

---

*This review appeared in issue No. 11 (2009) of The Open Space Magazine.*

---

*A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, by George E. Lewis, is a provocative, engaging, and sometimes infuriating book that can be divided into two inextricably intertwined threads: a chronicle of the founding and functioning of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) – a collective of intensely creative, open, and politically aware African American musicians that was founded in 1965 as a means of musical self-determination – and a critical examination of the proper place of the AACM in relation to the discourse on experimental music (of, primarily, the United States).

Lewis is immensely successful in respect to this first thread (the bulk of the book), which is based upon an extensive body of interviews conducted by Lewis with members of the AACM over a period of 10 years and also upon a thorough review of audio recordings of the organization’s early meetings. Large sections of the text in these portions of the book are transcribed directly from these sources, giving us both personal histories of significant AACM members, illustrating how the experiences of a strong collection of personalities came together to form this organization, and a sense of the identity of the organization, itself, from its founding as a grass-roots effort to support the presentation and promotion of the “creative music” of its members to its eventual veneration as a Southside Chicago cultural institution.

The second thread proceeds with more mixed results and is based upon Lewis’s very significant observation that there is a “general absence of discourses on issues of race and ethnicity in criticism on American [experimental music],” in light of which he situates his scholarship on the AACM “as an interventionist project, an activity aimed at encouraging the production of new histories of experimentalism in music,” (xiii). The criticisms I will offer on this aspect of the book will focus on points of argument that are in need of clarification and terms that are in need of definition. These shortcomings, unfortunately,

make it impossible to accept all of Lewis's claims as they stand; however, I believe that the fundamental premise regarding the absence of a critical understanding of the impact of racial and ethnic identity on the discourse on experimental music is sound and that identifying the ambiguities in Lewis's work will help stimulate "the production of new histories of experimentalism in music," the stated purpose of Lewis's scholarship in this area.

Lewis's account of the pre-history, founding, and early operation of the AACM is woven together with biographical sketches of important figures in the history of the organization, giving us an insightful glimpse into the cultural experiences of African Americans coming up in the United States (and particularly in Chicago) – from those who were children during the Great Depression, to those who were born at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement – as it displays the shifting face of institutionalized racism. As Lewis recounts formative incidents in the lives of these artists, striking similarities accumulate that illuminate the necessity, both cultural (collective) and individual, they felt to come together as a grassroots organization that would control the means of production of their own musical works, to support each other's work, and to offer opportunities for younger musicians to garner experience with this music.

Lewis makes a compelling and informative case for the importance of autodidacticism within this context while presenting a clear-eyed and thoughtful account of the educational experiences of young African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, the importance of autodidacticism reflects the reality of failing schools – Lewis relates his and contemporaries' experiences with under-funded and overcrowded schools that simply halved instruction time for their students so as to double the number of students served in a single day (without any attempt at compensation for lost instruction time) – and a dominant culture that offered few opportunities to its minority members. Lewis makes clear the awareness that racial prejudice had imposed upon African Americans' educational aspirations: AACM co-founder Philip Cohran's father had a college education and yet worked as a Pullman porter "because they made much more money. A college degree wasn't worth ten cents in Mississippi for a black man," (7). In a society that devalued formal education for a whole segment of its population (where those opportunities were even

available), autodidactic learning strategies take on the character of self-determination and an unwillingness to be cut off from knowledge.

We learn of these closures of areas of cultural activity as we read of many members of the AACM, particularly those of the first generation, enrolling in music programs in various US colleges and quickly discovering – either explicitly through the words of their teachers or implicitly through the lack of opportunities offered – that it was a very rare exception to the imposed rule of racial essentialization, indeed, for a black musician to make a career in the world of pan-European “classical” music. Instead, many of these musicians opted for degrees in music education, where they might find a job teaching music at African American high schools, in the mode of two prominent, high school band directors, Captain Walter Dyette and Major N. Clark Smith, who taught many of the first AACM musicians, or they chose other fields of study altogether. Either way, the lesson was clear: the white-dominated cultural sphere, with its greater connections to funding, etc., would be doing these musicians no favors.

The first generation, covering the founders and early membership (most of whom were born in the 1930s and 1940s), was largely shaped by experiences of poverty and, perhaps most dramatically, the direct experience of a virulent racism in the US military. The younger members of this generation had some experience of college, usually in those days of segregation, in historically black colleges and community colleges, while the older members of this generation had no college education at all, though they had a more traditional experience of finding their way in the jazz world, accruing experience and respect while playing with more established musicians and, perhaps, eventually leading their own groups.

We see many future AACM musicians enlist in the military during the 1950s, often when educational opportunities did not meet the desires or interests of these individuals: Joseph Jarman and Leonard Jones both dropped out of high school to enlist; Wadada Leo Smith, despite of receiving scholarships to two universities, enlisted when a scholarship to his preferred school was not forthcoming. The racism these men encountered in the military, often culminating in a court-martial or the threat of one (as we see in the cases of Leonard Jones, Lester Bowie, and Wadada Leo Smith), is noted by Lewis, who cites historian

Robin D. G. Kelley's observation that these experiences with the military may have had a radicalizing effect (65). We see, on the positive side, that "Army musicians had plenty of time to practice and exchange information," (65) and so, where possible, these musicians were able to turn this into an opportunity for more autodidactic and community-based learning, sharing ideas with one another and learning from older musicians like saxophonist Joseph Stevenson, who mentored both Roscoe Mitchell and Anthony Braxton during their respective stints in the army. A pattern emerges as Lewis tells of the experiences of these men in the military who were, to a man, not the sort to defer to authority when they perceived that authority to be in error. They would not be complicit in their own oppression – a fact that would be at the root of the AACM's founding philosophy.

Another common thread binds Mitchell, Jarman, Braxton, and Henry Threadgill together: they all studied music under the open-minded Richard Wang at Woodrow Wilson Junior College in Chicago, Jarman and Mitchell enrolling in 1961, Braxton and Threadgill in 1963. Jarman, Threadgill, and Mitchell formed a study group (again reflecting the autodidactic thrust of African American culture at this time) after meeting there and soon, at Mitchell's instigation, became involved with Muhal Richard Abram's Experimental Band, a "cooperative environment where musicians could learn new ideas and techniques from others, and bring their own music and hear it performed," (68). The Experimental Band also served as a precursor to and eventual feeder for the AACM.

The members of what Lewis refers to as the "second wave," all born in the late 1940s or the early 1950s (this group includes Lewis, himself) grew up in the same neighborhoods, in the same or similar socio-economic conditions (for the most part), and with the aforementioned problem of overcrowded schools; however, they did see some opportunities their elders had not in the wake of *Brown v. The Board of Education* and other civil rights triumphs. Most notably these individuals had the opportunity to attend top-tier universities such as the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and Yale University (Lewis's alma mater). This proved to be no paradise of blissful co-existence, of course, as black students encountered deep-seated prejudice. Many of them became involved with the student protest movement during the Vietnam War and, more specifically, with civil rights

activism on their campuses. The university experiences of many, such as Steve and Iqua Colson at Northwestern University were, to a degree, analogous to the experiences of institutionalized racism that their AACM elders had encountered in the military<sup>1</sup>. This was also the first generation of AACM members to come into the organization through the AACM School (one of the initiatives of the founding members that persists to this day) and the only generation, it seems, to have the benefit of working directly with the luminaries of the AACM's founding generation at the school – which quickly lead to relatively high-profile performance opportunities.

In many ways the “new regime” that came to run the Chicago chapter of the AACM after the departure of many of the prominent founders and members of the second wave for New York in 1976 and 1977, seems to have had formative experiences more akin to the younger members of the first generation. These individuals, only a few years younger than the second wavers, were radicalized earlier in life than their second wave counterparts. Ameen Muhammad and Ernest Dawkins both became involved with the Black Panthers, just as both had a more patch-work college education of the sort experience by the older generation – moving between various colleges and community colleges. Like their second wave counterparts, however, they managed to avoid military service.

The narrative springs to life in those sections dealing with the founding of the collective. Lewis provides long quotations from interviews conducted with AACM members present at the organization's inception and from tape recordings of the meetings, themselves. This gives a clear, fascinating presentation of the concerns of the musicians – many deriving from their experiences of racial prejudice, others purely practical and administrative, and still others wholly aesthetic. We are treated to meeting agendas, lengthy discussions around points of contention such as the meaning of the term “creative music,” the racial constitution of the membership, and most importantly, the means by which the organization would allow members to take charge of the presentation and performance of the music they created without reliance on existing avenues that had been compromised by

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly and significantly, none of the members of the second wave were drafted into military service during Vietnam, nor did they have any direct experience with the military, which had been such a profound presence in the lives of Mitchell, Jarman, Braxton, Threadgill, Bowie, Smith, etc.

institutional biases against black musicians. These meetings eventually culminated in the articulation of nine purposes contained in the group's charter:

- To cultivate young musicians and to create music of a high artistic level for the general public through the presentation of programs designed to magnify the importance of creative music.
- To create an atmosphere conducive to artistic endeavors for the artistically inclined by maintaining a workshop for the express purpose of bringing talented musicians together.
- To conduct a free training program for young aspirant musicians.
- To contribute financially to the programs of the Abraham Lincoln Center... and other charitable organizations.
- To provide a source of employment for worthy creative musicians.
- To set an example of high moral standards for musicians and to uplift the public image of creative musicians.
- To increase mutual respect between creative artists and musical tradesmen (booking agents, managers, promoters and instrument manufacturers, etc.).
- To uphold the tradition of cultured musicians handed down from the past.
- To stimulate spiritual growth in creative artists through recitals, concerts, etc., through participation in programs. (116)

We see both the early triumphs of the first concerts and the inevitable reevaluations of the means of governance as the organization gained practical experience resulting in a refined vision that led to the departure of many original members.

At this point, before the historical emergence of the names we now know from the AACM as major forces in the musical culture at large, Lewis dwells touchingly on figures that helped constitute the soul of the organization if not shaping its musical identity – figures like Jackson, a talented administrator who offered his skills to the organization and its individual members (helping many of them navigate Chicago's welfare system). Such details start to fall away as various members of the AACM begin to accumulate some renown and the attention shifts from the homespun activities of a grassroots organization to such issues as representations of the AACM, its members, and their music, in the popular press, availability of recording and performance opportunities, and audience reception in Europe.

Citing the lack of performance opportunities in Chicago, due largely to economic limitations and the racial politics of the Northside/Southside dichotomy, Lewis recounts the

tale of the Art Ensemble (originally the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble – the name was later changed to reflect collectivist ideal of its members which included Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, and Lester Bowie) and, subsequently Braxton-Smith-Jenkins (which was hot on the heels of the Art Ensemble in terms of critical acclaim and featured the luminaries Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, and Leroy Jenkins) and their respective departures for Paris in 1969. At this point the book seems to be at variance with this collectivist ideal, which was at least as much a part of the AACM ethos as it was a part of the Art Ensemble's: "...there was no question that the collective conception that dominated the AACM, both institutionally and artistically challenged the commodification of individuality itself – the 'star system'..." (155), as Lewis focuses on the achievements of star members such as Mitchell, Braxton, Abrams, Jarman, Smith, and a few others. The working details of establishing officers, determining procedures, the long quotations from AACM meetings, are now gone, and we are not to return to governance issues until the European excursion ends and a second exodus to New York causes friction between the Chicago Chapter, now run by the "new regime", and the newly formed New York Chapter of the AACM, with a membership drawn from many of the founders of the AACM and members of the "second wave". Here Lewis seems, despite a valiant effort, to be unable to completely overcome his own partisanship as a member of the New York contingent as he privileges the opinions of Abrams and others that made the move to New York. It is also telling that, for the most part, Lewis focuses on the performing opportunities and achievements of the New York expatriates rather than the organizational activities of the New York Chapter. Did the New York Chapter found a school as well? Did it engage actively in the pursuit of the nine purposes? Lewis's account leaves us in the dark on these matters.

This points to the difficulty of writing a history of an institution, particularly an institution that was founded to support the work of creative individuals. It is important to tell of the achievements of the members, for it reflects on the way the institution has succeeded, but these achievements are not the entire story – the Art Ensemble was not the AACM (as many AACM members were at pains to point out during this period), though it brought international attention to the AACM. What then was happening with the AACM

while the Art Ensemble was in Paris? I found myself wondering how the collective, back home, managed, after its initial success and sustaining the losses in leadership that the departure of so many luminaries introduced, to achieve all it did on a shoestring budget in a social climate that was hostile to any assertion of agency, let alone near total independence, of black artists. This climate is clearly seen in histories Lewis provides of BAG (Black Artists Group) and UGMA (Underground Musicians' Association) - similar groups arising in St. Louis and Los Angeles, respectively, which suffered less kind fates than the AACM.

Lewis evinces a strong concern with the discourse that frames our understanding of the music of the AACM. This concern manifests in lengthy analyses of press reception of the AACM. Indeed, Lewis touches on a tremendous portion of what has been written in both the popular and academic presses regarding the organization, and he does so to great advantage. Along the way he reveals the traditionalist bias in jazz journalism, particularly within the United States, that helped to marginalize, within the jazz community, the work of the AACM and like-minded musicians, citing such famous (or infamous) examples as Leonard Feather's blindfold tests, a monthly feature for the jazz magazine *Down Beat*, in which well-known jazz musicians, selected by Feather, were asked to evaluate recordings, also selected by Feather, without revealing to the listener who the musicians appearing on the recording were. Addressing academic attention that was lavished on the AACM, after the first European successes of the Art Ensemble and Braxton-Smith-Jenkins, which sought to characterize the music of the AACM as either a black nationalist music of protest or a subversive response to capitalist hegemony, Lewis shows the resistance of AACM musicians to the imposition of such definitions by outside forces: "...some AACM musicians felt that this kind of theorizing sometimes devolved into reducing the music to an occasion for the presentation of social theory and exoticism, as well as constructing essentializing differences between various AACM approaches to music," (238). Perhaps most importantly, Lewis shows how internalized assumptions held by the press about racial identity allow white musicians to move freely between the worlds of jazz and classical or experimental music and to be treated as doing so, or even, as in the case of John Zorn, to be lauded for transcending these and other boundaries while Anthony Braxton, for instance, is forced to accept the

identity of “jazz musician”, in articles by the same writer (508). It could not be more clearly stated than it is when Lewis writes that white musicians of Zorn’s generation “who were never subjected to the discourses of canonization and ‘roots’ that were being used to police the work of black experimental musicians, were able to take full advantage of their relative freedom from cultural arbitration,” (508).

This touches the heart of Lewis’s attempt to situate the AACM within a broader field of American Experimental Music. It also touches on the status of cultural identity and musical traditions one encounters from that identity – not as a limiting factor but as a point of departure (and return). This may have nothing to do with one’s definition of “experimental music” but it certainly has everything to do with the experience of being a musician today in the United States (at least) where very few young musicians play only one “kind” of music, let alone listen to only one kind of music. “Indeed, if jazz, the ‘avant-garde’ and other musical movements have become part of a larger network in which no one scene is dominant, resistance to the essentializing impulse that discursively block freely forming conceptual, financial, social, and cultural flows is critically important,” (510). It is this kind of world that produces a John Zorn and makes his work meaningful for so many, and George Lewis is absolutely correct that John Zorn, without the precedent of the AACM, is unthinkable. It is, therefore, only proper to hold both the AACM and the Downtown II musicians, as Lewis calls Zorn and his musical associates, to the same standard of stylistic mobility – a standard that has been redefined largely because of the groundbreaking work of the AACM. Whether this sort of post-modernism is experimental, in itself, remains an open question (to which, however, Lewis assumes an affirmative answer – more on defining the limits of “experimental” in music below), one that, should we attempt to answer, we should be aware of our own attempts at controlling the discourse.

It is important to make the distinction between discourse and practice clear. Practice refers to the actual activities of the musicians – what Braxton and Zorn, for instance, play and compose. In referring to discourse, I mean the body of language-based knowledge that has accrued around the practice of some musical tradition or another and which comes to define the place of that practice within a broader culture – particularly those

aspects of the culture that learn of the practice through the discourse. This discourse, once initiated, develops its own practice as well, raising the possibility of a widening gulf between discourse and practice, where discourse already could not possibly have embraced all aspects of practice. In this way, discourse may easily come to obscure aspects of practice. Lewis's project is to lay bare how the discourses of the classical-based experimental and avant-garde musics have covered over the aspects of practice that have practitioners learning from the music of their black counterparts. We have seen that he successfully illustrates how both the classical-based discourse and the jazz-based discourse failed to meet the challenge of the music produced by the AACM and proceeded, instead, along their essentializing ways (the "one-drop rule of jazz").

The one-drop rule also plagues funding issues, as illustrated by Lewis throughout his book, as grant-giving organizations remained woefully disengaged from the latest developments in jazz, still grouping it, in many cases, with folk or popular music, and remaining blind to the prospect of such music coming from an African American composer being considered anything other than jazz. The situation only began to ease (a bit) when Muhal Richard Abrams was given a seat on a grant panel with the NEA in the latter portion of the 1970s (395).

This attention to the treatment of the AACM within popular, academic, and institutional discourses opens onto the interventionist program that comprises the second thread of *A Power Stronger than Itself*. In particular, Lewis focuses on the way in which a racialized discourse regarding avant-garde and experimental musics has colored (or, perhaps whitewashed is the better term) the understanding of paths of influence across jazz-based and classical-based musics (and other forms of music, to boot). I came away with the sense that Lewis has raised an extremely important question for which, in the end, he doesn't provide a compelling answer – and this is more a question of methodology than anything else. There are instances where Lewis overstates his case, but mostly it is a lack of clarity in the terms employed that renders the assertions in which they are employed meaningless. For instance, nowhere in the text does Lewis define what he means by the terms "experimental" and "avant-garde" in music (nor does a reading of his previous articles on the

subject of improvisation, experimental music, and the relationship between the work of the AACM and white American and European musicians that self-identify as “experimental” uncover definitions of these terms<sup>2</sup>). This is deeply problematic as there is no consensus on their use even within the narrowly defined discourse of the pan-European concert music tradition. In my experience, the two terms have been used more interchangeably within the discourse of jazz, but even to allow that Lewis is employing these terms as used in that discourse (as he appears to be doing) does not resolve the further difficulty that, even should the terms have clear meaning within each discourse these meanings would have to be shown to be congruent or else in some way reconciled by the positing of a working definition of the terms that could be applied to both idioms.

I, myself, am accustomed to a discourse in which “avant-garde” refers to a, largely, European tradition that flows forward from integral serialism and also includes the proponents of such techniques and their derivatives on the East Coast of the United States and which, within the microcosm of New York City, is referred to as Uptown music. In other words, the music that has found a home in the universities of the United States and has such figures as Boulez, Stockhausen, Babbitt, and Carter as its fountainheads. “Experimental” music, on the other hand, is largely American, and is founded on the work of Cage, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown. It, by contrast, has enjoyed a much more circumscribed acceptance into academia with a few notable institutions supporting such work – interestingly enough, these same institutions can also boast of the presence of AACM members on their faculties: Anthony Braxton at Wesleyan University, Roscoe Mitchell at Mills College, Wadada Leo Smith at the California Institute of the Arts, and frequent AACM collaborator Anthony Davis at the University of California, San Diego (which also formerly had George Lewis on faculty). If we are to truly understand the relation of these terms to one another in a discourse that includes both jazz-based and classical-based musical traditions, and further, if we are to be able to stake out a claim for a broader category of “American experimental music” as invoked in the book’s subtitle, we will need to

---

<sup>2</sup> See “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives” in *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996) and “Gittin’ To Know Y’all: Improvised Music, Interculturalism, and the Racial Imagination,” in *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (2004).

determine the criteria by which something may be admitted as “experimental” beyond the bounds of either discourse. In this sense, I think the word “experimental” is the correct starting place as “avant-garde” suggests a “garde” in respect to which one can be “avant”. Prior to establishing a broader definition of “American experimental music” that combines impulses that may be grouped together within jazz- and classical-based music discourses, we have no “garde” and so no “avant-garde.”

This linguistic/taxonomical endeavor should also be paired with a thorough historical accounting of the known interactions between practitioners of music(s) that fall under the new umbrella term of “American experimental music.” For instance, we know that Earle Brown worked as a jazz musician before giving himself over to composition in (what has been generally accepted as) an experimental vein, and that he taught the, now obscure, Schillinger System of composition, which also had a profound impact on AACM composers through the tutelage of Muhal Richard Abrams. Whether or not we have any further evidence of interaction between Brown and members of the AACM, or whether Brown kept abreast of the developments in the jazz world after his departure from it (as active participant), we might look towards the correspondence between Schillinger’s ideas and certain broader operating principles within our American experimental music and track the historical avenues by which these principles worked into this music and how they evolved once they were there. This is another book (at least), not Lewis’s, but it is importantly suggested by Lewis’s work. It is also necessary for the proper historical contextualization of any musical practice in reference to the discourse on American Experimental Music (whether the practices of John Cage, Muhal Richard Abrams, or anyone else).

In addition to the ambiguity of terminology employed in the text, we must also examine the construction of a straw-man argument that Lewis deploys when situating the AACM within the historical context of a broader American experimental music. This argument rests upon an unproblematically accepted assertion, made by European composers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that jazz was the only interesting music being produced in the United States and that, should American composers wish to come of age, they had best begin incorporating elements of jazz into their work: “It is well known, though not

widely discussed in histories of American music, that European composers of the 1920s and 1930s felt strongly that jazz could form the basis for a uniquely American music that could emancipate itself from European models,” (371). This idea has been deeply embedded in the American psyche, taking the popularized form “jazz is America’s classical music.” But the statement is problematic, and those who originally espoused it might be said to have had some of the right opinions (e.g. jazz was and is an area of musical practice of international importance and artistic significance) for all the wrong reasons (e.g. the assumption that American composers not embracing jazz could only create poor imitations of European concert music). By the time these European composers, such as Ravel and Dvorak, were making pronouncements such as this, the Americans Ives, Seeger, Crawford, Cowell, and Ruggles were all actively creating music (music that still stands up today as some of the most interesting work of the period) without much in the way of cultural support at home and without the apparent awareness of the Ravels of the world abroad.

This assertion also must be seen in the light of the prevailing (artistic) ideas of the day. This was the time when Nationalism and Primitivism were all the rage, manifesting in compositions that incorporated folk music of European composers’ (such as Stravinsky, Bartók & Kodály) homelands. This was also the period in which Picasso was fascinated with African masks and composers like Colin McPhee were studying the music of “exotic” cultures and incorporating it into their own orchestral compositions. In the eyes of a Eurocentric classical music establishment, jazz was an exciting music of primitive people to be tamed and civilized by the high art of European civilization. Even those composers who picked up on this European suggestion saw jazz as a primitive force to be civilized by the intellectual exertions of “classical” composition. In an anthology of American composers writing on American music edited by Henry Cowell (first published in 1933), the celebrated African American composer William Grant Still writes: “Colored people in America have a natural and deep-rooted feeling for music, for melody, and rhythm. Our music possesses exoticism without straining for strangeness. The natural practices of this music open up a new field which can be of value in larger musical works when constructed into organized

form by a composer who, having the underlying feeling, develops it through his intellect.<sup>3</sup> We cannot, then, accept this assertion as a simple acknowledgement of jazz's aesthetic superiority to American classical music. Unfortunately, it seems that Lewis does just this as he elides the evidence of Cowell and Ives attempting to bring awareness to their own music with an aesthetically-driven inferiority complex, for which no direct evidence is offered.

Advancing this confusion, Lewis makes the claim for jazz as the preeminent aesthetic force in American music, "an avatar for American music itself," (372), and hence, all attempts by classical composers to get their work noticed by a jazz-infatuated Europe, particularly all comments complaining, as Ives is quoted as doing, that "we have gained the reputation in Europe of being able to produce only jazz – or conventional imitations of European music..." (373), are read as attempts to deny jazz any influence rather than attempts to claim influence for other avenues of American musical expression. Of course this can be seen in the light of the sort of competition for resources that Lewis invokes throughout the text, a competition that led to the creation of the AACM in the first place, as an organization to advance the music of its members in response to the fact that they were receiving no support from outside. Ives and Cowell might be seen as, less systematically, pursuing an analogous agenda, but, as with the AACM, this does not entail a sense of antagonism or ill will towards the "competing" form. Indeed, Cowell included William Grant Still and George Gershwin in his anthology despite his aesthetic differences with them.

It is important to address this topic in Lewis's book because it forms such a foundation for his reading of the history of American Experimental Music – the inferiority complex of the white American classical musician when he compares this work to jazz, that will lead to his manipulation of the discourse from his culturally privileged position so as to erase this "competitor". If, as it appears, this antagonism is overstated, then alternative rationalizations of uses of discourse on the part of pan-European experimentalists will be needed. For instance, where Lewis claims that John Cage has introduced the terms "chance" and "indeterminacy" into the discourse to obscure a debt to bebop, he is relying on this

---

<sup>3</sup> Cowell, Henry, ed. 1961 [1933]. *American Composers on American Music: A Symposium*. New York: Frederic Unger Publishing Co.

notion of an aesthetic inferiority complex that has white experimentalists feeling the need to respond to the challenges of black music, in this case a notion of spontaneity<sup>4</sup>. Lewis's presentation does not account for the fact that Cage's first work with chance procedure, *Music of Changes* (1951), was fully notated, making no attempt at spontaneity at all, nor does he address anywhere in the text the acknowledged debt Cage owed to Eastern thought in attempting to formulate a music devoid of his own taste (or any other manifestation of ego-drive), the generally accepted impetus for Cage's work with chance procedures and indeterminacy. Should Lewis hope to successfully dismantle this prevailingly held viewpoint, his arguments would need to address these historical facts rather than pass over them in silence.

We must also examine Lewis's position on the work of the AACM in relation to the jazz tradition, which is substantially harder to pin down. This seems entirely appropriate from the standpoint of a survey of members' position on this question. On the other hand, if Lewis is to be successful in placing the AACM in the context of "experimental music", then it seems very important to stake out a claim on the relationship between jazz and the AACM and to offer the reasoning behind the position. It seems to me that this is a necessary precursor to any positioning of the AACM in relation to an experimental music to which it belongs and which is not confined to a stylistic tradition – i.e. if it is not to be "experimental jazz" but "experimental music" (in the sense of transcending pre-existing styles) then we must know how it is not, *wholly*, jazz. The same must be undertaken in reference to an experimental music stemming from the pan-European tradition, and here Lewis is correct to point at the bases of the biases of the terms we have available to us to reference this practice: Why should this tradition give us "experimental *music*" while the music of the AACM is termed "experimental *jazz*"?

---

<sup>4</sup> Lewis's argument is predicated on the assumption that bebop was in some way more spontaneous than any jazz that preceded it, a claim he makes in his article "Improvised Music after 1950" and supports with a description of big band swing, which ignores the presence of small group swing (even as a standard feature of the larger big bands) in which more spontaneous, improvisatory music was performed and which also ignores the milieu of Kansas City jazz, which was well known for its all-night jam sessions and the looseness of (even its large) bands such as Walter Page's Blue Devils, Count Basie & his Orchestra, Andy Kirk & the Twelve Clouds of Joy, and Jay McShann and his Orchestra (of which a young Charlie Parker was a member). See Pearson, Nathan W. 1987. *Goin' to Kansas City*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, for a thorough history of Kansas City swing in the wide-open era of political boss Tom Pendergast.

For sheer wealth of information, *A Power Stronger than Itself* is an impressive addition to the historical record on the AACM, particularly in its early days. Lewis also provides invaluable information of concurrent organizations of similar musical direction and espousing the same Black Arts Movement drive towards self-determination. While I have been critical of some aspects of Lewis's presentation, particularly in reference to his weighting of the text towards certain outstanding members, the story could not be told without some of this information, and I am willing to own my own bias towards bureaucratic detail in my assessments. I am sure that many a reader will be quite happy to leave the deliberations regarding dues payments in favor of accounts of the Art Ensemble's living situation in Paris. To his credit, these accounts of the stars of the AACM make available the commentary he offers on the reception of the AACM and the music that came out of the AACM within the popular and academic presses. This connects to the status of the book as a piece of scholarship. In this area it has the benefit of asking important questions regarding the influence of cultural politics on the discourses surrounding music, American experimental music and jazz, in particular. Though I remain unsatisfied with many of Lewis's answers to these questions, in regards to his stated purpose of inspiring the production of new histories of experimental music that consider these questions, he has succeeded as much as any instigator could hope to do by provocatively questioning our prevailing assumptions and by introducing notions that contradict the prevailing norms of thought, thereby demanding further attention. At moments the provocation goes too far, overstating unfounded positions, but these instances are balanced by the interest of the rest.