

10 Days with the Art Ensemble of Chicago

In 1979, I attended a 10-day workshop with the Art Ensemble of Chicago at Karl and Ingrid Berger's Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, N.Y. It was one of the most remarkable experiences of my life.

There has never been a school quite like CMS. Situated in a rustic hunting lodge, it was home to some of the most renegade music-making in jazz history. At the time, jazz education was fairly conservative and almost exclusively bebop-centric, but anything was possible at CMS. Learning world music, collaborating with classical musicians, contemplating music as mysticism—all of this is common now, but it certainly wasn't then.

Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors and Don Moye were huge personalities with advanced degrees from "the street." Don created ebullient, layered percussion pieces, Malachi spoke gently and seriously about the many-hued roles of the rhythm section and Lester led a brass and woodwind ensemble that we all composed for. But it was Joseph and Roscoe who remained center stage in my memory.

Joseph had us create *mélanges* of theater, poetry, and music. Masks—literal and figurative—were created and torn away through humor and gravitas, as each student was charged with creating a multi-genre piece. All manner of costume drama, wild improvising, and deranged text erupted forth. Joseph was a world-class provocateur who seemed to enjoy getting under my skin. When my performance came, I became the provocateur. At the apex of my presentation I grabbed the skullcap he always wore and put it on my head, in a sort of "kill-the-Buddha" moment. For a second he looked like he might reach out and strangle me, but instead he thanked me!

"What we do takes courage," Joseph said. "Remain brave, calm and centered."

Roscoe sat all 25 of us in a circle under the premise of a single rule—play only when you have to. He'd snap his fingers the moment someone disturbed the group's energy. Despite our attempts at graceful connection, we never made it past a minute. On many occasions, he'd stop us after a few notes. A resonant silence began to permeate the room after a few days, as we were forced into deeper realms of listening. Then, toward the last day, we made it to about three minutes. Like a benediction, a broad smile appeared on Roscoe's face. We finally connected and realized that jazz, at its core, is a truly collective experience.

Far more prosaic lessons emerged when Lester drafted me as the band's driver, and I went out to dinner with them a couple of times. I expected to discuss weighty matters of crucial philosophical and musical import, but the main topic was the latest Superman movie. I gathered that certain band members were in the NRA, at least a couple of them registered Republicans. The way Lester disarmed a hero-worshipping acolyte and brought laughter to the table was remarkable.

Where today does music education focus on self-revelation rather than historical orthodoxy? The Art Ensemble was part of a wave of AACM-based musicians whose incalculable influence was curiously underappreciated. To have been taught by musicians of such fearless devotion and righteous invention was an honor.

