

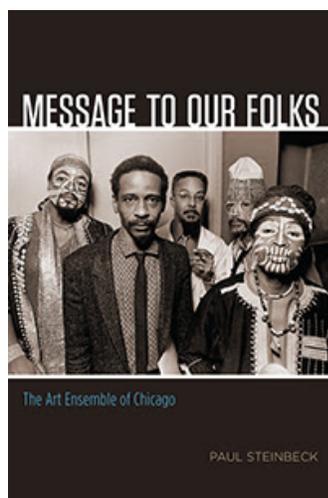


# The Free Jazz Collective

Reviews of Free Jazz and Improvised Music

## Paul Steinbeck - Message to Our Folks (University of Chicago Press, 2017) \*\*\*\*

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By [David Menestres](#)

*Message to Our Folks* is the new book from Paul Steinbeck, an assistant professor of music theory at Washington University. As the title implies, the book is a dedicated study of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the still revolutionary group formed in the late 1960s, originally under the moniker of the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble before taking the name Art Ensemble of Chicago after the group moved to Paris in 1969.

*Message to Our Folks* is split into nine main chapters plus a conclusion. Three of the chapters are dedicated to detailed analyses of three of the more than fifty releases by the Art Ensemble: *A Jackson in Your House* (BYG Actuel, 1969), *Live at Mandell Hall* (Delmark Records, 1972) and *Live from the Jazz Showcase* (a concert video recorded in 1981, released on VHS by Rhapsody Films in 1990). These recordings are available on Steinbeck's website, a nice approach that makes it easy for the reader to access these recordings if they don't already own them.

The book contains a wealth of information and original interviews. It is a very easy read, well written and clear throughout. Starting with preliminary background information on the five main performers in the AEC, Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Lester Bowie, Famoudou Don Moye, & Malachi Favors Maghostut, as well as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), which gave birth to many groups including the Art Ensemble, Steinbeck does an excellent job charting the birth and growth of the Art Ensemble from Chicago to Paris and beyond. The work is extensively footnoted. The first chapter is twenty-five pages and contains two hundred and forty footnotes, though few of the footnotes contain supplement information, they are almost exclusively just the work and page cited.

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**JAZZ = IMPROVISED MUSIC FOR HEART, BODY AND MIND**

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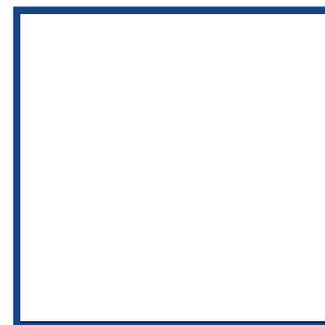


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There is a thorough discussion throughout the book of the importance of the collective organization the members developed and how it changed over time. It is this organization, the democratizing of decision making, the pooling of resources, and the dedication to the collective that enabled the Art Ensemble to work and grow for decades. Despite this collective mindset, the musicians never gave up their individual autonomy. The supremacy of the individual to be able to express themselves through music, costume, make up, theatrics, or any other means, while still working within the group, is a large part of why the Art Ensemble has stayed consistently creative for so long.

The chapters dedicated to musical analyses are lush with detail. Through transcriptions, diagrams, and highly detailed writing, Steinbeck conveys the depth and creativity that goes into each Art Ensemble performance. The illustrations in these chapters are extensive. These three chapters alone are worth the price of the book.

As an object, the book is very nice. Blue cloth covered boards (that fun industrial cloth that seems like it would be used to carpet a patio but is mainly for libraries that will remove the jacket). The jacket design is simple and elegant. A photo of the Art Ensemble from 1987, showing Jarman, Moye, & Favors in face paint, Bowie in his lab coat, and Mitchell in a suit, adorns the front of the jacket with a simple title and author on the spine, and the obligatory blurbage from people like Roscoe Mitchell and George Lewis on the back.

My only real complaint about the book is one I've seen echoed by other writers. Steinbeck does an excellent job covering the AEC from its inception through the end of their contract with ECM in 1985. Unfortunately, everything that comes after is dealt with quickly and perfunctory, breezing through the DIW years into the PI Recordings of the early '00s. You blink once and before you know it, Bowie and Favors are dead, Jarman has left to pursue his Buddhist priesthood eventually coming back to the group, and then you blink again and the book ends. While these years might have seen a decline in Art Ensemble activity when compared to the group's hyperactive earlier years, they are worthy of being discussed in as much detail as the rest of their career.

Despite this, *Message to Our Folks* is an essential read for anyone interested in the Art Ensemble of Chicago or creative music. There has never been a group as dedicated to pushing the boundaries of their vision as the AEC was and continues to be (a version of the band with Roscoe Mitchell, Don Moye, Hugh Ragin, and Junius Paul is currently touring). A recommended read for all.

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo25125876.html>

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By Stef The advantage of writing fewer reviews is that I can listen a lot more to the same album, and I have listened dozens of times ...



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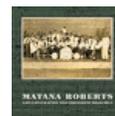
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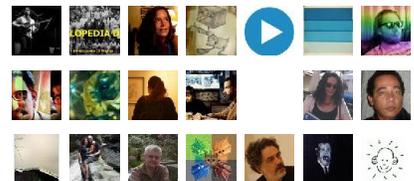


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