)

"Lewis's landmark book. . . goes deeper into the formation and development of the AACM than any previous history, and as a formal acknowledgement of the group's enormous importance and influence it's long overdue." (Peter Margasak Chicago Reader 2008-04-10)

"This could very well be the most anticipated book of the year. . . . The long wait is now over and patience will be rewarded. George Lewis's encyclopedic knowledge, thorough research and in-depth interviews have produced an eye-opening work. . . . Overall, it is a pleasant read, scholarly but not overly academic in tone, covering a wide stylistic range—from essay to storytelling to autobiography." (Alain Drouot Jazz Notes)

"[Lewis] sets a new standard for scholarly writing about the people who make Great Black Music, or any other kind. . . . Reading Lewis's book about the AACM makes one want to have been a part of it." (Downbeat)

"Simply put, George E. Lewis' new and long-awaited history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) must be considered among the most important books ever written about creative music. A tour de force of narrative history and analysis driven by a clearly articulated point of view, it draws on a massive body of scholarship and original research that places Great Black Music in its historical, aesthetic, and social contexts. It will

certainly shape the scholarly, critical, and public discussion of jazz and creative music for years to come." (Ed Hazell Signal to Noise)"Rich and dense and gratifyingly readable. . . . [Lewis] makes a scholarly portrait of a complex community into a ripping good and inspiring yarn." (Kevin Whitehead Fresh Air) "In bringing intellectual breadth and what Lester Bowie calls 'good old country ass-kicking' to bear on past and present indignities, Lewis has produced a fitting companion to the music he celebrates." (Franklin J. Bruno Nation) "An important book. . . . Mr. Lewis narrates its development with exacting context and incisive analysis, occasionally delving into academic cultural theory. But because the book includes biographical portraits of so many participating musicians, it's a swift, engrossing read." (Nate Chinen New York Times 2008-05-02)"Very dense but very readable, filled with fascinating stories, capsule bios and rewarding side trips. Lewis has a gift for explaining abstruse ideas without dumbing down. As a reader, I'm torn between wanting to savor it slowly and devour it fast. Two hundred pages in, I've got weeks worth of stuff to think about." (Kevin Whitehead e-Music)"An unequalled volume on both its subject and on Black creative collectivity." (Clifford Allen All about Jazz)"Lewis' writing is lively, avoiding the trap of sounding too academic and instead creating a story that is compelling in its portrait of musicians dedicated to their art. This is a fine work on an area of jazz that deserves wider recognition and greater understanding." (Alan Chase The Wire)"This essential book is music history from the inside. . . . Lewis is telling an interesting and important story here and telling it well. Anyone who is interested in modern serious music will learn from and enjoy this outstanding book." (A.B. Spellman Chamber Music)"An illuminating, articulate panorama of a little-examined yet highly influential organization, one whose 'graduates' have permeated every element of modern music." (Choice)"The crystalline study is thoroughly engaging. . . . Even the most dedicated improvised music aficionado will find anecdotes, relationships and hitherto unknown performances and biographies laid out in stunning detail. . . . The book is a graceful intertwining of oral history, hard research and insightful scrutiny of a complicated organism." (Eugenia Bell Frieze)"More than any other recent new-jazz-studies or improvisation-studies monograph, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* draws clear connections between the collective history and aesthetics of a community of improvisers and the musical procedures they have employed." (Paul Steinbeck Journal of Music Theory) "A *Power Stronger Than Itself* is not only an essential history of the organization but a critical analysis into its place in American art, politics and socioeconomics." (The New York City Jazz Record)

George E. Lewis is the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University. A

recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in 2002, Lewis has made over 120 recordings as composer or performer, and his publications on experimental music appear regularly in scholarly and popular journals.

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.

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.

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 (Muhal 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 Muhal 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.

AACM. Get familiar if you aren't.

Stop whatever you are doing and read this book!!

If you want to know about the history of Afro-American experimental music, you need to know about Chicago and the AACM, and this book is the definitive history. Well-written and thought provoking...

actually got the book for a good friend of mine..She actually knows the author personally, and other people that were mentioned in there as well..She was so excited to receive it

amazing

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