

# ***Gittin' To Know Y'all: Improvised Music, Interculturalism, and the Racial Imagination***

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## **Introduction**

Turning the face of music historiography toward a relatively frank engagement with issues of race, ethnicity and class has rarely proceeded without discontents. While popular music studies, including jazz history and criticism, have addressed race matters for quite some time, studies that deal specifically with these issues in the self-described “experimental” musics, including improvised music, are rather few in number, evincing a rather stunted discourse. In the foreword to their book, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, editors Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman use the term “silence” to describe the historical aporias that accompany this discursive lack (37).

Among the vanishingly small number of texts that explicitly address constructions of race in experimental music, those produced by improvisors stand out, including work by Malcolm Goldstein (1988) and Wadada Leo Smith (1973), and Anthony Braxton's massive three-volume *Tri-Axium Writings* (1985), an effort which, while in dialogue with such texts as LeRoi Jones' *Blues People* (1963), John Cage's *Silence* (1961) and Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Texte* (1971), extends considerably beyond these texts, both in length and in range of inquiry.

This general erasure of race seems at variance with experimental music's presumed openness, its emphasis upon resistance, and its excavations of subaltern and marginalized histories of sound. The primary direction of my analysis, then, concerns the ways in which not only music scholars, but also musicians themselves, have either confronted or avoided engagement with issues of race in experimental music. I seek to identify some uninterrogated tropes concerning process, history and methodology that, when brought to light, do seem to embody coded assumptions about race, ethnicity, class, and about the possibilities for artists to move across, transgress and possibly erase borders.

As critical tools in advancing my theorizing, I wish to return to the terms “Eurological” and “Afrological,” which I used in a previous essay (“Improvised Music”) to historicize the particularity of perspectives developed in culturally divergent environments. These terms refer metaphorically to musical belief systems and behavior that, in my view, exemplify particular kinds of musical “logic.” The terms refer to social and cultural location, rather than phenotype (skin color); they are theorized here as historically emergent, and must not be used to essentialize musical direction in terms of ethnicity or race.

As I maintain in “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological

Perspectives,” these constructions make no attempt to delineate ethnicity or race, although they are designed to ensure that the reality of the ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent socio-musical group must be faced squarely and honestly. In fact, the term “race” here is viewed as a historical construct whose borders are consanguineous with those of class and place. The fluidity that marks this intersection produces complex, mobile identities that do not respect traditionally monolithic taxonomies that assume race as a necessary precondition of musical method, infrastructure and materials.

## The Two Avant-gardes

As a prime site for this examination, I will consider aspects of the histories, musical directions, methodologies and historical reception of two experimental music communities which emerged at around the same moment in time: the European “free jazz” or “free improvisation” movement, an international development that spanned the continent, and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), which emerged from Chicago’s racially segregated, all-black South Side. Both of these movements are framed in music histories as key representatives of a second generation of the “free jazz” movement spearheaded by Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and John Coltrane, among many others. At the same time, the goals, methods, materials, geographical base, historical outlook, cultural stances and critical reception of the two avant-gardes problematize simplistically linear generational readings of the sort too often advanced in jazz historiography.

By 1965, these two distinct musical avant-gardes, based on different continents and unaware of each other, yet sharing important characteristics, goals and acknowledged musical antecedents, were in the process of crystallization. It is good to remind younger people who are used to the idea of improvised music as a rather large international field that in 1965, these two vanguards were by some accounts extremely small. In a 1969 interview, Lester Bowie estimates Chicago AACM membership at about twenty-five (Caux 19). Peter Brötzmann, when asked in 1968 about the size of the pool of European free jazz players with whom he could feel compatible, responded, perhaps only partially tongue-in-cheek, “I think I could get a good group going with 15 people” (Schmidt-Joos 129).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the first extensively documented musical collaboration between members of these two avant-gardes took place in December of 1969, at the “Free Jazz Treffen” in Baden-Baden, a small town nestled in the German Schwarzwald, known since Roman times for the curative powers of its *Bäder*. The “meeting” was supported by the state-owned Südwestfunk radio network, and organized by the important critic and radio producer, Joachim Ernst Berendt. A recording of several pieces that were created for the meeting survives; the recording was released in 1970 under the name of Lester Bowie, with a pointedly ironic title, *Gittin’ to know y’all*.

Through the prism of this event, and using the recording of the Bowie work, I wish to

highlight aspects of the histories and methodologies of these two socio-musical complexes. Along the way, I try to provide some answers to the question of why these two avant-gardes, despite their evident similarities, remain relatively distanced from each other in terms of certain kinds of collaborations.

## The European Emancipation

There is a general agreement among scholars working on European improvised music that at the end of the 1950s, European jazz was in the throes of an identity crisis. Music historian Ekkehard Jost describes the European jazz of this era as “an exotic plant on barren soil [. . .] that must have seemed as bizarre as British flamenco” (Jost, *Europas Jazz* 11).<sup>2</sup> In thrall to what Wolfram Knauer calls an “epigonal Americanism” (156), European jazz musicians were said to inhabit a landscape in which aesthetic, methodological and stylistic direction flowed for the overwhelming part from the metropole of America to the tributaries in their own lands. In a sense, the notion of “European jazz” itself was an expression of American cultural hegemony that conflated all of the combined histories, languages, and styles of the continent into a single monolith.

The situation would eventually lead to a kind of declaration of independence from that hegemony. Beginning roughly in the mid-1960s, this move toward aesthetic self-determination took musical form as musicians combined extensions, ironic revisions and outright rejections of American jazz styles with a self-conscious articulation of historical and cultural difference. The critically important first generation of musicians who confronted these issues of identity included Willem Breuker, Misha Mengelberg, and Han Bennink in the Netherlands; Fred van Hove in Belgium; Irene Schweizer and Pierre Favre in Switzerland; Albert Mangelsdorff, Manfred Schoof, Alexander von Schlippenbach, Peter Brötzmann, Karlhans Berger and Gunter Hampel in Germany; and Maggie Nicols, John Stevens, Trevor Watts, Paul Rutherford, Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley, Barry Guy, Kenny Wheeler and Evan Parker in England.

The work of these and many other musicians would soon result in the emergence of a panoply of approaches that, taken together, constitute one of the critically important developments within a composite notion of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century musical experimentalism. Historical accounts represent this new breed of Europeans as having first promulgated a new, specifically European style of “free jazz” that built upon the innovations in form, sound, method, and expression advanced by Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and other African-American musicians of the early 1960s. Later, the new European musicians were widely credited with the development of a more open conception of “free improvisation” that was generally acknowledged in Europe to have broken away from American stylistic directions and jazz signifiers.

Borrowing from a critically important event in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American history, the end of chattel slavery, Berendt, in a 1977 essay, called this declaration of difference and independence “The Emancipation” (Berendt, “Ein Fenster” 222), a term that has entered

the general lexicon of German jazz historiography. There is little question that this term, with its explicit recall of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century freeing of American slaves, references notions of blackness. What is new here is the ironic use of the reference to simultaneously unify Europe under the banner of whiteness, and to portray as subaltern the culture that, until recently, had dominated the planet.

If “American models” of jazz were effectively African-American models, then in Berendt’s re-presentation of the emancipation narrative, Europeans became Spivak’s voiceless subalterns, with African-American musical culture cast as a symbolically putative slavemaster. Indeed, as Berendt maintains, “the creative European musician has ceased to imitate American musicians. He has ceased to compete with him in areas – above all in swing and in the field of black traditions – in which he cannot catch him” (*Das Jazzbuch* 374).<sup>3</sup>

Knauer’s account of the historical working-out of the Emancipation challenges the notion that the process happened in one short, sharp shock. Knauer identifies a phase of becoming and a phase of being, which allows him to examine the Emancipation as a gradual process. For Knauer, the trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, one of the first German jazz musicians to become well known in the United States, is seen as representing a new consciousness in German jazz. Maintaining that art is an expression of its time and place, Mangelsdorff concluded in 1963 that “For that reason, a jazz musician in Europe should not demand of himself to play like a colored musician in New York or Chicago; he should not try it and one should not expect it of him, because his problems are different and his surroundings are subject to other circumstances” (qtd. in Knauer 147-48).<sup>4</sup>

There is little question, however, that the first generation of European free jazz improvisors were heavily influenced by now-canonical African-American figures from the jazz tradition. Confounding simplistically linear and rigid notions of “roots” and “influence,” as well as bombastic accusations of appropriation and perhaps even “theft,” it is clear that at this early stage in the development of European free improvisation, the musicians made no attempt to deny the Afrological influence upon their work. Indeed, both critics and musicians have generally overlooked the crucial, ongoing investment by the current field of European free improvisation as a whole in fundamental notions of sonic personality that are based primarily in Afrological models.

In the context of improvised musics that exhibit strong influences from Afrological ways of music-making, musical sound – or rather, “one’s own sound” – becomes a carrier for history and cultural identity. “Sound” becomes identifiable, not with timbre alone, but with the expression of personality, the assertion of agency, the assumption of responsibility, and an encounter with history, memory and identity. Yusef Lateef maintains that “The sound of the improvisation seems to tell us what kind of person is improvising. We feel that we can hear character or personality in the way the musician improvises” (Lateef 44). Essentially the same notion was advanced in the 1940s by Charlie Parker, who declared that “Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your

wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn" (qtd. in Levin and Wilson 24).

Therefore, what Knauer describes as a coming to a consciousness of difference, an acknowledgment of "European-ness," can arguably be viewed as a direct expression of the Afrological notion of improvisation as a process of finding one's own sound. On this point, Erroll Garner is at one with Albert Mangelsdorff. Garner counsels that "If you take up an instrument, I don't care how much you love somebody, how much you would like to pattern yourself after them, you should still give yourself a chance to find out what you've got and let that out" (Taylor 97). Similarly, exemplifying Knauer's notion of *Selbstbewußtwerdung*, or becoming-conscious-of-self, Mangelsdorff felt that even as one admires American musicians, "one should not forget, in the midst of all admiration, that first of all, one should express musically one's own personality, one's own conception of jazz." (qtd. in Knauer 150).<sup>5</sup>

### Form, Sound and Difference

For Berendt, the trenchancy and vitality of the "New Thing," the innovations of Ayler, Coleman, Taylor, Coltrane and others, was based upon an assertion of freedom from "the tyranny of regularly accented meter, functional harmony, symmetrical cycles and phrase endings."<sup>6</sup> Berendt asserted that these new developments were more exciting to European jazz musicians and their audiences than they were in the United States, not least because of the greater acceptance by European concert music audiences of "atonality" (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 370).

Extending Berendt's analysis, I would place certain preconditions for the acceptance of European free improvisation somewhat earlier. By the early 1950s, bebop had already problematized, on an international basis, the high-art/low-art divide (Belgrad 182-183). Indeed, for some later historians, such as Daniel Belgrad, "bebop embodied a more radical cultural stance than European modernist music, because it provided for a more democratic and participatory form of musical expression" (Belgrad 185).

On both sides of the Atlantic, the grudging acceptance as high art of a music in which black perspectives and cultural markers dominated made the emergence of a European-based, post-Emancipation high art based on improvisation (as well as concomitant state support for such work) a thinkable proposition. Even more radical, as Jost saw it, was how the Emancipation operated as "a powerful psychomusical act of validation that not only placed the established rules of jazz improvisation on tenterhooks, but in the end, also placed the identity of jazz music itself in question" (*Europas Jazz* 12).<sup>7</sup> In other words, if jazz is American, then who are we as Europeans?

Knauer sees the late 1960s as the watershed year in which responses to this question would begin to take shape. With the 1966 declaration by Alexander von Schlippenbach that "We don't call it New Thing, but Own Thing" ("Own Thing" 69),<sup>8</sup> "European jazz" moves from *Selbstbewußtwerdung*, becoming self-aware, to *Selbstbewußtsein*, being self-conscious of its own power and possibility. By 1967, the earliest recordings of Peter

Brötzmann, Gunter Hampel, Peter Kowald, Irene Schweizer, John Stevens, Manfred Schoof, Willem Breuker, Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink, Fred van Hove, Wolfgang Dauner, and the Globe Unity Orchestra had been released, and European “free jazz” was receiving substantial notoriety, albeit mainly in Europe itself.

According to Knauer, this initial period of *Selbstbewußtsein* also included extensive engagement by some of these musicians, such as Schlippenbach, with European contemporary music (151). Commentators such as Berendt and Bert Noglik have observed that European improvisors were much closer than Americans to the geographical and cultural roots of the postwar European musical modernism of Stockhausen, Boulez, and others. Berendt asserted that the European improvisor “knows his Stockhausen and his Ligeti more closely than any of his American colleagues.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a link would soon be forged in Europe between the composition-centered and improvisation-based avant-gardes, involving such composers as Vinko Globokar, Hans Werner Henze, and Alexander von Schlippenbach’s composition teacher, Bernd Alois Zimmermann.

The long history of engagement with European musical modernism by African-American modernists such as Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington doubtlessly provided strong precedent for even more extensive involvement by later generations, including formal academic study, as with AACM composers such as Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, and Anthony Braxton. For Noglik, however, even in the absence of overt influence from Euromodernist methods, a kind of unconscious engagement – perhaps a metaphor for genetic/cultural memory – is available to European improvisors in a way that Americans could never experience: “In terms of inclination, for example, by way of comparison, the encounter (consciously or instinctively) with advanced composed music – as regards a certain breadth and differentiation of aspiration – affected the creative work of European improvising musicians” (Noglik 214).<sup>10</sup>

For Berendt, the end of functional harmony in both jazz and contemporary Western music also heralded the recrudescence of collective improvisation, which the critic saw as a hallmark of the new European jazz. It is certain that the need for a collective orientation was deeply felt among the new musicians. For instance, Manfred Schoof, in a 1965 interview, critiques an Albert Ayler recording on the grounds that “you feel no ‘with each other’ and no ‘for each other.’ There are three individual actions that don’t lead to a real collective” (“Hie Logan” 174).<sup>11</sup> Writing in 1973, Berendt maintained that “European jazz is – also in its emphasis – a collective jazz, in which the individual proceeds from the ensemble.”<sup>12</sup> Berendt points to the example of the Globe Unity Orchestra, in which Alexander von Schlippenbach’s hybrid mediation between improvisative and compositional methods emerges “from a particular relationship to collectivity and to the European tradition” (*Das Jazzbuch* 371).<sup>13</sup>

By 1968, as Europe was in turmoil and the cozy, American-dominated postwar political arrangements were under wide-ranging attack from a new generation of young Europeans, this notion of collectivity would provide an important symbol for the eventual political and economic unification of Germany (and Europe) as well. At this time, cross-

border collaborations between Europeans from different states were complicated not only by formidable borders in Western Europe, but by the intractability of the East-West divide, symbolized most potently by the division of Germany. With the Cold War still producing a divided Germany and a Balkanized Europe, as well as the first effects of the postcolonial condition, the new European free music could be read as asserting the desirability of a borderless Europe – if not the decline of the notion of the unitary European nation-state itself.

Following Knauer, the first fruits of *Selbstbewußtsein* manifested themselves as a kind of “rebellion” (152) in which the younger generation of European musicians sought to discover a new, even revolutionary freedom. In 1966, Peter Brötzmann, among the most radical of the younger generation of musicians, located his own construction of personal narrative, not in the Afrological notion of sound as personality, but in pure personal expression as taught in the wake of Abstract Expressionism: “From painting I learned to utilize the freedom of personal expression. One should not recognize any restraint in simply knocking over the traditional” (qtd. in Knauer 152).<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, in the period between 1965 and 1970, Brötzmann, like most European improvisors, saw himself as extending the jazz tradition, both personally and as a representative of a specifically original European variant: “I’m drawing throughout on the stuff that King Oliver did 50 years ago” (qtd. in Schmidt-Joos 129).<sup>15</sup>

The extended aesthetic reflections that took place in conversations printed in the pages of *Jazz Podium* included many of the key players of the period, such as Buschi Niebergall, Wolfgang Dauner, Irene Schweizer, Peter Kowald, Manfred Schoof, Pierre Courbois, Gunter Hampel, Pierre Favre, and Alexander von Schlippenbach. For the most part, the musicians’ discourse in these early years concerned the aesthetics and practice of jazz, and their role in that field. Similarly, in a 1973 interview, Evan Parker asserted, “I still use the word ‘jazz.’ For me, I’m playing jazz” (Carr 66).

### **The Crucible of Chicago**

In May of 1965, a number of Chicago musicians, diverse in age, gender, and musical direction, received a postcard from four of their mid-career colleagues – pianists Jodie Christian and Richard Abrams, drummer Steve McCall and trumpeter Philip Cohran – calling for a general meeting, and specifying fourteen issues to be discussed in relation to forming a new organization for musicians. This and subsequent meetings, held on Chicago’s South Side, led to the formation of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, whose composite musical directions comprised one of the critically important developments in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century experimental music.

The wide-ranging discussions in these early meetings, in which musicians are speaking frankly among themselves, rather than to any outside media, evince nothing so much as an awakening of the subaltern to the power of speech. Already on display was the radical collective democracy and solidarity that later became a central aspect of AACM ideology, and which would at times prove baffling to outsiders, as we will see in

examining press reports of the *Gittin' to know y'all* session. The meeting participants included bassist Malachi Favors, saxophonists Maurice McIntyre, Joseph Jarman, and Roscoe Mitchell, pianist Claudine Myers (later Amina), and trombonist Julian Priester (Abrams et al.). The proceedings were conducted using more or less standard parliamentary procedure, and were recorded on audiotape. Each participant stated his or her name for identification purposes before speaking.

The taped evidence does not support the notion advanced overwhelmingly by most critical reception that the AACM was formed in order to promote or revise “new jazz,” “the avant-garde,” or “free music.” Rather, with the very first order of business, the desire of its membership to create and perform a generalized notion of what they called “original music” was centered:

**Richard Abrams:** First of all, number one, there's original music, only. This will have to be voted and decided upon. I think it was agreed with Steve and Phil that what we meant is original music proceeding from the members in the organization.

**Philip Cohran:** I think the reason original music was put there first was because of all of our purposes of being here, this is the primary one. Because why else would we form an association? By us forming an association and promoting and taking over playing our own music, or playing music period, it's going to involve a great deal of sacrifice on each and every one of us. And I personally don't want to sacrifice, make any sacrifice for any standard music.

**Steve McCall:** We've all been talking about it among ourselves for a long time in general terms. We'll embellish as much as we can, but get to what you really feel because we're laying a foundation for something that will be permanent. (Abrams et al., Vol.1)

The name “Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians” and the acronym “AACM” were adopted unanimously at a subsequent general meeting, and by August of that year the organization was chartered by the state of Illinois as a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. The documents submitted as part of the charter request included a set of nine purposes, to which the membership continues to subscribe in 2002:

- 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 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. (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians 1-2)

In early August of 1965, an “open letter to the public” introducing the new organization and announcing its first concerts appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, the important African-American newspaper of record. Written by Richard Abrams and Ken Chaney, the letter declared that, “The ultimate goal is to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to serious music and performing new unrecorded compositions [. . .] The aim is universal in appeal and is necessary for the advancement, development, and understanding of new music” (“Creative Musicians”; Abrams and Chaney). The language used in the nine purposes, as well as the language of this announcement, which uses terms reminiscent of high-culture, pan-European music – “new music,” “serious music” – already distances the organization from jazz-oriented signifiers.

The first US articles on the AACM began to appear as early as 1966. International attention was not long in coming; between October of 1966 and December of 1968, a series of ten detailed and highly enthusiastic reports on “The New Music,” by the young Chicago-based producer-critics Chuck Nessa, John Litweiler, and University of Chicago microbiologist Terry Martin, appeared in the Canadian journal *Coda*. In 1968, Martin published the first major European article on the AACM, in the English journal *Jazz Monthly*. In 1966, the first commercial recording by an AACM composer, Roscoe Mitchell’s *Sound*, was released by an independent Chicago-based firm, Delmark Records, and in May of 1967, Philip Cohran released two seven-inch recordings of his music on his own Zulu Records label.

In a 1973 article, two early AACM members, trumpeter John Shenoy Jackson and co-founder and pianist/composer 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” (Abrams and Jackson 72). This optimistic declaration, based in notions of self-help as fundamental to racial uplift, cultural preservation 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.

AACM musicians emerged from a musical tradition that had already played a major world role in problematizing the border between popular and high culture. At the same time, these artists, like many others, were experiencing at first hand the breakdown of genre definitions and the mobility of practice and method that was starting to inform the emerging postmodern musical landscape. Thus, rather than simply extending the definition of jazz, AACM musicians articulated the more radical project of emancipation from any and all fixed definitions, particularly boundaries of race and place – two of the particular circumstances within which their ideas emerged.

This notion of emancipation could be seen as parallel to the European historical dynamic, albeit in reaction to a different set of circumstances. AACM musicians challenged the use of jazz-related images to police and limit the scope of black cultural expression and economic advancement. Through their music and in interviews, AACM musicians constantly challenged racialized hierarchies of aesthetics, method, place, infrastructure, and economics that sought to limit their mobility of genre, method, and cultural reference.

Not only did this project constitute an understandable reaction from musicians who grew up in working-class homes in one of the most segregated ghettos in the United States, but it was also in keeping with the overall project of African-Americans with respect to politics, economics, and culture. By articulating notions of genre mobility and by actively seeking dialogue with a variety of traditions, these musicians had placed themselves in an excellent position to recursively intensify and extend Charlie Parker's emancipatory assertion: "Man, there's no boundary line to art."

Nonetheless, the activities of the early AACM have generally been framed as crucial to the emergence of a "second generation" of "free jazz" or "New Thing" music that revised many of the standard methods and musical tropes that had marked the first generation.<sup>16</sup> The European free jazz musicians, however, were at once both a first and a second generation. To the extent that the pioneers of the European movement drew heavily upon the methods, materials, and histories of American jazz, acknowledging progenitors such as Coleman, Ayler, Taylor, and Coltrane, the work of the new Europeans constituted part of a second generation within a gradually globalized notion of jazz. At the same time, in a local sense the new European musicians also constituted a first generation of European free improvisors, who by the mid-1970s gradually began to align themselves with an emerging pan-European nationalism.

### **Paris: The catalyst**

Between 1967 and 1968, these two avant-gardes began to become aware of each other. During this time, the now-landmark series of Delmark and Nessa recordings of AACM music by Abrams, Jarman, Braxton, Mitchell, Bowie, and their colleagues were becoming known in Europe. Steve McCall, the first AACM member to visit Europe, provided a personal link between the AACM and the first wave of European free jazz

musicians, collaborating as early as 1967 with German vibraphonist Gunter Hampel and Dutch saxophonist-clarinetist Willem Breuker. Perhaps in response to McCall's reports from the field, by 1969 a number of AACM members literally flew over New York City, the traditional Mecca for jazz musicians, taking the AACM message to Paris, the undisputed center of black American expatriate cultural production in Europe, and arguably the most accommodating city in the world to the new black American music.

Within days of their arrival in Paris in June of 1969, the Art Ensemble of Chicago – Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Malachi Favors, and Lester Bowie – caused something of an immediate sensation with the first of their regular performances at the Theatre du Lucernaire in the Montparnasse district. The group's unusual hybrid of energy, multi-instrumentalism, humor, silence, found sounds, and homemade instruments – and most crucially, extended collective improvisation instead of heroic individual solos – proved revelatory to European audiences. Following closely on the heels of the Art Ensemble were Leroy Jenkins, Leo Smith, and Anthony Braxton, who arrived in Paris that same month and quickly garnered important notice for their work as well.

For the most widely published American cultural historians working on blacks in Paris (Stovall), the Paris-based black musical experimentalists of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are all but invisible. In the contemporaneous French media, however, black musicians were extensively and consistently chronicled, not only in jazz magazines, but also in the French newspaper of record, *Le Monde*. Multi-issue articles appeared in the pages of *Jazz Magazine* and its cousin, *Jazz Hot*, with intricate poststructuralist disquisitions detailing the thoughts, political theories, and compositional processes of Braxton, Jarman, Bill Dixon, Archie Shepp, and Clifford Thornton.

Within a few months of their arrival in Paris, the AACM musicians received their first major interview in a European publication. Rather than submit to individual interviews, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Malachi Favors, Leroy Jenkins, Leo Smith, and Roscoe Mitchell were interviewed as a group, introducing the AACM to French readers with a hopeful, expansive vision of their future. In response to a question about the AACM's future plans, Lester Bowie was enthusiastic in his stated intention to “install the AACM everywhere, on every corner of the universe” (Caux 17).<sup>17</sup>

Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli's classic 1971 *Free Jazz/Black Power* can be said to have articulated a sociopolitical analysis of the AACM and other black musicians that was far more heavily influenced by Le Roi Jones' ideas than many of the AACM musicians themselves were. But besides having had little or no direct contact with Jones/Baraka up to that point in time, the early AACM musicians tended to subordinate politics to musical expression. For instance, in response to a question about the group's connection with the Black Panthers, Jarman replied that affiliation with political organizations was “outside the aims of the AACM”<sup>18</sup> and that the original nine purposes were sufficient to explain their political position. Ultimately, through an encounter with the AACM's music, listeners “in turn can become more active and responsible” (Caux 17).<sup>19</sup>

AACM musicians advanced ongoing critiques of media discourses, with trenchant analyses of how language was used to place borders around black expression. At the conclusion of the interview, Bowie explicitly asserts, in his own way, the need to develop new discourses around music, with the clear implication that jazz discourses in particular were in need of revision and expansion: “In fact, the jazz press has to re-evaluate what’s going on right now in the music, going further in looking at everything Joseph [Jarman] was talking about, and what our message is about. Now, you have to invent a new way of talking about things” (Caux 18).<sup>20</sup>

Besides a critical stance toward media, the trademark AACM solidarity is also on display in this interview. Leo Smith’s reply to a question concerning the meaning of “the tradition – the blues, for example,”<sup>21</sup> by asserting that “We want to integrate all forms of music [. . .]. Everything and anything is valid. Why differentiate what is tradition from what isn’t? That separation serves no purpose.”<sup>22</sup> When Mitchell is asked for his opinion about Smith’s comment, he replies, laughing, “Leo just said what I could have said [. . .] Why repeat it?”<sup>23</sup> This exchange in turn prompts Jarman to reassert the full mobility of the AACM project of “original music”: “We play blues, rock, Spanish music, gypsy, African, classical music, European contemporary music, voodoo [. . .] anything you want [. . .] because, in the end, it’s “music” that we play: we create sounds, period” (Caux 18).<sup>24</sup>

This exchange illustrates the extent to which the early AACM notion of “original music” was unbound by strict adherence to free improvisation, notated composition, constructed notions of blackness, or any other fixed notion of method or tradition. Rather, as Lester Bowie asserted not long after the dawn of postmodernism, “We’re free to express ourselves in any so-called idiom, to draw from any source, to deny any limitation. We weren’t restricted to bebop, free jazz, Dixieland, theater or poetry. We could put it all together. We could sequence it any way we felt like it. It was entirely up to us” (qtd. in Beauchamp 46).

### **The Meeting: Collectivity and its Discontents**

The Baden-Baden Free Jazz Meetings of the late 1960s and early 1970s revised the standard jazz festival model in a number of respects. First, rather than featuring fixed groups or compositions, the “meetings” were, in a sense, musician-centered events, assuming a diplomatic model in presenting opportunities for intercultural unity in the wake of the Emancipation, while framing improvisation itself as a site for musical and cultural exchange. Moreover, the meetings could also be read as performing an analogous function for improvisors to what the Darmstadt *Ferienkurse* represented for composers. As with the later work of Company, the brainchild of English guitarist and first-generation European improviser Derek Bailey (*Company 5*), the Baden-Baden meetings exemplified the core conception of placing musicians in a space with few or no externally imposed preconditions – or rather, the histories and personalities of the musicians themselves constituted the primary preconditions.

Steve McCall provided entrée for the newcomers into the expatriate and itinerant musicians' community in Paris (Beauchamp 74). Given his knowledge of the European music scene, McCall could well have been in a position to suggest to festival organizers that the Chicagoans be invited to the 1969 edition of the *Free Jazz Treffen*. Besides McCall, three other members of the "Chicago avant-garde" who were living in Paris – Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, and Roscoe Mitchell – came to Baden-Baden for the event, along with the pianist Dave Burrell. Ensclosed in the Schwarzwald, they met sixteen European musicians, including Albert Mangelsdorff, Eje Thelin, Alan Skidmore, Heinz Sauer, Gerd Dudek, John Surman, Willem Breuker, Terje Rypdal, Leo Cuypers, Tony Oxley, and Karin Krog.

In hindsight, the Baden-Baden event could be viewed as an early example of an intercultural event between the two emerging musical vanguards. As Bowie himself affirmed, shortly before his untimely passing, "I called it *Gittin' to Know Y'all* because that's what it was – being acquainted with them, getting to know each other" (Interview). The *Gittin'* session held out the promise of the formulation of what ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin calls an "affinity interculture," a "transnational performer-audience interest group" in which audiences and musicians cross various borders, continually reorganizing themselves into fluid, shifting, diverse communities with fluid definitions, "even when they are not part of a heritage or a commodified, disembodied network – and particularly when the transmission is of the old-fashioned variety – face to face, mouth to ear" (Slobin 68).

Following Jason Stanyek, what is critical here is precisely this kind of "intercorporeality" ("Transmissions" 90) – a body-based, face-to-face exchange of ideas and sounds where, to gloss Judith Butler, improvising bodies themselves are precisely what matter. In Stanyek's formulation, this kind of intercultural music-making "serves to reinforce difference and to rupture contiguities. Interculturalism thrives on both proximity and distance" ("Articulating" 44). In this way, in the affinity interculture, race can be a factor in parsing musical utterance, alongside methodology, materials, class, and subject position.

This basis in notions of difference and intercorporeality allows a contemporary listener to hear the performance of *Gittin' to know y'all* as the working-out of a transnational, intercultural exchange of sonically-based cultural artifacts in terms of historical positionality, including constructions of race and class. At this time, however, intercultural music-making was framed primarily in terms of what Stanyek terms a "music-as-universal-language trope" that was "about the transcending (and effacing) of difference" ("Articulating" 44). Given such an understanding, it must have come as a shock to many of the attendees to find that the 1969 meeting exposed a vast aesthetic, methodological, social, cultural, and sonic gulf separating the two avant-gardes.

This gap was expressed first in Bowie's title, where the term "y'all" appears to instantiate an ironic demarcation between Us and Them. Moreover, the title seems to fix the Europeans within the focus of the black American gaze; otherwise, the piece could

have been called *Gittin' to Know Us'n*. In terms of the formal syntax of Ebonics grammar, the directional sense of “y'all” can certainly be reversed, since the European musicians were also “gittin' to know” this new generation of black American improvisors. Unlike a name such as “Globe Unity,” however, the use of the word “y'all” itself constitutes a marker of difference.

Bowie and his AACM cohorts had been living in Europe just eight months, invited by drummer and organizer Claude Delcloc, who also came to Baden-Baden and participated in the sessions (Beauchamp 28). Mitchell had come into contact with Mangelsdorff from his Army days in 1958, when he was stationed in Heidelberg, while Bowie and Jarman were newcomers to Europe, “gittin' to know” its peoples, cultures, and musics. Thus, rather than promoting aspirations of unity, the title of Bowie's piece seems designed to signal his intent to present a symbolically autobiographical experience of nomadism that, in part inadvertently, placed himself and his AACM colleagues on the one hand, and the European free music community on the other.

Perhaps this attempt to foreground African-American experience, and to examine differences that were already present, was at variance with at least one reviewer's notion of the proper articulation of collectivity. According to one reviewer, several other Chicago musicians, including Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton and Leroy Jenkins, turned up in Baden-Baden without a real invitation to the meeting, and were both surprised and upset that they were not allowed to take part in the performance – although who it was that barred their participation is not mentioned in the review. The reviewer complains that during the course of the meeting, the six Chicagoans “separated themselves, formed a clique whose unapproachability stood in contrast to Bowie's certainly honorably intended work of contact, and somewhat disturbed the otherwise refreshingly familial character that distinguished the meeting” (“Das bietet” 56).<sup>25</sup> For this reviewer, the “one-big-happy-family” of musicians was destroyed by the “unzertrennlliche Bruderschaft” – inseparable brotherhood – exhibited by the Chicagoans.

The review cited racism as the cause of the problems, and the clear implication was that the Chicago “clique” was to blame: “The black-white problem spread itself like a shadow over the event” (“Das bietet” 56).<sup>26</sup> Certainly, jazz has been obliged to deal with race throughout its history, as difficult as this has been at times, and any music as heavily influenced by jazz as European improvised music would have to deal with race as well, particularly in a situation of intercultural and interracial collaboration. But this simplistic reproach, directed exclusively at the black musicians, effectively “e-raced” not only obvious creative differences, but the asymmetrical class differences, both personally and in terms of socioeconomic systems – the children of the underdeveloped Chicago ghetto suddenly face-to face with the relatively privileged descendants and beneficiaries of the *Wirtschaftswunder*<sup>27</sup> and the Marshall Plan.

In the course of the recorded performance of *Gittin' to know y'all*, both the American and the European improvisors seem to alternately embrace and reject blues and jazz-based sonic signifiers. Listening to the piece with the ears of a third-generation improviser, Bowie's piece may be heard as a kind of negotiated settlement between two very

different ideologies and methodologies of music-making. The music appears to mediate between two different subject positions, oscillating between the ferocious intensity of “heroic” individual solos of the sort Coltrane was noted for, and what by 1970 had become standard AACM practice of partial perspectives and unstable silences.

Even given these various sources of ambivalence and instability, the *Jazz Podium* critic found that the 1969 performance of the Bowie work “led to an ideal collective playing, to a real unity. An abundance of individual voices sensed the same soul” (“Das bietet” 56).<sup>28</sup> For this critic, the work was in step with the growing ideological understanding that what was different about post-Emancipation European jazz was its articulation of collectivity as the path to a new unity – an intercultural transcendence of difference on the European continent itself. This affirmation of the importance of collectivity was seen as part of the European transition away from an American-centered “free jazz” that, for Berendt in 1976, exemplified a preoccupation with singular heroic figures: “Whoever reflects upon the high points in European jazz in recent years always thinks of the collective. Whoever thinks about high points in American jazz of the 1960s, then as now, thinks of great individuals: Cecil Taylor, Pharoah Sanders, Ornette Coleman [. . .]” (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 371).<sup>29</sup>

Of course, the AACM, which Berendt does not mention, constitutes the other radically collective grouping that emerges at more or less the same moment as the European musicians Berendt cites. Without the AACM, Berendt’s argument stands on its own two feet; to have cited the AACM would have complicated and weakened a seemingly stable binary. In fact, for both the AACM and the European improvisors, musical articulations of collectivity could be seen as challenging the ongoing American fascination with individualistic social Darwinism.

By the early 1970s, the European musicians were entering the period of the *Grossen Orchester* and the so-called *Kaputtspielphase*. In a 1972 interview, first-generation European free improvisor Peter Kowald described the approach this way: “It was mainly about breaking down the old values; that means, letting everything about harmony and melody fall away” (qtd. in Jost, *Europas Jazz* 113). According to Jost, *Kaputtspielen* took musical form in tendencies toward restlessness, very fast non-tempi and collective “powerplay” (Jost, *Europas Jazz* 116-117). Perhaps more crucially, *kaputtspielen* helped to further crystallize the rejection of US musical hegemony. As Kowald declared, “Today it is evident for the first time that as musical influence, most Americans of our generation don’t interest us in the slightest” (qtd. in Jost, *Europas Jazz* 113).<sup>30</sup>

The *Gittin’ to Know Y’All* performance engages this notion of powerplay, with moments of collective intensity that recall late Coltrane, particularly *Om*. The musical practices of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, though inclusive of this kind of method, also included extreme articulations of silence along the lines of Bowie’s 1967 *Numbers 1&2*, recorded just two years earlier in Chicago. Moreover, contemporaneous accounts and recordings of AEC performances from the Paris period indicate that Bowie and his AACM cohorts had not suddenly abandoned their silences, irony and humor. In *Gittin’ to know y’all*, however, these kinds of approaches are as conspicuously absent as in much European

improvised music of the period – excepting, of course, the sophisticated wit and whimsy of the Dutch school of Mengelberg, Bennink, and Breuker.

With Lester Bowie as soloist and leader, the piece starts with a drone on A. Then as now, slow, meditative, repetitive textures were very uncommon in European improvised music, but often used in AACM music, such as Joseph Jarman’s “Song to Make the Sun Come Up” (*As if*) and Richard Abrams’s “The Bird Song” (*Levels*). Drones were commonly used as transitional devices in the live performances of the Art Ensemble; moreover, one function of drone textures in many cultures is to evoke the spiritual, a trope that is relatively absent from the European improvisors’ discourses. As Steve Lake observes, the musicians on *Machine Gun* were unlikely to be found chanting *Om*.

In contrast, the AACM purposes explicitly include a desire “to stimulate spiritual growth in creative artists.” Joseph Jarman wrote in a 1967 edition of the AACM’s short-lived newsletter: “Man need not destroy himself or his GODS (anti-western rationalism) simply because he has become so advanced intellectually; this music means NOTHING more than the act of it, the human giving that it entails, the homage to the source of all life, the spirit that is man in the universe” (“On Questions”). Directly realizing a negative aesthetics of modernism, the paradox of *Kaputtspielen*, from the standpoint of Emancipation discourse, emerged in the similarity of many such performances to the spirit of late Coltrane – as with the opening salvo of Peter Brötzmann’s *Machine Gun*, which despite the assertion of English critic Steve Lake that the music “sounds nothing like American models,” is easily heard as a gloss on the first movement of Coltrane’s *Meditations*. Thus, after the opening drone, a kind of hectic restlessness sets in, eventually evoking Coltrane’s *Ascension*, even to the extent of a nearly direct quote by one saxophonist from a particular passage played by Coltrane in that work.

Further differences between the two camps would emerge, prefigured by the Baden-Baden meeting. Jost notes that in the music of European improvisors, “compositional plans remained, in general, limited to a minimum” (*Europas Jazz* 113).<sup>31</sup> Bert Noglik’s recounting of the well-known story of Paul Rutherford’s freely improvised “performance” of the Luciano Berio “Sequenza V” for trombone solo (Noglik 263) serves as a salient example of how the European improvisors’ critique of European high-culture composition often embodied an ideology of binary opposition between free improvisation and extended notated composition. Indeed, the notion that compositional devices should be either kept to a minimum or entirely avoided is an ideology to which many European musicians continue to adhere, as in Evan Parker’s assertion that “[. . .] if anyone in the production of a musical event is dispensable, it is the score-maker, or the ‘composer,’ as he is often called” (Bailey, *Improvisation* 81).

The AACM musicians, on the other hand, were emphasizing a hybrid compositional-improvisative discourse that incorporated insights, sounds, techniques, and methods from a variety of areas, including European high musical modernism. Unlike free improvisors, or either modernist or postmodernist pan-European composers, the composition/improvisation binary lacked any real force in AACM practice. Rather, AACM composers were often drawn to postmodern collage and interpenetration

strategies that blended, opposed or ironically juxtaposed the two disciplines. The AACM critique of high-culture composition, in contrast to the European improvisors, was not centered on the Eurologically-based binary of notation versus freedom, but upon an opposition to the silencing of black perspectives – an ideology that privileged fluidity, mobility, and hybridity. AACM musicians were headed away from, not toward, an exclusive preoccupation with free improvisation, as befits their status as a second generation rather than a first. For these musicians, in the wake of the volcanisms of Coltrane, Taylor, Murray, Shepp, and Ayler, this more delicate, nuanced approach was as revolutionary and anti-hegemonic as the previous “free jazz” claimed to be, not just in its challenge to notions of what American free music should sound like, but to notions of the “proper” processes by which working-class black musicians should produce music.

In fact, the focus in standard histories on the role of improvisor as constitutive of the AACM’s activity follows a trope that has become standard in the historiography and criticism of black American music. In examining the activity of the first wave of the AACM, the limits of that trope in accounting for the diversity of black musical subjectivity quickly become disclosed. As we can see from the following meeting excerpt, the dominant focus of the AACM as strongly *composer-centered* was fostered right from the start, eventually leading to the extensive engagement with notation that we see in so many AACM members’ works. Thus, there was no rhetoric of refusal of composition, but an engagement where composition itself became an act of resistance.

**Richard Abrams:** Now, for the benefit of those who were not here last week, we decided that we in this organization will play only our own music – original compositions or material originating from the members within the group.

**Julian Priester:** It would seem to be that if you put too many restrictions on the activities at this point, you’re going to put a lot of obstacles in your way. For instance, to me, everyone in here is not a composer, so right there you exclude them.

**Richard Abrams:** No, no one’s excluded, you see. You may not be Duke Ellington, but you got some kind of ideas, and now is the time to put ‘em in. Wake yourself up. This is an awakening we’re trying to bring about. (Abrams et al., Vol.2)

In the context of the 1970s, Abrams’ reference to bringing about “an awakening” through composition recognizes that this simple assertion by Afro-Americans – defining oneself as a composer – was a challenge to the social and indeed the economic order of both the music business and the aesthetics business. Moreover, the reference to Ellington is quite understandable on a number of levels, given the fact that throughout his career, Ellington’s image of himself as a composer working with and through African-American forms was constantly challenged, stigmatized, and stereotyped. Thus, Ellington could be viewed as a symbol, not only of excellence and innovation, but also of optimistic perseverance; again, as with Ellington, the dissonance between the AACM composers’ catholicity of methods and materials and the immobility of their genre

classification as jazz was seen by AACM members as largely race-based.

Finally, vacillating between relative calm and full-out intensity, the Bowie work seems to be providing a way for the AACM musicians to “blend in,” as immigrants must do, while being unable to completely suppress their difference even if they wanted to. Thus, while *Gittin’ to know y’all* constitutes something of an anomaly in AACM practice, it can be heard as a reflection of an uneasy attempt at musical hybridity.

### **Complementary Cultural Nationalisms**

In citing the “strategically essentialist” character of 1970s black cultural nationalism – certainly an influence on some individual AACM members – Stuart Hall (citing Gayatri Spivak) claims that “historically, nothing could have been done to intervene in the dominated field of mainstream popular culture, to try to win some space there, without the strategies through which those dimensions were condensed onto the signifier ‘black’” (29). In the paragraphs to follow, I suggest that in an environment dominated by epigonal Americanisms, a similar strategic essentialism was at work in preparing the next stage of the evolution of European free music – the 1970s drive to distance the new tradition from its jazz roots by asserting a purely European character for it.

The English critic Steve Lake, an early leader in the drive to create a critical space for a European improvised music, cites Brötzmann’s 1968 *Machine Gun* as “the first jazz album you could call ‘European’,” in that the musicians came from five different European countries. But by the mid-1970s, the political stance of the new European musicians had moved well beyond the notion of “European jazz.” An emerging pan-European political nationalism was certainly an influence on the emergence, reception, and production of European free improvisation, at a time when there were patrolled borders between France and Belgium, Holland and Germany, and West Germany and East Germany.

By the mid 1970s, this cultural nationalism was being strongly asserted by the first-generation, post-Emancipation European free musicians. As Misha Mengelberg saw it in 1974, an essential aspect of the new consciousness was aimed at bringing the new music into the European cultural consensus – which would include the kind of government support for cultural production that had become an integral part of European social democracy. To make the case for inclusion, the new musicians conceived a nativist politics that identified African-American music and musicians as foreign competitors.

Thus, as with generations of black musicians before them – as with Charlie Parker’s 1949 assertion that bebop was not jazz (Levin and Wilson 24) – by the mid-1970s many European musicians began to deny that they had anything to do with jazz (Jost, *Europas Jazz* 14). As Mengelberg declared, “the music we play, we and the other European musicians, even those who invoke ‘free jazz,’ has no longer anything to do with Afro-American music. But we are inspired, it must be acknowledged, by this music

in order to create our own” (Brötzmann, Bennink, and Mengelberg 20).<sup>32</sup> In the same series of interviews, Alexander von Schlippenbach, in response to a question about Sun Ra, observes that “I think that what they are doing is inseparable from the situation of black Americans, and the problems that we have in Europe are different” (Schlippenbach 18).<sup>33</sup>

In the light of such statements, it seems odd that the black cultural nationalist aspect of the Art Ensemble’s term, “Great Black Music,” is often roundly criticized, while the pan-European cultural nationalism of the European free improvisors often remains uninterrogated. For some, such as Mengelberg, the redefinition of their work as “nouvelle musique improvisée européenne” – new European improvised music – had immense political significance: “Our improvised music is political [. . .] the fact that we defined our political position made our music more powerful than it ever had been, and at least as powerful as that of the Afro-American musicians” (Brötzmann, Bennink, and Mengelberg 20).<sup>34</sup> Ironically, the strategy outlined by Mengelberg strongly resembles theoretical and historical antecedents in Pan-Africanist worldviews that were routinely attributed to black American musicians active in this same period, such as Archie Shepp and Clifford Thornton.

Both the European improvisors and the AACM pursued projects of collectivity, politically and musically. The challenge for the Europeans was to unify musicians from a variety of nations, languages and histories – a multicultural project of recognizing unity within diversity. The AACM project of collectivity aimed at the reverse – the maintenance of diversity within unity in the face of a massive, corporate-driven appropriation and flattening of black culture generally. Black music in its various forms was both admired and feared as arguably the most widely influential music of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. At the same time, black music had become the most commodified art in history, and the space of positions for alternative black musical expression was becoming vanishingly small.

The need to move beyond the dependent conception of “European jazz” to a putatively indigenous concept of free music seemed a logical outgrowth of the same kind of drive for self-realization that the AACM pursued for different reasons, and to recall Mangelsdorff’s phrase, under “other circumstances.” For European improvisors, the term “jazz” had become first and foremost a marker of the link to epigonality; the very word “jazz” pointed to Americanized musical norms. Accordingly, discourses of distance appeared as they had among the black musicians, including borrowings of terms such as “zeitgenössische Musik” [contemporary music], “folklore imaginaire,” and the currently preferred, if somewhat bland, “improvised music.”

No longer bound by the externally imposed hegemony of “European jazz,” the musicians sought to bring themselves together, reasserting a pan-European culture. This revised strategy of unification, moreover, would no longer be based in the older notions of liberation from American hegemony generally, but rather in a need for the musicians to distance themselves from historical and aesthetic responsibility to specifically African-American cultural tropes. In Nietzschean terms, the new European free music was emancipating itself by breaking the cycle of *ressentiment* that made the

debt of Europe to African-American tradition impossible to pay. Perhaps inevitably, this project would be interpreted by subsequent generations in a way that conflated ethnicity and race.

### The Way Ahead?

Bowie's highly-charged attempt at *Gittin' to know y'all* seems to have set a certain tone; up to the present day, collaborations between European improvisors and AACM improvisors have been very limited. Tellingly, these collaborations have centered on free improvisation events; in the case of the late-1970s hybrids of composition and improvisation promulgated by AACM composers, such as Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, and Leo Smith, the presence of European musicians is all but nonexistent. These extended works were realized in performance by ensembles comprised largely of AACM members and other American musicians.<sup>35</sup>

One might have thought that a strong case for an ongoing, vital exchange between the two avant-gardes could be made on the basis of the overlap of interests and methodologies. However, if, as Renato Poggioli asserts, an avant-garde needs a metropole to assert difference, the two avant-gardes were each working in reaction to a different construction of the metropole. In any event, the point here is that the absence of collaboration can express a complex mix of aesthetic, historical, and methodological positions. Just as in 1969, resorting to simplistic explanations based on accusations of individual racism between members of the two vanguards obscures far more than it reveals.

More to the point is the fact that these two generationally similar avant-gardes (the major exponents in both vanguards were born between 1930 and 1950), employing methodologies that overlapped to a considerable extent, were both seeking to obtain footholds for their music in Europe, a fact which inevitably placed them in competition for resources. Complicating the position of the Americans in the race were the problems of being foreigners in an increasingly nativist European political and cultural landscape. Another problem lay closer to home – the perception of the United States cultural situation expressed by Muhal Richard Abrams in 1982: “Look, this country here was never focused, in whatever area, to tolerate a black image” (qtd. in Jost, *Jazzmusiker* 198).<sup>36</sup> Making the Europeans' position more complex was the *ressentiment*-based perception by some musicians of the desires of the home, European audience, broached in 1974 by Brötzmann: “In general, the public prefers the black musicians and Americans” (Brötzmann, Bennink, and Mengelberg 21).<sup>37</sup>

The critiques of jazz advanced by first-generation European improvisors evolved from a rejection of African-American cultural hegemony in jazz to an eventual asserted severance of the link to the jazz tradition itself. A newer generation of critics, along with many musicians, moved beyond this relatively benign position to frame free improvisation in a way that erased African-American agency and influence altogether. This movement sought to fold the practice and history of free improvisation into a

composite construction of a whiteness-based, transnational, pan-European experimental aesthetic that would frame as axiomatic the permanent marginalization of African-American agency.

Thus, composer and improviser Anne LeBaron, writing almost forty years after the Emancipation, makes a claim that would have astonished first-generation European free musicians. After citing the “modernist origins of free jazz” in the work of Coltrane, Taylor and others, the writer proceeds to claim that “With the exception of maverick composer-improviser Anthony Braxton, the Americans maintained closer relationships with conventions associated with traditional jazz (such as repetitive harmonic structures and fixed rhythmic pulses) while “free jazz” in Europe tended to demolish anything smacking of the formulaic [. . .]. The abandonment of clichéd conventions in American jazz in the 1960s was more gradual, less radical than in the European free jazz movement” (Le Baron 39).

As we have seen already in this essay, however, the passing of the era of strict tempo had already become a given by the mid-1960s. Moreover, the early European free musicians explicitly regarded this and other new frontiers of form, materials and method as having originated with American free jazz, not from their own work. In fact, as we have already heard from Berendt, first-generation European free musicians, who had heard John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Roswell Rudd, John Tchicai, Milford Graves, and others at first hand, were influenced by their work precisely *because* of the absence of “repetitive harmonic structures and fixed rhythmic pulses” (*Das Jazzbuch* 370).

LeBaron’s account, however spurious in its attempted revisionism, draws (perhaps unwittingly) upon a particularly complex stereotype of African-American music-making that treats “jazz” not as a fluid, contested, dynamic genre with porous borders, but as a body of received, unchanging methods, with hermetically sealed histories, and most crucially, an always-already supply of blacks who, regardless of background, interests or affinities, are genetically bound to the embodiment of the stereotype. The work of the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha can help us to unpack this particular version of what is, after all, a common discursive strategy – practically a cliché (see, for instance, Toop).

For Bhabha, the stereotype is “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated [. . .]. It is the force of [this] ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed” (Bhabha 66). Bhabha’s articulation (in Stuart Hall’s sense of the term) of the notion of “stereotype” with the concept of “ambivalence” allows us to uncover the extent to which LeBaron’s analysis rests upon what George Lipsitz has called a “possessive investment in whiteness” (see Lipsitz) and concomitant appeals to networks of power and pan-ethnic particularism. In this way we are able to see how the critique of jazz can become a springboard for a more fundamental erasure of black culture, and finally, of the black people who create it.

For commentators such as Tom Nunn (14-16) and LeBaron (39) free improvisation can be distinguished from free jazz in terms of a well-specified set of musical characteristics. However, the exact nature of the difference appears to be difficult for the proponents of this theory to identify – already a source of ambivalence. LeBaron appears to take a cue from John Cage (Kostelanetz 162-164) in looking askance upon fixed tempi and recurrent harmonic structures. The underlying claim is that the absence of these elements counts as a mark of "progress," or in LeBaron's case, a boundary marker between modernism and post-modernism.

Here, we see Bhabha's colonial stereotype at work. As we have seen in examining the experience of the European improvisors, the "truth" of the "fixed pulse" stereotype is "far in excess of what can be logically construed" by people who were familiar with mid-1960s African-American experimentalism – such as the first-generation European free jazz improvisors. Thus, the constant, anxious repetition of the canard that jazz is somehow intrinsically doomed to endless recycling of "clichéd conventions" becomes essential to the marginalization and subsequent erasure of African-Americans as experimental music-makers. On this view, anxiety and ambivalence on the part of the critic must necessarily result from the divergence between what is historically known and what is being asserted.

Since the notion that free improvisation and free jazz differ in the articulation of regular pulse and repetitive harmony cannot be taken seriously once its cycle of stereotypic repetition has been interrupted, one influential version of the free jazz/free improvisation dialectic, advanced by the improvisor Derek Bailey, redeploys the stereotype at a higher level of abstraction. Bailey's formulation of "idiomatic" and "non-idiomatic" genres or traditions of improvisation is still based on the notion that some musics rely for their identity on the articulation of fixed forms and received wisdoms: "Idiomatic improvisation [. . .] is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom" (*Improvisation* xi-xii).

In contrast, Bailey asserts that "'Non-idiomatic' improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation and, while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity" (*Improvisation* xi-xii). From this vague definition, however, it may be difficult to see how free improvisation avoids becoming an idiom like all the others out there. The most historically consistent answer to this would frame non-idiomatic improvisation as drawing primary sustenance from modernism's negative aesthetic.

Thus, "non-idiomatic" improvisation and free improvisation prove to be one and the same, expressing the tautology  $A=A$ . On this view, the very being of "non-idiomatic" improvisation must become parasitic upon the existence of an "idiomatic" genre of improvisation – a fixed star, if you will. Among the many supposedly idiomatic improvised musics in the world, there are many from which to choose for that honor, but it has traditionally been jazz, the most influential improvisative music of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century,

which has “served to animate many projects in the formation and exploration of a particularly Eurological improvisative sensibility” (Lewis, “Improvised” 144).

Even as free jazz becomes a handy second (fixed) term in the binary equation, in the context of the improvisative musics that emerged from the mid-1960s, the explanatory power of both the free jazz/free improvisation and the idiomatic/non-idiomatic dialectics rests in large measure upon an erasure from the history of improvisation of the very group whose work problematizes both dialectics – the AACM. Thus, we find an aporia in the Bailey, Nunn, and LeBaron texts (and many others) with respect to the AACM as a group, although individual AACM artists may well be included as footnotes – such as the AACM musician Anthony Braxton, who is often exceptionalized (i.e. tokenized) in texts on “new music.”

Whether Braxton is admitted to the pantheon – allowed to “transcend race,” in the colorblindness language of the American political right wing – or simply “e-raced,” like the AACM colleagues of his generation – the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Muhal Richard Abrams, or many others – the racialized character of the inclusion decision itself reveals an asymmetry of power where historical erasure itself becomes a tactic in the competition. Thus, the supposed difference between free jazz and free improvisation becomes disclosed as resting not upon methodological or sonic difference, but upon ethnic and racial identifiers that become mapped onto method in a way that not only advances a whiteness-based version of the relationship between African-American improvisative culture and postmodernism, but revokes the genre mobility of the African-American improvisator.

This dynamic, if successful, would import similar discourses to those now active in historical constructions of the “American experimental music” tradition, which was actively ethnicized and racialized by its most ardent proponents, who saw themselves as part of a unitary European heritage and timeline (Lewis, “Improvised” 138). Viewed historically, this “American” tradition proved to be no different from its predecessors in finding African-American musical traditions quite indigestible. The effect was to ground the very identity of American experimentalism upon a radical absence of African-Americans, or – empanelling Cage himself as a hostile witness – a form of “silence,” to follow Radano and Bohlman.

So far, the American experimental tradition has been unable to break free from its singularly anxious preoccupation with this kind of pan-European identity politics, which threatens to transform a vital tradition into a marginalized microworld that appropriates freely, yet furtively, from other ethnic traditions, yet has no place to recognize any histories as its own other than those based in a racialized construction of pan-Europeanism. The danger for that tradition seems clear enough in a globalized world with fluid borders of practice and transcultural exchanges that are no respecters of race, tradition or genre. As the dynamics of globalization oblige both the United States and Europe to make the transition to the construction of multicultural societies, the single-minded pursuance of cultural identity politics inevitably appears as an increasingly shrill, yet futile set of exhortations to hold back the night.

Moreover, in a discursive environment where African-American histories – and yes, leadership – will forever be proscribed, intercultural rupture of the kind we have seen between these two avant-gardes is inevitable, making collaboration between them difficult, unlikely, even impossible. Abrams frames the process in this way: “For generations, what it comes to is that they imitate black music, sever it from its roots, and in that way, obscure its origins. And this has grown into a habit with those people. They do it quasi-automatically. Even in this time they do it. And they don’t even notice that they are insulting us” (qtd. in Jost, *Jazzmusiker* 197).<sup>38</sup> In this case, the hurt can be not only general, but deeply personal.

For a history of free improvisation, of all things, to adopt such a path, to pursue such a massive erasure, would be precisely the wrong kind of emancipation – an ultimately fatal enactment of “ambivalence.” In contrast, an inclusive, nonracialized historical account of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and 21<sup>st</sup>-century free improvisation, based on a fluid notion of tradition, could recognize adherents to the form coming from all over the world, articulating a multicultural, multi-ethnic base for histories of experiment in improvised music. This would interrupt the repetition of the jazz stereotype, since by definition African-American experimental musical agency could not be bracketed off into a separate category based on racialized signifiers such as “free jazz.”

Finally, as Radano and Bohlmann attest, “music resists silence, and music has the power to undo the historical aporia of silence” (37). What I am hoping is that some responsible individual will stand up and write the history I am calling for, and break the circle of ambivalence once and for all. I am pleased to believe that such a history will not be long in coming.

### **Acknowledgements**

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**Notes** (all translations by the author)

<sup>1</sup> “Ich glaube, ich könnte eine gute Gruppe mit 15 Leuten auf die Beine stellen” (Schmidt-Joos 129).

<sup>2</sup> “[. . .] eine exotische Pflanze auf kargem Boden [. . .] die ebenso bizarre erscheinen mußte wie britischer Flamenco” (Jost, *Europas Jazz* 11).

<sup>3</sup> “[. . .] der schöpferische europäische Jazzmusiker hat aufgehört, amerikanische Musiker zu imitieren. Er hat aufgehört, auf Gebieten mit ihm zu konkurrieren – vor allem in swing und im Bereich schwarzer Traditions – in denen er ihm doch nie erreichen kann” (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 374).

<sup>4</sup> “Deshalb sollte ein Jazzmusiker in Europa nicht von sich verlangen, so zu spielen wie ein farbiger Musiker in New York oder Chicago, er sollte es nicht versuchen und man sollte es nicht von ihm erwarten, weil seine Probleme andere sind und sein Lebenskreis anderen Bedingungen unterworfen ist” (qtd. in Knauer 147-48). Rendering the racial marker “farbige” as “colored” (meaning African-American) respects the idiom for the period in Germany.

<sup>5</sup> “[. . .] man sollte bei aller Bewunderung nicht vergessen, daß man in erster Linie seine eigene Persönlichkeit, seine eigene Konzeption des Jazz musikalisch ausdrücken sollte” (qtd. in Knauer 150).

<sup>6</sup> “der Diktatur des gleichmäßig durchgeschlagenes Metrums, der herkömmlichen Funktionalharmonik, der symmetrischen Perioden und Phrasenabläufe” (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 370).

<sup>7</sup> “[. . .] ein gewaltiger psychomusikalischer Kraftakt, der nicht nur das altgewohnte Regelsystem der Jazzimprovisation auf den Angeln hob, sondern in dessen Folge schließlich auch die jazzmusikalische Identität selbst ins Frage gestellt wurde” (Jost, *Europas Jazz* 12).

<sup>8</sup> “Wir sagen dazu nicht New Thing, sondern Own Thing” (“Own Thing” 69).

<sup>9</sup> “[. . .] seinen Stockhausen und seinen Ligeti genauer kennt als irgendeiner seiner amerikanischen Kollegen” (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 374).

<sup>10</sup> “Tendenziell hat sich beispielsweise die Begegnung mit avancierter komponierter Musik (bewußt oder unbewußt) auf das Schaffen europäischer Improvisationsmusiker vergleichsweise eher und – was eine gewisse Breite und Differenziertheit der Bestrebungen anbelangt – stärker ausgewirkt” (Nogliki 214).

<sup>11</sup> “[. . .] man spürt kein Miteinander und kein Füreinander. Es sind drei Einzelaktionen, die sich nicht zu einem wirklichen Kollektiv führen” (“Hie Logan” 174).

<sup>12</sup> “Der europäische Jazz ist – ebenfalls schwergewichtig – ein kollektiver Jazz, in dem der einzelne in dem Ensemble ausgeht” (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 371).

<sup>13</sup> “[. . .] aus einem besonderem Verhältnis zum Kollektiv und zur europäischen Tradition” (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 371).

<sup>14</sup> “Ich habe in der Malerei gelernt, die Freiheit des persönlichen Ausdrucks zu gebrauchen [. . .] Man sollte keine Hemmungen kennen, das Althergebrachte einfach umzustoßen” (qtd. in Knauer 152).

<sup>15</sup> “Ich beziehe mich durchaus auf die Dinge, die King Oliver vor 50 Jahren gemacht hat” (qtd. in Schmidt-Joos 129).

<sup>16</sup> See Litweiler for a discussion of "generations" in free jazz.

<sup>17</sup> “installer l’AACM partout, à tous les coins de l’univers” (Caux 17).

<sup>18</sup> “étranger aux desseins de l’AACM” (Caux 17).

<sup>19</sup> “peuvent devenir à leur tour plus actifs et plus responsables” (Caux 17).

<sup>20</sup> “Il faut, en effet, que la presse spécialisée dans le jazz réévalue ce qui se passe actuellement dans la musique, aille plus loin dans l’examen de tout ce dont Joseph parlait et qui constitue notre message [. . .] Il faut, maintenant, inventer une nouvelle façon de parler des choses” (Caux 18).

<sup>21</sup> “la tradition--le blues, par exemple” (Caux 18).

<sup>22</sup> “Nous voulons intégrer toutes les formes de musique [. . .] Tout et n’importe quoi sont valables. Pourquoi séparer la tradition et ce qui ne l’est pas? Cette separation ne sert à rien” (Caux 18).

<sup>23</sup> “Leo vient de dire ce que je pourrais dire [. . .] pourquoi alors le répéter?” (Caux 18).

<sup>24</sup> “Nous jouons le blues, nous jouons le jazz, le rock, la musique espagnole, gitane, africaine, la musique classique, la musique européenne contemporaine, vaudou...tout ce que vous voudrez [. . .] parce que, finalement, c’est ‘la musique’ que nous jouons: nous créons des sons, un point c’est tout” (Caux 18).

<sup>25</sup> “[. . .] sonderten sich ab, bildeten eine Clique, deren Unzugänglichkeit in Kontrast zu Bowies sicher ehrlich gemeintem Kontaktstück stand und den sonst so erfrischend familiären Charakter , der diese Treffen auszeichnet, etwas störte” (“Das bietet” 56).

<sup>26</sup> “Das Schwarz-Weiß Problem breitete sich wie ein Schatten über das Geschehen” (“Das bietet” 56).

<sup>27</sup> The term, literally "economic miracle," is generally used to refer to West Germany's rapid post-World War II economic recovery.

<sup>28</sup> “[. . .] führte zu einem idealen Zusammenspiel, zu einer wirklichen Einheit. Eine Fülle individueller Stimmen spürte den gemeinsamen Kern” (“Das bietet” 56).

<sup>29</sup> “Wer an die Höhepunkte im europäischen Jazz der letzten Jahre denkt, denkt immer an Kollektive [. . .] Wer an die Höhepunkte im amerikanischen Jazz der sechziger Jahre denkt, denkt nach wie vor an große Einzelne: Cecil Taylor, Pharoah Sanders, Ornette Coleman [. . .]” (Berendt, *Das Jazzbuch* 371).

<sup>30</sup> “Da ging es hauptsächlich darum, die alten Werte wirklich kaputtzubrechen, das heißt, alles an Harmonie und Melodie wegfällen zu lassen...Heute ist zum ersten Mal klar, daß die meisten Amerikaner unserer Generation als musikalischer Einfluß gestohlen bleiben können” (Jost, *Europas Jazz* 113).

<sup>31</sup> “Kompositorische Maßnahmen bleiben im allgemeinen auf ein Minimum beschränkt” (Jost, *Europas Jazz* 113).

<sup>32</sup> “[. . .] la musique que nous jouons, nous et d'autres musiciens européens, même ceux qui se réclament du “free jazz,” n'a plus rien à voir avec la musique afro-américaine. Mais nous nous sommes inspirés, il faut le reconnaître, de cette musique pour créer la nôtre” (Brötzmann, Bennink, and Mengelberg 20).

<sup>33</sup> “Je pense que ce qu'ils font est indissociable de la situation des Noirs américains, et les problèmes que nous avons en Europe sont différents” (Schlippenbach 18).

<sup>34</sup> “Notre musique improvisée est politique [. . .] le fait que nous ayons défini notre position politique a rendu notre musique plus puissante qu'elle ne l'était, et au moins aussi puissante que celle des musiciens afro-américains” (Brötzmann, Bennink, and Mengelberg 20).

<sup>35</sup> One can enumerate the AACM musicians who have collaborated the most extensively with European improvisors literally on the fingers of one hand: Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith, Steve McCall, and this author. Others who have done so to a limited extent include Fred Anderson, who toured with pianist Dieter Glawischnig in 1976, Leroy Jenkins (Paris 1969-70), and the participants in the 1969 Baden-Baden event. Since the late-1990s, Hamid Drake, a close associate of many AACM musicians, has been active with a variety of first-generation Euroimprovisors. In the main, however, most of the better-known AACM musicians – Anderson, Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors, Famoudou Don Moye, Henry Threadgill, Amina Claudine Myers, Kalaparush Ahrach Difda, Adegoke Steve Colson, Iqua Colson, Ernest Khabeer Dawkins, Kahil El-Zabar, Douglas Ewart, Chico Freeman, and Edward Wilkerson – have rarely or never collaborated with European improvisors,

or have not done so since the early 1970s. As of the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, one observes that the latest generation of AACM artists, such as Nicole Mitchell and Jeff Parker, are becoming more involved in these collaborations.

<sup>36</sup> “Siehst du, dieses Land hier war niemals darauf eingestellt, in irgendeinem Bereich ein Schwarzes Image zu tolerieren” (qtd. in Jost, *Jazzmusiker* 198).

<sup>37</sup> “En général, le public préfère les musiciens noirs et américains” (Brötzmann, Bennink, and Mengelberg 21).

<sup>38</sup> “Seit Generationen läuft es darauf hinaus, daß sie die Schwarze Musik imitieren, sie von ihren Wurzeln trennen und dadurch ihre Herkunft verdunkeln. Und das ist bei den Leuten zur Gewohnheit geworden. Sie tun es quasi automatisch. Genau in dieser Zeit tun sie auch das. Und sie merken nicht einmal, daß sie uns beleidigen” (qtd. in Jost, *Jazzmusiker* 197).

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