

**“Improvisation is a human right”: Chicago Slow Dance: The AACM in Conversation**

Muhal Richard Abrams, George Lewis, and Roscoe Mitchell

Moderated by Lincoln Beauchamp Jr.  
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**LB Jr.:** So I’m going to start out by telling you who I am, and how I came to be associated musically, and intellectually, and spiritually with these gentlemen to my right. My name is Lincoln Beauchamp, known in the music world of blues, to use a name, as Chicago Beau. But my personal experiences have been very diverse in terms of my musical tastes, and all the elements of our particular culture that we come from.

Chicago provides an excellent landscape for culture, and music. When I was a kid—these two fellas on my right are a little older than me—there was something very interesting going on in Chicago. In the course of one day, leaving school, I could walk by a place called Lincoln Center, and see the adverts for an experimental music concert with Muhal Richard Abrams, and [inaudible] and Roscoe Mitchell. I could take a jitney taxi about a mile up the road to 47th Street to the 518 club where all the blues bands would be smokin’. Or be down on 43rd Street at Theresa’s Lounge, or Pepper. It was all going on in the southern hotel, where back in the old days, Louis Armstrong and others, they even had permanent rooms in that hotel. And jazz went on downstairs. That was the kind of musical topography that was going on at that time. So at the Oakwood Square Theatre going on, and I’d see that happening. So it was always happening.

But now, first, I want the gentlemen... I want to start with Roscoe because he’s on the far right... to introduce themselves. This is Roscoe Mitchell, Muhal Richard Abrams, and George Lewis. And give you just a little bit of their background and the inception of the AACM, which has spawned so much music, and so much thought, that I don’t think we can really begin to pull back the layers of just what the AACM has really done for the world. But I’ll start off with Roscoe. Roscoe? Just a little brief thing on your beginnings in the AACM.

**RM:** When I returned to Chicago in 1961, I met Muhal Richard Abrams and I became a part of Muhal Richard Abrams’ experimental band. I think that the thought for putting the AACM together started with that band. It was a band that rehearsed every Monday night, and you were encouraged to write for the band, bring your music in and get it played. You make some mistakes, go home and fix that up and bring it back, or bring in a new composition. This is where it started for me. I was going to Wilson Junior College at the time, but I would mostly end up over at Muhal’s house after school, and stay there until 9, 10 o’clock at night, studying music and learning about writing, and lots of different things. We’d go to art museums or portrait events. It was just a real artistic community at that time.

**LB Jr.:** [a sustained sound begins to emerge from the back of the room] The idea of the AACM came from the great mind of Muhal Richard Abrams...

**GL:** [waves his hand to someone in the audience] Don’t sit there.

**LB Jr.:** That's the art that's talking to us, right?

**GL:** The three of you that are sitting there, please come forward. If you're sitting in the piece then it will make sound. Don't sit there.

**LB Jr.:** And don't dance! [audience laughs] Muhal, the whole idea came from the mind of Muhal Richard Abrams, and I'd like Muhal to give a brief statement on his ideas on creating the AACM. Muhal?

**MRA:** I have quite a few ideas on creating the AACM, and what you're talking about, and I'll address it. I think, I know, the AACM was created by quite a few people, the AACM itself. But let me start back somewhere where you started when you first spoke, about the atmosphere in Chicago. When I grew up, it was all available, and it was available at any time. You could walk a couple of steps and you were there, in a particular type, or approach to blues, or whatever. There was never really any opposition from the musical community as to which direction you wanted to go. Never. Never. Everybody was busy being themselves. And so I think the idea of the AACM started in that atmosphere. You know what I mean? So anyone endeavoring to express a different idea from the mainstream, if we can characterize it as that, was free to do so.

Now personally, I'm self-taught. I always like to figure out things. Why I wanted to be that way, I have no idea. But I always like to take things and figure them out. And I picked up a theory book my sister brought home from high school, DuSable High School in Chicago. I looked at it. It had the sharps and flats on the page, so I wanted to know what they were. So I read the book, and the book was talking about keys and whatnot. I wondered how they were determining the key from the arrangement of the sharps and flats on the page. So I figured it out, and I kept looking.... well, first I learned what the lines and spaces were just by reading the book, and I noticed that in the sharps, the last sharp, whatever the name of the last sharp was, the note that came after that was the key! So I just read until I discovered that, and I would see that it was consistent with all the sharps, and it was. So then I looked at the flats, and I noticed that the name of each flat key was indicated by the flat that came before the last one. So I said, "Well, so I figured that out..." I fancied myself as writing music because I knew where the sharps and flats were. And that's the way I started.

I went on to study other things. I went through Schillinger, all sorts of things, you know what I mean? Bartok System, just all kinds of things. But my main study was in the street, playing jazz music—studying, or practicing performance of jazz music and blues. And as I studied I began to put all these things together, so I got so overwhelmed with certain kinds of information I decided I needed some place to express these things. I needed more musicians to write music for, things like that. In addition to all the other activity, many things, performances with great musicians, and all that. But I'm getting right to how we get to the AACM proposition. I decided I needed to organize the musicians in order to play this music I wanted to write. So I organized the experimental band. I also decided that whoever participated, had to have their own thing too, because I didn't want any followers. I just wanted individuals who were seeking self-realization. I didn't characterize it in that way at the time, but that's actually what it was.

So, I began to attract certain musicians. Roscoe was one of the very first ones; he was among the first. I was fortunate to attract people like Roscoe, Joseph Jarman, and several other people who could respond to the idea of doing their own thing. Doing their own thing.

And from there we began to have a pretty good time. Earlier a lot of the younger people, Roscoe and a lot of people, they weren't composers then. They were interested, but they didn't "think" they were composers, let me say that. But I told them that they were composers. Because if they were playing music, they'd just start writing what they would play on their instruments. That's the first thing I told him. I never said anything to Roscoe about how to write. He said, "Muhai, I would like to do writing like you do." I said, "Just write what you're playing on your horn." That's all I ever said to him, and here he sits. He just went. That's the way it happened.

Later, two musicians came to me and started talking about organizing a more formal situation with more numbers of musicians in Chicago, on Chicago's South Side. These are all black musicians on the South Side of Chicago. If you know Chicago, Chicago has a North Side and a South Side [shrugs]. Still has. Anyway, Phillip Grant and Joe de Christian, pianist. And Phillip Grant, he plays the harp and brass instruments. We got together and we started to talk about calling a meeting to find who, among the other musicians, wanted to participate in an organization that played only original music, no standards, within the organization. They could participate in their own person way outside of the organization as they pleased. So we had a meeting and there were people who were interested, and there were those who weren't interested because they could no longer play standards within the organization. Although they were very fine musicians, they didn't continue. We had a second meeting, and the second meeting was only the people who wanted to go forward. And from there we had the AACM, and we moved forward. That's its.

**LB Jr.:** That's it. [audience claps] George, you are one of the younger members of the AACM?

**GL:** Not anymore. [laughing]

**LB Jr.:** But George, as probably most of you know, has written an amazing, definitive work on the AACM. The name of the book is *A Power Stronger Than Itself*. But from where you came in, enter things, and your intellectual, spiritual perception, and what motivated you, how you took on this undertaking... Could you just give the audience a little bit of your feelings and your music, and what led up to your coming into it?

**GL:** Coming into what?

**LB Jr.:** Coming into the AACM.

**GL:** Well, nothing led up to my coming into the AACM. I found it completely by accident. I saw a bunch of people playing in a basement, and I walked in, and I said, "Could I play?" and they said, "Yes." [audience laughs] It was completely random, as far as I can see. It was one of those happy accidents, as it were. Then, [I] found out later what things were about. They said, "Well, why don't you come to the school?" They had started this school back in 1968. I'm into school, but sometimes school is complicated. In fact, the reason why I was seeing these people at all was because I was temporarily out of school. Well, sure, let's go to school. So I go to school and Muhai's sitting at the board and he's writing music on the board and I'm realizing, "Hey, this is composition class. Wow, I've never been to composition class before." And everyone was talking about composing. Which seems perfectly consistent with what I've heard so far from Muhai and Roscoe. That is to say that the AACM at that time, perhaps even today with people

much younger than me. I mean the youngest people, I think, are somewhere in their twenties at this point, in an organization that started in 1965. And it's lasted into the present, forty-five years. And now in two chapters: one in Chicago, and one in New York.

What seemed to happen there was, as I characterize it, a little red schoolhouse conception of doing things. You came in and wherever you were you started at the beginning with a set of precepts, which actually, if you read the book you can see some of the first exercises that Muhal would give people. And you were encouraged to go home, and the next week you had to come in with a composition. That was it. Whether you were a beginner in music, or whether you'd been studying for years, that was your task to accomplish. And in the end, the people who were beginners were not necessarily inferior to those who had been studying for a long time because after all, you were charged with doing something none of us were really adept at, which is composing. And that's a very different matter because we've had conferences here about improvisation—this year, improvising bodies—and, in general, the Guelph Jazz Festival and its emphasis on improvisation but, as I wrote in the book, it always seemed to me that the AACM was composer-centered. That was, the idea in those years was the production of composers. There were no jam sessions, no one really even talked about, as I saw, improvising. Maybe before I got there there was a lot of talk of that kind, but by the time I got there you studied in class, you went home and wrote your composition, and came back and you presented it. And if you were going to do a concert, I guess by that time the rule, more or less—I don't know if it was written—was that you had to present your own music, which was your own original music. And, of course, you can see in the book what I see as being the trajectory of that kind of legend. In fact, you can see the book. They had a copy at... what is that the eBar down there, the bookstore downstairs? It always nice for an author to see his own book in a bookstore. It was nice. They may have more than one. Run right now and get it [audience laughs].

But you had to present your own work. The thing is, it's funny, composition... people don't, like Muhal said—I'm interpreting it this way—individuals don't really produce art. Networks produce art. So in order to produce music, the methods... you're sitting in your little room and doing your scribbling or whatever you're doing, but in fact once you finish the scribbling or even while you're doing it you're in touch with a whole network of people, and those people are necessary for you to bring your art to fruition. The AACM recognized this eclectic way. We were charged with bringing each other's work to fruition. While you were presenting your composition, someone else would sweep the floor, and when they presented their composition, you would sweep the floor. Because the floor-sweepers are also necessary to the act of composing. So in the end what you learned was a sense of the sociality, the world, the responsibility that art making entails, a responsibility to one's fellow artists. And, of course, that has wider implications toward the general notions of social responsibility. So maybe those were my initial lessons.

**LB Jr.:** Okay. Thank you so much [clapping]. I'd just like to read something here from one of the great AACM members, and a member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago who's passed away. Here are his thoughts on how he became involved. And that's Lester Bowie. Our praises on Lester [starts clapping]. He's gone [audience claps]. And Lester's a funny cat. I know he's feeling good that we're doing this. I asked Lester a question: "When did you hook up with the AACM?" And he answered: "Well, when I first came to Chicago I was doing a lot of sessions down at Chess Records..." And for those of you who don't know, that was a big blues recording

house. Or, he wanted to call it a kind of blues mine. It was labour intensive without much reward.

You know jingles and other stuff. There were cats down there that later went on to become Earth, Wind, and Fire. In fact, Maurice White was a studio drummer. A lot of cats were around there in that time. But I was bored. So they had this cat who could take me around. One day he asked if I wanted to go to an AACM rehearsal. He said I wouldn't be bored. So Muhal Richard Abrams was having the rehearsal. Man, I had never seen so many weird mother fuckers in my life [audience laughs]... in one place. I said, 'This is home' [audience laughs]. As a musician there are always a couple dudes you hang with, but there was thirty or forty crazy motherfuckers all in one spot. I mean, Roscoe Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, and Abrams, eccentric type cats. So I made rehearsal, and Muhal had me play a solo. Before I got home, the phone was ringing, cats calling up asking me to be in their band. Roscoe Mitchell, I hooked up with him. He had his own band, the Roscoe Mitchell Quartet. So this was fun, and it was a challenge, and I always wanted to be a jazz musician. I was doing pretty good with what I was doing so I didn't really need the bread, but I could do what I wanted to do, you know? My old lady had a hit record out, and I was working. Shit, I was paying myself a salary. So when I got to the AACM it was a real challenge. I always wanted to be more than just a student musician. I wanted to be like Miles and Diz and those cats, a professional jazz musician.

So that's from the interview I did with Lester thirteen, fourteen, maybe fifteen years ago now. So that's kind of in conclusion to this last question [audience claps].

Another thing I want to address with the panel here is commercialism in music. The AACM, at least in my opinion, doesn't represent dollars, commercialism. It represents something more profound than that, so deep. But there have been attempts, or at least in a normal way of letting people know that things happen in recordings and whatnot—and I think one of the first to record the AACM may have been Bob Koester at Delmark Records. And given what Bob Koester does—records lots of black music, jazz and blues—do you all see the recordings of Bob Koester as being helpful towards creating more of a cash flow or just something he's done? Because Delmark Records are not huge sellers.

**RM:** Well, you know, it wasn't totally Bob Koester's idea. There was a young man there, Chuck Nessa, who convinced Bob Koester that he should start to listen to some of these other things that were going on in Chicago. So, I would say that Chuck Nessa was the motivator.

**LB Jr.:** That Chuck was the motivator?

**RM:** ...for Bob Koester starting this new arm of his recording label.

**LB Jr.:** I mean I think his label, the body of what he calls the jazz part of it, is still going with the AACM. I just don't see him as being a real force in putting the music out there.

**GL:** You know the funny thing is... let me break in here for just a second... because, first of all, when I got this record—*Sound* it was called, the very first AACM record—and when I also got the Muhal Richard Abrams record, *Levels and Degrees of Light*, I had no idea whether they were

making money or not. All I knew was this was a record I could listen to, and that had come out, and I could learn from, and lots of other people presumably had learned from. And, as we sort of know, these records were instrumental. They had already arrived in Europe by the time that you got there. They were already being reviewed. People knew about them. So, the commercial aspect of it aside, and whether people made money, I think I remember reading an Art Blakey review where he said, “Well, if you don’t appear, you disappear.” And these records appeared, and they’re still in print as far as I know.

**LB Jr.:** Oh sure, absolutely.

**GL:** And so they actually had their impact in ensuring people didn’t disappear. I think most discussions of jazz end up turning upon two things usually: why people don’t have money, and also why no one likes jazz. [audience laughs] And I’m going to submit today that these are questions which I have no real interest. And I’ll tell you why. Part of the reason is that somehow we’ve managed to survive all these years. We’re here. We’re not sick. And I think that’s because of the collective conception of the AACM, which presents an alternative model to what we’re talking about, the binary of the commercial or the creative, which I think doesn’t exist. At least not in the terms that I’ve come to understand it. And I’m not as old as the people here. Although, I am pushing sixty. So I think that in the end we have to think as much about what happened to what the collective impact was of the organization even without the huge paydays accrued to other forms of music-making. And this isn’t the only form of experimental music that doesn’t make money [audience laughs]. So we find ourselves in effect in a place where we have to make common cause with a group of people who’ve come together to collectively support and nurture other forms of music-making.

Now the other thing about why people don’t like jazz, that’s not so interesting to me largely because I don’t really see the AACM as really tied in necessarily. You know jazz is perhaps where the organization started but where the members ended up seemed to be some very diverse places. And so, in the end, to tie it all back to the mother lode seems unnecessary, at a point where so many of us have had so many different experiences. Anthony Braxton said, “There’s no way I could go back to the South Side of Chicago now.” And that’s how I feel at this moment. I don’t want to go back to the South Side of Chicago, except to visit my parents, and my relatives, and my friends who still live there and do things. But conceptually I want to be what they are, a person, like you (looks to his left, toward Lincoln Beauchamp Jr.), a cosmopolitan person who’s been around the world. I’m very interested, for example, in my book to quote your comments about what it was like in Paris in 1969. And literally, you. I think it’s in your book. That was very exciting, the part about the appeal for peace. But I had to read that. That was extraordinary. It’s one of the few accounts of what it was like for someone of your age, an African American person of your generation. Not the previous generation, not the people from the 1950s, not the James Badlwins, not the Chester Himes’, but you, someone of your generation, to come to Paris to experience what it was like to be a person with a lot of new ideas, and a lot of new creativity, and looking at the past but also being very interested in the future. You know that part in your book?

[LB Jr. hands him the book and the audience laughs]

**GL:** I’ll find it while you chat.

**LB Jr.:** I think it's under "Essay on Paris."

**GL:** Maybe it wasn't in the book, but it was somewhere. I'll find it.

**LB Jr.:** Anyway, getting to what he's saying. I think this is what...

**MRA:** I want to make a comment.

**LB Jr.:** ...and let me say one thing, Muhal. What this music has done has actually broadened a global community. I mean, Paris is one element—what happened when I was there—but the idea, this kind of peace if you will, has arrived in any number of cultures. I think it emanates from the AACM's concepts or thoughts. Go ahead, Muhal.

**MRA:** I think George took us into an area that we should go here. We're talking about the generics of the AACM, musicians activities, you know what I mean? But we're human beings. Now when I used the word "self-realization" earlier, we thought of it in that way after a fashion, and we spoke of it in that way after a fashion, and we used to face east. In concert, before any performance, we would face the east. And no one dictated as to what you should think when you faced the east. You understand? Facing east was further consent as a group to be yourself: self-realization. Whatever you thought about when you faced east, it's fine, whatever you thought about. We used to talk about the types of food that one could eat without dictating as to whether one should actually eat that. And I think these things are like non-musical things, you know what I mean? But they're human things. So the whole vibration of being human, it's what happened to the idea of the AACM. And I might add that it was just an addition to that type of human activity that has been participated in by people many, many times ago. I want to say years, but that wouldn't express it: many times ago. So, it's no wonder that today, even in academia, the AACM and others are being discussed and examined as to the impact it has had on humanity itself; the world of music and outside of the world of music.

So, if we get back to the Koester records, little did we know, little did we know that this was the intent of the forces driving us. Now whether you believe in something spiritual, or whether you're an atheist, or whatever, we know that something drives us, causes us to do things, you would say it's us, our thinking, our minds. Of course, we are not our minds. We all know that. We're changing every day. You know, the mind is a storehouse for some entity, yourself, for keeping these thoughts and whatnot. But the thing is, the point is this: that the Koester records—Koester made his money off of blues. He had Big Arthur Crudup, John Estes, So House, Howlin' Wolf [Lincoln Beauchamp Jr. mention's Big Joe Williams].

Big Joe Williams lived in his basement! Big Joe Williams down in the basement. Big Joe Williams' records were making thousands. I know. Maybe not millions at that time, but they were making thousands. He was a prime study. He was a primitive, so he was a prime study of all kinds of people all over the world. And he was living like a vagrant in Koester's basement. I used go down and talk to him when I'd go over to collect my money. He was living in Koester's basement, and he had no idea of his impact on people, in terms of the raw blues. See, but the thing is, among all the stock, the record stock, really... it's true... but the thing is Koester made a lot of money off the blues. He was making money off of blues. As Roscoe said, Nessa, Chuck Nessa, went to him and convinced him that he should deal with these musicians that were on the

South Side doing this music. And he picked Roscoe as the first person he wanted to deal with. *Sound* was the first record to come out of the AACM. Now, the commercial aspect of things, they are a fact. Human beings have various types among themselves. So there's all kinds of things. There's blues, there's rap, there's this. It all has to exist because all those kinds of people exist. Whether art or any production of art has to make money, that becomes questionable. What is it for? What's the purpose of it? Why is it being put out? And that's what... George put it clear to the front. Again, that's what we're talking about. That's what we're talking about. What is it that is happening to us as human beings? The idea of asserting yourself, and being an individual within yourself, that's a human right. Not just for musicians. Improvisation is a human right [audience claps]. Thank you. Improvisation is a human right. Improvisation starts with just the average person. Improvisation is a necessity. It comes about as a result of a necessity by human beings. Okay, I'm trying to move this carpet here, and I can't move it. But my left foot can do it, so I'll do it like that. Improvisation. Or I can flip it over, you know what I mean? Improvisation is happening all the time. We specialize in sound improvisation, but that's just sound improvisation. But improvisation is a right of human beings, and animals, insects. Improvisation: flowers. Today the flowers lean this way. Then it opens 'til tomorrow like that, necessary because of the way the sun hit it. Then it leans over this way the next day. Then it withers and dies because it needs more sun. But the same flower comes up in the same place the next year, no water or anything. So, I was going there anyway [audience laughs]. That's it.

**LB Jr.:** Thanks, man. George pointed out this section that I wrote in my book, and just to give you an idea about what the potential is, and what was happening in a certain period when what you did with your soul was probably far more important than making money. And I bring up the idea of commercialization because it's an important topic to discuss so we can have some interaction, and understand what can be provided to the world in kind of a selfless way, which is what improvisation is. So if you make money, you're lucky. And if you don't, that's not why you did it in the first place.

This is what George wanted me to read you.

I arrived in Paris from Amsterdam—I'm speaking about myself now—in late August, 1969. The scene was fertile with painters, writers, poets, dancers, and musicians. Everywhere change was in the air, change in attitudes, change in music, change in social orders. Nearly every creative act contained an element of revolution, protest, discontent, or an appeal for peace. The war in Vietnam raged on. The populace of the United States were reeling from assassinations, civil protests, official unofficial martial law, and the ever-lengthening list of war dead. For many artists, the time had come for respite from the day-to-day soul-shattering existence in the United States. Paris in the late sixties and early seventies served as [inaudible] for artistic expression and ideas. Actually, it was like a Euro-urban cosmopolitan haven for senior creatives like Wilfred Delaney, Josephine Baker, John [inaudible], and [inaudible], Leopold [inaudible], and others who really lit the scene with memory and presence.

I won't read on, but you get an idea of the kind of place that it was. And in the middle of that were the Art Ensemble of Chicago, several other artists, Anthony Braxton and others that were there. It was an amazing place to be. I got there in 1969. I was twenty. \ It was much hipper than being on the South Side of Chicago [everyone laughs]. I mean it was really much hipper than



being there. And like Lester Bowie, I have to say when I went by a place called The American Center for the first time, I've never seen as many crazy mother fuckers in one spot, believe me. It was insane, but it was so fertile. You were broke down, you stand up, you were crippled and rising at the same time. It was truly an amazing place.

Now, time is moving on, and I want to open up for questions. Because I know that this room is full, so we want to be able to get through in a little bit. So just randomly, I'm going to ask would anyone like to address any issue now with the AACM? The room is open for questions, please. There's got to be someone here. Yes, sir?

**Audience Member:** I'm was wondering what does it look like...

**LB Jr.:** Who is your question for? If you could direct it to... Anybody? Okay.

**Audience Member:** I was just wondering what does it look like now—I'm talking about the beginning—what does it look like now looking back on so many years ago?

**RM:** You know, art manifests itself in very strange ways. He was speaking about Paris. There was a sort of a buzz in the air. Now, that's starting to happen again. So, I would consider myself to be lucky to have been in Chicago at the time when this was happening. But now it's starting to manifest all over. I mean people are starting to feel this sense of urgency about what they're doing. And the atmosphere in Chicago was very uplifting, great for building somebody's concert, and see what they were doing, and getting excited about going home and figuring out what you're going to do on your next concert. And we're starting to approach that kind of period again. Everything kind of goes in a circle. We've had a sort of decline. I mean, not for people that kept active in their work, of course. But it kind of feels like that kind of period might be coming back around again.

**LB Jr.:** Yes, sir?

**Audience Member:** A question for Muhal. What is your advice for people very interested in improvising finding themselves in the present time in difficult financial situations? But they're very dedicated to the music. What would be your advice... reflecting your experiences?

**MRA:** We'll have to break all that apart that you said. We'll put the finance over here, and come back to your question without that part for now. First of all, I don't give advice [audience laughs and claps]. But I want to discuss that with you. No, really. I sincerely believe, from practice and watching life—I'll get into the first person's question; I'll tie it in to this. What I've learned through all these years is to appreciate practice, to appreciate practice and the quality of the practice that I recognize as practice, you know? That's in life and that feeds into the practice of sound, that which we call music. Now, let me say this: in that appreciation also is housed the fact that I made a self-study as to my preferences. Now, in terms of improvisation, we all differ. We have different motivations, different vibrations, you know, approaches to life. So therefore, if one examines what one really wants to do... Take the rules and put them over here, with respect, and get into the raw focus of what you really want to do. Because everything we know about music has been organized and ordered by some group of individuals, or some individual, you know what I mean? Take all that apart. Put it back together in the manner that you want to put it

back together, and you find out what's going on. This is so personal and individual. But let me say this in closing: the process of performance of music, or that term "improvisation," the process of performing music, in that process one should observe silence also. And then you have it. You have to decide when to speak and not to speak. It's great.

**LB Jr.:** Yes, sir?

**Audience Member:** You all have such an illustrious past, that we're not talking about the present much. And the record, *Streaming*, that the three of you made is really one of my favorites. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about [it]. Is there a method, a particular focus in the way that it works and how it came together? Any of you?

**LB Jr.:** Gentlemen?

**Audience Member:** Is there a working process?

**LB Jr.:** Thanks, Curtis. Nice to talk about the present. I mean, I didn't have a, what was it, Bob Koester record. Or many records at all. But this one, I think it's kind of telling, that would be telling, wouldn't it? I mean tomorrow, I hope you all come to the event, the concert, and see and hear what we're doing. But I can only talk about it from my perspective since it is, as far as I know, completely improvised performances, whatever that means.

I think I remember Muhal saying—if you don't mind my probably paraphrasing—that the handling of the open space... That said, it doesn't really mean very much; it's kind of hard to know what that means, I mean to you. But to me it sort of means that if you do have an open space, or if you think of a space as being open—and no space is really completely open—you do have a sense of what you'd like to see in that space, if anything, how you observe what was there when you got there, how you construct and interact with the environment in which you find yourself. But these are things you should already know because you're doing them yourselves at every moment. And as Muhal said, we're doing the sonic, we're in the sonic domain of that. And some of you probably are too. But we're all in other domains where we do exactly the same things. So I would encourage people to listen to that recording or any other recording of free, or open, or whatever kind of improvisation, to look at it with a sense of empathy, and a sense of being connected through that model of the human birthright that we all share, as improvisers, and as a way of life. To consider that what we're doing is really in principal and in practice pretty much the same. And if you think about [it], you could place yourself in that space and say, "What would I have done in that position, faced with those sounds in that moment? What would I do?" Or maybe you would disagree with what was being done. In any music, I'm listening to it and I think, no, no, no, no, don't do that. Do this. Or last night's wonderful performance, when it was wonderful to see the realization, the performances needed to come to an end, sort of percolate through the band very slowly. I think it started with Sylvie, really, and went over Jim, and it went over to Bob. And then Bob said, "What do I do?" So he tapped Taylor on the shoulder and he said, "It's over" [audience laughs]. We could see and hear that. And so probably a lot of you were thinking the same thing. And I could see it right there: they are trying to get to the end. We've all tried to get to the end. We're trying to get there right now [audience laughs and claps].

**LB Jr.:** It's always going in [circles]. You get to the end, you get to the beginning. Yes, sir?

**Audience member:** I have a couple of questions. The first one is... over the thirty years or so I've listened to your wonderful music, one of the things that I've seemed to have gleaned or learned about art coming from the AACM—and this is tying into Muhal's wonderful sort of theory, or philosophy, or improvisation and such, to improvise—is that still it's always coupled with a hidden premise of social or spiritual responsibility. And I've look at art that's been a litmus test that I've taken away from listening to AACM, to separate who's coming from the right motive and who's coming from an indulgent motive. Is that fair to say, that though there was that motive that you would improvise but that you were aware of pursuing the right motives, that there was a social responsibility, or spiritual responsibility? That's the first question. The second is... whenever I meet old timers from Chicago... around the time of the AACM there would have been Sun Ra. Did you have any interface with Sun Ra, or any Sun Ra story? Once I asked Ron Freedman that question, and he talked to me for a half hour, full of all these wonderful stories of those days in Chicago.

**MRA:** What is your question first?

**Audience member:** The first one is, is that analysis correct? Because that's one of the things that I see to have learned from the AACM. But I wondered if that was intentional. It just seems that there's a certain earnestness. I always had a comfort that there was an earnest perspective behind all that improvisation. And that's a litmus test between good improvisation and bad improvisation, what one brings spiritually or a sense of responsibility to the act.

**MRA:** Oh, you expanded that first question [audience laughs]. He expanded the first. Okay, well I think George, what George said previously, I think it addressed, in my opinion, it addressed the first part quite aptly. However, this expansion you mention, that is quite another situation because who says whether one act is of value over another act, you know what I mean? I never saw that as being pertinent to the process. Of course, I respect the fact that you could arrive at something like that because we all have vision. You look at a dollar bill, and it has a one on it. And that's a dollar bill. You say, "You're a damn liar. That's not a dollar bill." Because you're seeing something else, you know what I mean?

And what's the second part?

**Audience member:** Second part was... at the time that the AACM was taking off, Sun Ra would have been...

**MRA:** Okay.

**GL:** Actually, no. That's not true. Sun Ra was in New York in 1965. In fact, he left in 1960. So there was no Sun Ra in Chicago in 1965.

**MRA:** But I want to go back.

**GL:** Go ahead. Before that...

**MRA:** ...before that. Because I was around in Chicago and saw a lot of people. We were all individual musicians in Chicago. Sun Ra was a little older than the rest of us. Nevertheless, he was there. But in terms of influence, I think you are pointing toward that type of question. I think Beau expressed it a little in the beginning, a little bit, when he talked about it, and then I expressed it myself. You were allowed to be individuals in Chicago, and all this difference—Beau expressed it—all these different approaches to things, individual approaches to things, were respected. We had no reason to copy each other. It's amazing. We had no reason to copy each other, you know what I mean? Maybe it was like that because we didn't have any star bands, that you had to wait in line to get in [laughs]. So we didn't have to measure up to any licks or anything. We didn't have to be in somebody's band. Quite the contrary. In New York, with all due respect, great music was produced in that atmosphere. Some of the craziest music that would ever be produced was in that atmosphere, in that pecking order, in the way that they function. In Chicago, Sun Ra was Sun Ra, and everybody respected Sun Ra for what Sun Ra did. And in terms of the AACM a lot of people have asked the question. I'll just go a little bit further. A lot of people have asked the question as to whether there was any influence one way or the other. No. But then you could answer the question yourself. If you put on a Sun Ra record, and you put on an AACM record, it would be answered in two minutes.

**GL:** Well, if you look at the...

**MRA:** Two different concepts.

**GL:** And if you look at the timeline. Think about it. I mean, Sun Ra, 1960, 1959. He leaves in 1960. If you look at the people who were... How old were you, Roscoe, in 1960? You were twenty, right? You were twenty years old? I was eight.

What happens if you even look at the Sun Ra timelines? The Sun Ra of 1967 was nothing like the Sun Ra of 1962. Frankly, because he was learning in that environment from people like Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, even Charles Mingus. I mean, he was learning. And so by the time it got around to the Sun Ra of 1965, that was a very different animal from the Sun Ra of 1960. Most Sun Ra partisans tend to conflate all that. You just have to listen and look at the timeline. Everybody's learning. Everybody's growing. Nobody has to copy. There doesn't have to be an organic, linear narrative. And it's not there, needless to say.

**MRA:** Well, that's not to say Sun Ra was quite an individual. Even long before any of this stuff. He was an individual around then. He was the first person in Chicago to play the electric piano.

**GL:** Yup.

**MRA:** And he had his own way about doing things, you know? So, he was a distinct individual in the world of sound, as well as philosophy. He valued philosophy as an output as much as he did sound. But anyway, thank you.

**LB Jr.:** Can I just add that to be resistant to duplication is part of the improvisation process. Which is one area that I personally take issue with, being a blues player a lot of my life. Somebody's always trying to look and see who you sound like. "Well, that's not quite like he did it." Well, this goes beyond that. It's not even in that element, which is the most beautiful element

for creativity for me, you can be in. And also with Sun Ra you always have to keep in mind that Sun Ra was not from here. And he once cautioned me against dealing with earth women [laughing].

**RM:** There's a woman in the back that has her hand up.

**LB Jr.:** Yes? Yes, ma'am?

**Audience member:** I wanted to ask you about how it was in Chicago and the U.S. Thank you very much for coming to share your memories and your music here. I wanted to say that in Canada we hear mostly about health quality and, recently, energy and industry. But we don't hear a lot about what might have changed under President Obama in the cultural sector, except when we get visitors. So, would you speak a little bit about what has happened within the cultural sector in the U.S. in terms of change. Under Obama, is there more funding? Do you have more access internationally? And second, do you see a change in the outreach towards other countries like Canada, and even Africa? I mean with President Bush who went to Africa. And I'm wondering if President Obama has the same foreign policy objectives in terms of what he might do in future towards Canada and towards Africa. Thank you.

**LB Jr.:** I think a couple of us might have something to say on that, but I'll say this briefly and then pass it to George. You know, the United States doesn't have a Ministry of Culture. I don't think that the same importance is placed there on global cultural interaction, as it may be in other countries. Multiculturalism, including all its aspects in art, music, so on, lifestyle, language, is presented in, or at least lived out, in a completely different way in Canada, or Toronto, Montreal. So, you know, I've had the experience of living in Canadian cities, and I find that aspect much more agreeable with my disposition than in the United States. What's on Obama's plate, or Bush's? I mean, they do these State Department kind of tours or promotions from time to time. I rarely see them really have a real effect on a whole cultural community. Like they may send Junior Wells and say, I've got great talks with him going to West Africa, but how that impacted the blues world, the blues community, there's no change. Junior went and made some money, and that's it. And they look good in the diplomatic circles. And I can't really see beyond that, except in major, major, major things. I mean so huge and so major, involving those symphonic organizations that rarely touch the common person. You know, you read about it in *The New York Times*—so and so, and so and so there, and interacting in Moscow or this—but I don't think, ma'am, the United States has an orientation, that kind of presence of mind to want to expand globally culturally. That is to say that their culture is military and of other things of that nature. So... not the arts. That's my take on it.

**GL:** Well, I don't know. Health policy and cultural policy are connected, aren't they? Imagine if Charlie Parker had had health care. You know, I mean, maybe those kinds of attentions to the national infrastructure serve to... in one area can affect what happens in other areas. At a certain point, Eric Metcalfe called me up the day that the health bill was announced. He said, "Hey, you guys have health care now." Who knows what comes out of that in the end. I commend to you—foreign policy is not my area, as you can imagine—but I would commend to you a wonderful book that sort of, well, imagine if Eric Dolphy had health care. Or any number of people living in the United States today, musicians who are, as you know, well, I'll leave you with this. I was

in Vancouver, as I often am, at a meeting of musicians, and I came in and they were discussing a musician they were going to have to take a collection for. These are people in Vancouver. And I'm thinking, well, that's not so unusual, we're taking collections for people all the time who are destitute because they ran into insurmountable bills from health care expenses. And I said, "Well, who is this person?" And they said, "Well, George, you don't really understand. What happens is, we have a system here in Canada where if you go to the United States you pay a certain supplement to the health care when you go, in order to forestall the possibility of illness or accident or catastrophic expenses of the sort that you have over there. This guy didn't pay the supplement so he's on the hook for a hundred and twenty thousand dollars." I said to myself, "That's the difference between the two systems." And so something like that is going to affect cultural policy inevitably because once you start to think about the national infrastructure in one area, it begins to propagate to other areas. That's something from which the United States, I'm hoping, will learn. Whether it's Obama who does the learning or somebody else. We've had a lot of presidents there, and it's not just the president who is responsible for the process.

**LB Jr.:** Yes, sir?

**Audience member:** Just curiously wondering: within the AACM, particularly when we began the meeting today, above and beyond the music, are there things like progress to education on business and music contracts, the business of music, for example? How do you as a musician obviously ensure that the people doing business with [inaudible]?

**MRA:** Yes, but it's not formal. We pass information on to each other as needed. We pass information on to each other as needed. If George has a question about a contract, he might ask me if I know something regarding the particular question he's addressing. And if I do I pass it on to him because we've experienced quite a bit of business transactions through the years—a lot of us—and we have different levels of expertise in different areas. So we still interact with each other in that way. It's not formal though, but it works very well.

**GL:** And there also are... part of that business involves interacting with agencies of various sorts, including foundations, including government agencies of various sorts, private individuals, and including educational institutions that do provide specifically that kind of instruction. A lot of that instruction ends up being primarily focused on business models that don't exist anymore, such as the record industry. So, what we're finding is that there's a kind irregularity there, where earlier models of this business of music really don't operate beyond the basics of "Do you go from [inaudible] or this country's Socan, or another country's?" That could be an area in which the AACM could be providing additional instruction on a formal level at some point. It certainly is not to say that it couldn't happen.

**RM:** I'd like to add to that. That I think one of the big things that I got from being in the AACM is that it's not a bad idea for musicians to organize themselves. If you're out there beating on somebody's door, trying to get a concert or something like that, that's not the best position for you to be in. What I've seen by being a member of the AACM is that people saw that we were doing what we were doing, and that was the reason why they became interested. In a lot of ways musicians are their own worst enemies. They don't talk to each other about what they're doing. But in fact, the people who run the business of music talk to each other all the time. So, if you're

not organizing yourself, and getting together and making some sort of plan—the way you would like to see your future going—then it's not a bad idea to get with people who are interested in that, and share information. What we see now is you have musicians running around paying to play in clubs. So, that's not good for the music business in general.

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