

# 4

## FOUNDING THE COLLECTIVE

### **Urban Decline and the Turn to Communitarianism**

During the last phase of the Great Migration, from 1950 to 1965, Chicago's black population doubled from 14 to 28 percent of the total; in 1965, Chicago's African American population topped one million for the first time. In the heyday of the Cotton Club, Bronzeville's musical center was 63rd Street, previously a border zone between the black and white communities.<sup>1</sup> That heyday was all too brief, however, as the advent of the 1960s saw the sudden decline and near-disappearance of the area's music venues. Like a canary sounding the alarm in a mine-shaft, the Cotton Club was one of the first to go, closing for good in the late 1950s. The musical action shifted temporarily to another Cottage Grove club, McKie's Disk Jockey Show Lounge, run by entrepreneur and radio personality McKie Fitzhugh, one of the few black club owners in the city. McKie's was one of the last South Side venues to feature, along with the best and brightest of Chicago's musicians, nationally known improvisors such as John Coltrane. Leslie Rout, a cultural historian who also had experience as a saxophonist in Chicago, noted that by 1967, "there did not exist on the South Side of Chicago a single club that booked nationally established jazz talent on a consistent basis."<sup>2</sup>

The disappearance of the South Side club scene has never been adequately explained, though anecdotal speculations and academic

generalizations abound. Most popular music theorists connect the demise of jazz club scenes in black urban areas with a decline in popularity of “abstract” jazz in favor of more dance-oriented musics. This conventional wisdom is certainly buttressed by national sales figures, but at the local level in Chicago, the thesis is complicated by a number of factors. Many musicians ascribe the decline of Chicago’s South Side clubs to deliberate city government action. Roscoe Mitchell blamed the situation on licensing laws that were introduced in the late 1950s, where clubs were taxed according to the number of musicians on the bandstand.<sup>3</sup> On this view, discriminatory enforcement and harassment of both club owners and patrons were designed to prevent clubs from thriving, as a means of encouraging neighborhood gentrification and a concomitant rise in real estate values; the added expenses would force many clubs to abandon live music altogether in favor of recorded music.

In any event, taking into account the widespread economic deterioration in black urban areas across the United States problematizes explanations based largely on jazz sales figures. Reflecting the situation for blacks nationally, in 1966, “a peak prosperity year” for most residents of the Chicago area,<sup>4</sup> 20 percent of the black labor force in Chicago was employed at incomes below the official poverty line. Desperately poor people were stockpiled in ever more imposing modernist “projects” like the Robert Taylor Homes. Just three years after the opening of the Taylor Homes in 1962, fully half of its twenty-eight thousand tenants were on welfare, and, as Arna Bontemps and Frank Conroy noted in 1966, “as usual, upkeep and maintenance were neglected and repairs rarely made.”<sup>5</sup>

Schools in black areas, housed in dangerously decaying buildings, were becoming desperately overcrowded as well. Sensibly, Bontemps and Conroy connected the declining school infrastructure with an “appalling increase in juvenile delinquency.” Many black children (including me) attended school in half-day shifts, with no compensation at all for the instructional time lost. Released prematurely from instruction, these children often had nowhere to go but the streets, which seemed preferable to “the small, dark rooms they called home.”<sup>6</sup> These children, now the majority of the public-school population in Chicago, were herded into cold, drafty, trailers, called “Willis Wagons” in sardonic reference to the widely disliked school superintendent, Benjamin F. Willis. The trailers, touted as an “innovative” response to overcrowding, were often built over limited playground space, forcing children into the street at recess.<sup>7</sup> Resources from U.S. president Lyndon Baines Johnson’s “Great Society” antipoverty programs, perhaps the last

twentieth-century attempt at a domestic American Marshall Plan, trickled down to Bronzeville, sometimes in bizarre fashion. The vacuum asserted by the lack of educational infrastructure was filled by “youth gangs,” such as the East Side Disciples and the Blackstone Rangers. The Rangers, later known as the “Black P. Stone Nation,” received a \$1 million grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

In this rapidly decaying environment, not only jazz clubs, but rhythm-and-blues joints were also disappearing, along with Bronzeville’s movie houses, banks, clothing stores, bookstores, doctors’ offices, and quality restaurants. These establishments were quickly replaced by fast-food chicken shacks and endless variations on the corner liquor store. By 1967, 63rd Street was a musical ghost town, except perhaps for bluesman Arvella Gray’s frequent appearances with his steel guitar under the El station at 63rd and Cottage Grove. Concomitantly, music clubs were opening up in nonblack areas of the city, notably the white North Side and western suburbs, further complicating the standard explanation. Musicians began to connect this musical outmigration from the South Side with notions of exile and stolen legacies of culture. Speaking to AACM cofounder Philip Cohran, trombonist Martin “Sparx” Alexander put the situation plainly: “Phil, you mentioned about us being ‘robbed,’ about the music being taken away from us. When I first came to Chicago in the Fifties—around 63rd and Cottage—that was a kind of Mecca. The music was all over. You could walk up and down the street and hear brothers playing everywhere. You didn’t need to go in no joint. . . . They were localized in terms of *our* community. But something happened.”<sup>9</sup>

For the most part, contemporaneous accounts of the local Chicago music scene in *Down Beat* describe little of the musical ferment then active in Chicago’s black community, even though the magazine itself was based in Chicago. In a 1966 article in the Canadian journal *Coda*, one Chicago-based writer remarked rather dryly that *Down Beat*’s “reticence on local developments is thought-provoking, to say the least.”<sup>10</sup> The Chicago-based experimental musicians most frequently mentioned were the three white members of the Joe Daley Trio, with saxophonist Daley, bassist Russell Thorne, and drummer Hal Russell. The group, according to a *Down Beat* review, comprised “the city’s foremost ‘new thing’ group,” playing both their own music and pieces like Ornette Coleman’s *Rambling*.<sup>11</sup>

An article by J. B. Figi in a small, independent publication based in Detroit gives a completely different picture of Chicago’s new music scene, one in which black musicians were far more prominent. Playing on the etymol-

ogy of Chicago's name, which comes from an Algonquin word meaning "onion swamp," Figi noted that there was indeed a great deal of new music activity, but that "listeners saw only the tops of the onions."<sup>12</sup> Figi mentions Richard Abrams, Rafael Garrett, Steve McCall, Gene Dinwiddie, Fred Anderson, Roscoe Mitchell, Bill Brimfield, and Robert Barry, among others, declaring that "summer 1964 made it clear that there were musicians committed to the new music, and that some of them spoke it as a native tongue, not something picked up from phrase-books. . . . But, as commitment grew, so did evidence that acceptance would not be forthcoming from the existing order."<sup>13</sup>

In 1910, the classically trained composer-performers Will Marion Cook and James Reese Europe drew upon communalist models in founding the Clef Club as a site for bringing together black musicians of diverse backgrounds to develop both the music and the business of music. The "Clefes," as they were known, managed to purchase their own clubhouse in Harlem, as well as a branch in Chicago.<sup>14</sup> The Clef Club's vindicationist strategy included the formation of a symphony orchestra, in the belief that providing opportunities for black musicians to learn the craft of symphonic performance would counter the notion that blacks were incapable of interpreting Western classical music at the highest level. The hope was that greater opportunities for African Americans in such ensembles would emerge, both for performers and composers. At the same time, Clef Club members took full advantage of their familiarity with a diversity of styles to become well known as leaders of various popular and classical ensembles. Among the most notable of these ensembles was army Lt. Europe's all-black Hell Fighters military band, which became a sensation in World War I France for its ability to effortlessly code-switch between black protojazz styles and classical music. The Negro String Quartet, founded in 1919, was active on the East Coast, performing both standard works of European composers and compositions by contemporary black composers such as Edward Margetson and Clarence Cameron White.<sup>15</sup>

The Clef Club's strategy of control of their products had long been pursued by black artists, notably including theater artists and composers Bob Cole, James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson, who sought to maintain both creative and financial control of their productions in the face of legal chicanery, boycotts, and blacklisting. Cole and the Johnsons, according to Paula Seniors, "presented Black men and women as college students, soldiers, patriotic heroes, and romantic characters for the first time on the

American stage.”<sup>16</sup> Their work resisted both the racialized channeling of black artists into particular genres or venues, and the dominant blackface minstrelsy and coon song genres that dominated the American theater. The massive commodification of black imagery was still in relative infancy at the beginning of the twentieth century, but Cole and the Johnsons were already fighting white producers’ attempts to assert spurious claims to authorship of their original work. For Cole, whose 1906 *Shoo-Fly Regiment* was the first theater production completely conceived, created, and run by African Americans, “uplifting the race” meant “full ownership and control of the theatrical product,”<sup>17</sup> as his 1898 “Colored Actor’s Declaration of Independence” affirmed: “We are going to have our own shows. . . . We are going to write them ourselves, we are going to have our own stage manager, our own orchestra leader and our own manager out front to count up.”<sup>18</sup>

By the mid-1940s, however, this first wave of twentieth-century formal collective activism among black musicians had seemingly faded, though individual attempts by musicians to challenge systems of domination persisted. In 1952, Charles Mingus and Max Roach had started their own firm, Debut Records.<sup>19</sup> In 1955, saxophonist Gigi Gryce, along with Benny Golson, founded their own publishing companies, Melotone Music and Totem Music, to handle rights and royalties for their own works and those of other composers. African American lawyer (and later New York Supreme Court justice) Bruce Wright, who helped set up the companies, told an interviewer that “one of the reasons [Gryce] was setting up Melotone and Totem with Benny was that he felt that black jazz musicians were being cheated by record companies, by producers. . . . He established these publishing companies to become an honest broker in a field where musicians believed they were being cheated in large part.”<sup>20</sup>

It made sense for musicians to control their own publishing, as Horace Silver observed, “because we could not only control our music 100%, own the copyright 100%, but also get 100% of the money rather than 50% of the money.”<sup>21</sup> However, complicating the situation further, according to Silver and others, was the fact that record companies such as Blue Note and Prestige had formed their own music publishing companies, and were coercing musicians who wanted to record to place their compositions with the company. This would allow the record company to obtain part of the royalties for a given composition. In addition, the companies often demanded the copyright for the works. As Bruce Wright explained, “For years, if jazz musicians wanted their music recorded by established labels, the record companies would often insist that some stranger’s name be added as co-

composer. In that way, royalties would have to be split with someone unknown to them, usually a relative of an executive. If there was resistance, there would be no record date.”<sup>22</sup> According to Wright, Gryce’s companies were essentially blackballed by the industry. “Black musicians were being told that if they placed their music with Melotone or Totem, they need not expect any record dates in New York.”<sup>23</sup> Desperate to record, musicians pulled their music from Gryce’s companies. In 1963, Gryce released to their original owners the publishing rights to over two hundred compositions by people such as Marcus Belgrave, Clifford Brown, Ray Bryant, Lou Donaldson, Bob Dorough, Art Farmer, Benny Golson, Hank Jones, Duke Jordan, Booker Little, Howard McGhee, Blue Mitchell, Thelonious Monk, Lee Morgan, Julian Priester, Hale Smith, and Randy Weston.

By the mid-1960s, many musicians were reconceptualizing the discursive, physical, and economic infrastructures in which their music took place. In a 1966 interview, John Coltrane made it clear that “I don’t care too much for playing clubs, particularly.” Elaborating, the saxophonist explained that “the music, changing as it is, there are a lot of times when it doesn’t make sense, man, to have somebody drop a glass, or somebody ask for some money right in the middle of Jimmy Garrison’s solo. . . . I think the music is rising, in my estimation, it’s rising into something else, and so we’ll have to find this kind of place to be played in.”<sup>24</sup> In the same interview, Coltrane presented his notion of what artists needed to do in order to improve their situation. “There has to be a lot of self-help, I believe,” Coltrane said. “They have to work out their own problems in this area.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, sporadic attempts toward independence had been going on for some time. Charles Mingus and Max Roach organized a musician-run festival of “Newport Rebels” on the fringes of the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival to provide an alternative to what they saw as the commercialization, racism, and economic exploitation that the mainstream festival displayed. The alternative event, which took place alongside a riot that caused the cancellation of several concerts, featured young radicals Randy Weston and Ornette Coleman. The event was also supported by elder statesmen Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, and Jo Jones, who commented that “the big festival forgot about music, but these little kiddies have got to have a chance to be heard. That’s one reason why we did this.”<sup>26</sup>

This attempt by musicians to take charge of their own concert production was denigrated at length in a *Down Beat* article by writer Gene Lees, who ignored the cross-generational aspect of the event in turning his reportage into an ill-tempered, ad hominem assault on Mingus himself. Ac-

According to Lees, the musicians' festival was "unorganized," although on one night five hundred people reportedly attended. Lees sarcastically described the musicians' public meeting announcing the formation of a "Jazz Artists Guild": "They were going to fight the wicked forces conspiring against the jazz artist. They were going to book concerts and other events. They would oppose Birdland, another symbol to them of the forces of evil."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the message that "acceptance would not be forthcoming from the existing order" could not have been lost on the musicians.

To support the view that the Jazz Artists Guild project was a quixotic one, the writer used a quote from Horace Silver, who wished the guild well, while observing that "jazz musicians aren't very good businessmen, as a rule."<sup>28</sup> By 1965, however, John Coltrane was proving quite a good businessman, sufficiently successful as an artist to control his own publishing, his own recording studio, and his own record company. According to the Nigerian musician Babatunde Olatunji, Coltrane and Yusef Lateef were working with him on plans to organize an independent performance space and booking agency. Olatunji portrays the saxophonist as declaring in their conversation that "we need to sponsor our own concerts, promote them and perform in them. This way we will not only learn how to take a risk but will not have to accept the dictates of anybody about how long you should play, what to play and what you get."<sup>29</sup> The three musicians drafted a tripartite mission statement:

1. To regard each other as equal partners in all categories.
2. Not to allow any booking agent or promoter to present one group without the other two members of the Triumvirate.
3. To explore the possibility of teaching the music of our people in conservatories, colleges and universities where only European musical experience dominates and is being perpetuated.<sup>30</sup>

One of Coltrane's last performances, titled "The Roots of Africa," was produced by the new organization in April 1967 at Olatunji's Center of African Culture in Harlem. While Coltrane's subsequent passing apparently ended this collaboration,<sup>31</sup> the need for change was evident to many musicians, and the efficacy of highly individualistic strategies for accomplishing their goals was very much in question. Academic and musician Leslie Rout, Jr., identifying a "craving for individualism" by musicians as the source of their economic problems, leavened his version of the standard call for black unity with this observation that "jazzmen have almost no control over the

business end of their vocation. . . . Tightly-knit associations of jazz artists, allied on either a regional or local basis and led predominantly by black Americans, must gain significant control over the production, cost, and presentation of their art, or face the perpetuation of the intolerable conditions so often criticized.”<sup>32</sup>

One of the first collectively organized 1960s responses to the dire situation for black musicians took place in Los Angeles. An outgrowth of pianist Horace Tapscott’s Pan Afrikan Peoples’ Arkestra, the UGMA (Underground Musicians’ Association, later the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension), was formed in 1964, just before the massive rebellion in the Watts area of the city.<sup>33</sup> The New York-based Jazz Composers Guild, also founded in 1964, was perhaps the most widely publicized effort at collective self-determination of the early 1960s. Two determined iconoclasts, trumpeter and composer Bill Dixon and pianist Cecil Taylor, were widely credited with the idea of bringing into multiracial coalition the most committed new musicians in the New York area, including pianist Paul Bley, saxophonist Archie Shepp, composer Carla Bley, trumpeter Mike Mantler, trombonist Roswell Rudd—and Sun Ra, who was by this time well established in the city.

In 1965, Dixon clearly stated the prime rationale for organizing musicians: “Those of us whose work is not acceptable to the Establishment are not going to be financially acknowledged. As a result, it is very clear that musicians, in order to survive—create their music and maintain some semblance of sanity—will have to ‘do it themselves’ in the future.”<sup>34</sup> According to Dixon, the guild’s purposes were “to establish the music to its rightful place in the society; to awaken the musical conscience of the masses of people to that music which is essential to their lives; to protect the musicians and composers from the existing forces of exploitation; to provide an opportunity for the audience to hear the music; to provide facilities for the proper creation, rehearsal, performance, and dissemination of the music.”<sup>35</sup> In practice, as economist Jacques Attali noted, the guild’s members “directed their efforts toward becoming more independent of capital.”<sup>36</sup> The organization’s economic strategy aimed at creating a musician-controlled infrastructure for recording session production, product distribution, concert promotion, and event presentation.

A *Down Beat* review of the 1964 “October Revolution in Jazz” event that sparked the formation of the guild was grudging in its admission that the musicians had succeeded in organizing a successful production.<sup>37</sup> A second event at New York’s Judson Hall in December of that year featured the Cecil



Taylor Unit, the Bill Dixon Quintet, Paul Bley, the Sun Ra Arkestra, and the Jazz Composers Guild Orchestra. Performing were the cream of New York's avant-garde of the period, including trombonist Roswell Rudd, trumpeter Charles Tolliver, saxophonists Jimmy Lyons, Marshall Allen, Marion Brown, John Tchicai, Steve Lacy, and Archie Shepp, drummers Andrew Cyrille, Rashied Ali, and Milford Graves, pianist Burton Greene, bassists Alan Silva and Buell Neidlinger, and many others.<sup>38</sup>

Guild concerts were held weekly at a loft on Seventh Avenue in Manhattan, located two floors above the Village Vanguard jazz club.<sup>39</sup> At guild-produced symposia, musicians and critics debated topics such as "The Jazz Economy" and "Jim Crow and Crow Jim."<sup>40</sup> The group's plans also included ownership of its own concert space, and incorporation as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization for the purposes of applying for grants. However, in the end the guild lasted little more than a year, as the clash of strong-willed personalities, operating in the intensely competitive atmosphere of New York and the highly charged racial atmosphere of the United States, rendered its activities and goals untenable.

Retrospective accounts by Paul Bley and Bill Dixon as to the reasons for the guild's demise provide a glimpse into the extreme divergence of views within the guild. In his 1999 autobiography, Bley was skeptical of the viability of collectives in general: "All collectives, regardless of size, are usually run by a handful of key people who come to all the meetings and do all the work. . . . Every time I had been through one of these situations, I vowed never to waste my time doing it again."<sup>41</sup> Bley was particularly skeptical of the ability of collectives to produce music of high quality. "People choose to play with one another on the basis of their ability," Bley declared. "A collective would most probably encourage over-socialisation, over-fraternalisation, over-democracy. . . . You have the poorest players playing with the best players. It's not the best way to get the music along quickly."<sup>42</sup> The pianist described guild meetings as something akin to psychodrama: "What a bunch of wounded souls there were at these meetings. Talk about group therapy. It was nothing for someone to stand up at a meeting and talk for two or three hours about the pain that they felt, the struggle—inter-group, inter-race, inter-class, inter-family, inter-musical, *inter-everything*. The next night, the working nucleus of the Guild would get together and do all the work."<sup>43</sup>

Bley saw Dixon as manifesting an autocratic style that posed particular problems. "Bill saw [the guild] as a family of his friends," Bley recalled. "And if he wasn't friendly with anyone at a particular time it was ruled by

dictate.”<sup>44</sup> Certainly, Dixon’s frank and public contemporaneous observations concerning internal conflicts in the multiracial Guild could conceivably have been disconcerting, even to guild members: “Even in the guild, which is comprised of some very intelligent people, there has been a subtle, but apparent, indignation on the part of the white members (and this is something I think nearly all white men have in them) that a black man . . . myself, Cecil . . . could conceive and execute an idea that would be intelligent and beneficial to all.”<sup>45</sup>

For Dixon, white musicians were treated “significantly better, but not much better—that’s why they’re in the guild—than are black musicians, and that is simply because they play jazz, which is looked upon as something ‘primitive.’”<sup>46</sup> Dixon further asserted that white artists “are not bound by an enforced social tradition that relegates them to one area of musical expression. The Negro plays jazz because that music is close to him—it’s his way of life—and because, qualified or not, the other areas of musical expression are closed to him.”<sup>47</sup> In contrast, Bley was relatively unsympathetic to the possibility that there might be a need to work through class and race dynamics that may have affected white and black musicians in different ways. This did not mean, however, that the pianist was unmindful of being in a white minority in the guild. Echoing the views of many 1960s whites, both in the North and in the South, for Bley, the racial situation had been relatively harmonious up to the 1960s until “social consciousness” intervened:

Unfortunately, being one of the 4 White people in the group it was difficult for me to live with the pain with my friends who were in pain because the Black players I knew prior to that didn’t regard themselves as being in a painful situation, they regarded themselves as being in a joyous situation. It was when the musicians began to adopt a social consciousness that they had their own workloads to pursue over and above the greater financial reward of a group of musicians.<sup>48</sup>

For Dixon, race also played a central role in the organization’s demise, but along a very different axis from what Bley saw:

Of course this is America you’re talking about and racism in America is such that the parent society which has robbed and pillaged everything—they would rather lose some things rather than have the people that they

have oppressed come up with a solution. And in the JCG it was finally like that. The white ones wanted to . . . try and let everyone else participate even though they can't or don't want to. And that was the reason for its failure.<sup>49</sup>

Bley felt that one important reason for the failure of the guild was the unworkability of one of its central policies—that individual members must refuse work offered from outside the guild unless the guild as a whole approved the engagement.<sup>50</sup> Abandoning the organization's collectivist policy, Archie Shepp decided to sign with Impulse, the same company that published John Coltrane's work. According to Bley, Dixon received Shepp's decision poorly. "Archie had a family to support," Bley observed, "and he sure wasn't going to turn down *any* money, certainly not a lump of money like an Impulse contract. That was it for Bill. He got up and left the meeting. He didn't return until months later. That was a problem because he was the founder. After that, Roswell Rudd and I ran the Guild for over a year."<sup>51</sup> According to Bley's account, Dixon returned, months later, and demanded that the next meeting be held at his house, but "when the meeting time came, the following Thursday at the appointed hour, nobody showed up. I didn't show up, nobody showed up, for reasons no one knows. There were no phone calls, there was no decision in advance."<sup>52</sup>

Commenting on the downfall of the guild, Cecil Taylor had this to say:

The musicians don't just have something to do with art in society. They are themselves the society, even if they only find themselves on the periphery. Either actively or unconsciously they revolt against a bizarre society. I believe that the Guild did not survive because the people who were dealing with it did not raise enough social consciousness; they neglected everything that has to do with what a person who lives in New York today, who not only wants to earn his living but also to honestly express himself, experiences in everyday life.<sup>53</sup>

"We bungled an opportunity," Taylor reflected. "But at least we tried something. . . . In spite of it all, it was not in vain. We came out of it a bit with a bit more cunning."<sup>54</sup> Referring approvingly to the goals of the guild, John Coltrane told an interviewer in 1966 that "I don't think it's dead. It was just something that couldn't be born at that time, but I still think it's a good idea."<sup>55</sup>

### Born on the Kitchen Table: Conceiving the Association

My mother was playing whist and that's when the labor pains began. That's where I was born, right there at that table.

—Jodie Christian

The earliest histories of the Great Migration framed the movement as animated by a kind of spontaneous, leaderless combustion. These accounts claimed that the movement resulted not so much from conscious agency on the part of migrants, but from a kind of “historical imperative” conditioned largely by external factors such as economic pressures and climactic conditions.<sup>56</sup> One notices the similarity of this trope to the conventional wisdom that casts improvisation in general, and the products of black music in particular, as both lacking in structure and insensitive to historical or formal concerns. As a consequence, the historiography of jazz has rarely been able to find a place for tropes of deliberation, planning, and organization on the part of musicians. Rather, the image of the creative process for black musicians has favored clichéd images of spontaneity, along with portrayals of musicians as irresponsible, cryptically cliquish, and desirous of instant gratification.

In contrast, Steve McCall's mother Willa remembers a series of rather sober, intensely reflective meetings. “The AACM was born at my kitchen table,” she declared in our interview. “You had four of them, I think, at the beginning. Richard Abrams, Phil Cohran and Steve . . .”

“And Jodie, Mom,” added Willa McCall's daughter, Rochelle Toyozumi. “Malachi came in later.”

“That's right, Jodie Christian,” Willa McCall agreed. The meetings could well have taken place in early 1965, in the South Side housing project where the McCall family lived and where young Stephen McCall IV grew up. Toyozumi remembers the optimism that marked these encounters:

They sat there at the table and they went on about what they could do, and how strong they would be. They were trying to get a plan, something that would be good for black musicians, those that were starting out, those that were struggling, people that had no way of bringing this music before the public. They were just sick of what was going on, and they talked about what could *we* do for *our* selves. They had the courage of their convictions, and they would step out on that. They were not afraid to do it. That's the kind of people it took to make the AACM.

Jacques Attali sees a particular quote from Malcolm X as foreshadowing the kind of organization that was fervently desired by these artists. The quote, which valorizes improvisation as a way to create conditions for change, points up something of the mindset that was emerging in important segments of the black community at mid-decade, shortly before Malcolm's murder in 1965:

The white musician can jam if he's got some sheet music in front of him. He can jam on something he's heard jammed before. But that black musician, he picks up his horn and starts blowing some sounds that he never thought of before. He improvises, he creates, it comes from within. It's his soul; it's that soul music. . . . He will improvise; he'll bring it from within himself. And this is what you and I want. You and I want to create an organization that will give us so much power we can sit and do as we please.<sup>57</sup>

In Phil Cohran's hoodoo-tinged origin story, the AACM was conceived in the shadow of Dinah Washington's final resting place:

I can remember Steve McCall and Muhal walking along by Oakwood Cemetery. . . . We hadn't seen each other in a long time. We were all part of the same generation. You see, we were musicians who had come up under Bird and Dizzy and all of these guys, and then we looked up one day, and all that was snatched away. . . . There was a general feeling that we had been robbed of our culture. So we stopped and we started talking about how tough times are. . . . We wanted to do something about it.<sup>58</sup>

Abrams, Christian, Cohran, and McCall sent postcards to the cream of Chicago's African American musicians, announcing a meeting to be held on May 8, 1965, at Cohran's South Side home on East 75th Street near Cottage Grove Avenue. Abrams recorded this and subsequent meetings on his Sony portable reel-to-reel recorder, and the discussions on the tape made it clear that the aim of the meeting was the formation of a new organization for musicians. The postcard that participants received presented a fourteen-point agenda. The first point to be addressed concerned "original music" and "creative music," indicating that among Chicago musicians, a notion as to what these terms might signify may already have been developing. The other talking points listed on the postcard covered logistical

matters, financial issues, the projected organization's form and day-to-day operation, the nature of its legal standing, and its future plans and possible expansion. The points, apparently in this order, were: (2) size of groups, (3) concerts, (4) salaries, (5) places to play, (6) guests of performers, (7) promotion, (8) dues, (9) order and discipline, (10) charter, (11) name, (12) membership, (13) broadening scope of operation, and (14) collaboration.<sup>59</sup>

This first meeting was conducted using more or less standard parliamentary procedure. The rules for the meeting required each participant to state his or her name to the chair before speaking, so that the tape itself could augment, or perhaps eventually replace, conventional written minutes. As a result, some sense of who was there at the early meetings can be gained from the people who spoke.<sup>60</sup> 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 subalterns to the power of speech. Moreover, in direct contradiction to the overwhelming majority of critical commentary on the AACM, terms such as "new jazz," "the avant-garde," or "free jazz" were seldom, if ever, used in the discussions. Even "black music" was not directly mentioned, although it was obvious that many meeting participants directly connected the new organization's aims with those of black people as a group.

Abrams, as the presiding chair, called the meeting to order at around 2 p.m., calling for discussion on the first agenda item. "First of all, number one, there's original music, *only*," Abrams began. "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 coming from the members in the organization."<sup>61</sup> As might be expected from a group of strong-willed, relatively experienced artists, competing notions as to the nature and purpose of "original music" were in play throughout, and Cohran, Abrams, Christian, and McCall were adamant in their understanding that the eventual success of the process of organizing depended on hearing all voices. "I want it understood," emphasized Abrams, "that we by no means meant to dictate any laws or any standing rules as to this group. We only made suggestions as to a start. We don't want to stifle nobody, because we wouldn't have anything if we cut you off from what you might want to do for the sake of a few." Steve McCall agreed. "We've all been talking about it among ourselves for a long time in general terms. We'll embellish as much as we can, and get to what you really feel because we're laying a foundation for something that will be permanent."

As with the Great Migration, precedents for meetings such as these may

be sought not only in the immediate circumstances facing these artists, but also in deeper historical and cultural tropes. For musicologist Samuel Floyd, an imperative for letting all voices be heard emerges most centrally in the ring shout, a postslavery form of “participation performance” (to adopt Fluxus artist Allan Kaprow’s term) in which the people form a circle, moving, singing, and shouting rhythmically, while individual actors take impromptu solos as the spirit may move. In addition to Floyd’s notion of the centrality of a “metaphor of the ring” to African American musical culture,<sup>62</sup> a more proximate motive force was the influence of bebop, one of the “standard musics” that constituted the immediate background of most of these musicians. Here, one can find further precedent via Daniel Belgrad’s observation that bebop’s notion of intersubjectivity “implies that participatory democracy is the form of political economy with the greatest vitality and the most potential power.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it is entirely understandable that a people who were silenced by slavery would develop a music, jazz, in which everyone would have their say, and the ring shout–like, performative nature of the May 8 meeting was evident from the first moments.

The rationale for forming an organization for the support of new, original music recalls such earlier efforts as the Society for Private Music Performance (*Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen*), founded by composer Arnold Schoenberg in 1918. As Schoenberg wrote, the society’s purpose was “to present contemporary music in circumstances conducive to its proper appreciation.”<sup>64</sup> According to music historian Robert Morgan, the society “furnished an early reflection of the isolation of new music from ‘official’ concert institutions, and thus of the need to find a more specialized forum for its presentation.”<sup>65</sup> Speaking in the meeting, trumpeter Fred Berry, who had been developing new music with Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, and Alvin Fielder, saw a similar need: “For original music to be presented, it needs some help. It needs help, from us. This is why we’re doing this. The standard music needs no help to be presented. If you want to play standards, or standard music, there are places to do this. You’re working your gigs, you’re playing the standard music there. But this is for something new and something different that has no other medium.”

“What were your basic ideas that you had in mind, you and these three people?” asked bassist Melvin Jackson. “Maybe we can all build on the original idea.”

“We spoke in terms of discussing the furthering of creative music,” Abrams replied. “We had thought about, you know, giving our own con-

certs, you see, as a start, and then expand into other things that would enhance the project in general.”

“All of us are creative musicians,” said Cohran, “and that’s why we were invited together to form an association or a group, so that we can play our music, or the music that’s in our hearts, and the music of our experience and training, and desires, because we can’t do this any more.”

“The whole idea,” explained McCall, “is basically to organize to better the whole situation of work, as far as performing-wise, the writing, and giving concerts, and whatever, to encompass as much as we can.”

“I think the reason original music was put there first,” Cohran continued, “was because of all of our purposes of being here, this is the primary one. Because why else would we form an association? Because we’re all denied the privilege of expressing what is in us. I would like to suggest that if we have a motto or a purpose, that it be connected with promoting and playing and exchange of original music.”

“I don’t think you can talk about original music without including concerts and promotion,” Jodie Christian said, to general assent from the very experienced musicians present at the meeting. “The only jobs that we’re gonna have where we can really perform original music are concerts that we promote, because the type of jobs that we’re gonna get won’t call for original music.”

These musicians could not have hoped for support similar to that offered to university-based white American experimentalists in the wake of the cold war. Nor could they have imagined the kind of European social-democratic cultural support—again, a product of post-World War II political arrangements—that fueled the work of the early European free jazz musicians, whose rise to prominence paralleled that of the AACM. As Philip Cohran observed, the new organization was on its own. “By us forming an association and promoting and taking over playing our own music,” he warned, “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.”

“I think that for the most part all of us would play original music anyway,” said pianist Ken Chaney. “But do we want to really put a barrier out and say that that’s all that’s going to be allowed? Because we’re still not free then either. We’re just bound to original music.”

“I prefer to play music from the past, present *and* the future,” said bassist Betty Dupree. “Let’s play all of it.”

“The only thing that I’m concerned with personally is good music,” Mel-



vin Jackson opined. “Just to say, ‘original music,’ that’s not my mood all the time, it might not be your mood all the time.”

The comments by Dupree, Chaney, and Jackson connected music performance with issues of personal freedom, mobility, and individuality. In contrast, for Abrams, the assertion of personal freedom, while clearly an advance on the situation at standard gigs, was no longer sufficient at a time when “self-determination” formed a prominent aspect of the radical black political agenda. “All music is good, and I’m sure that this group will not be a source of cutting anyone off from doing most of the things that they want to do,” Abrams said reassuringly. “But at least we would have something that would definitely and directly push us at all times, personally, because this is what we need. We need to be remembered as representing ourselves.”

“The standard music, we’ve all played it,” said McCall. “But for *this* organization, you know, for the promoting of having cats to write original compositions, for getting together and presenting, in concert, and as a means of a livelihood, you dig, like making some money, getting out of *your* things, the things that we all create among ourselves. Being at a concert just for standard music, you know, there doesn’t have to be this kind of a group for that kind of thing.”

“This is a long range project, you see,” Jodie Christian explained optimistically. “You can’t look at what’s happening now, or what was happening behind you, because we don’t expect this organization just to be put in a spot over here while we play our other gigs over here. We expect this to branch out so we won’t have to go on those other gigs and play things that we don’t want to play.”

About forty-five minutes into the meeting, saxophonist Gene Easton summarized the differences of understanding in the meeting regarding the notion of originality. For Easton, the salient questions concerned the viability of systems old and new, the relationship to tradition, the expanding horizons of thought and opportunity, and an increasing awareness among artists of a wider world of music. Easton expressed the urgency of the aesthetic crisis that was at the core of the musicians’ decision to emancipate themselves through reliance on their own creative resources.

“I think we’re getting closer to an explanation of this term, ‘original music,’” Easton said. “‘Original,’ in one sense, means something you write in the particular system that we’re locked up with now in this society. We express ourselves in this system because it’s what we learned. As we learn more of other systems of music around the world, we’re getting closer to

the music that our ancestors played and which we are denied the right to really stretch out in.

"I feel that the authors of this business structure here," Easton continued, "had in mind sound-conscious musicians, if necessary finding a complete new system that expresses *us*. We're locked up in a system, and if you don't express in the system that is known, you're ostracized. And there are many, many, far too many good musicians put in that position because they don't, uh . . ."

"Conform," said a voice.

"But there are far better systems," Easton declared. "As we tried to progress in jazz, we find that there's expression on a much higher level than we had been led to believe. And presently, we will be locked up for the rest of our days in this system unless we can get out of it through some means such as this."

The long and thoughtful silence that followed Easton's remarks was broken by Roscoe Mitchell. "I move that we take a vote on it so we can go on to the next one."

"Is there a second?" Abrams asked the meeting.

"I second it," said Cohran.

"It has been moved and seconded," Abrams intoned, "that we take a vote on number one, titled 'Original Music,' Are we ready for questions?"

"Before we vote on whether or not we're going to play original music," Fred Berry ventured, "there has to be a clear-cut definition in everyone's mind of what original music is."

"We're not going to agree on what exactly original music means to us," Abrams observed. "We'll have to limit—now—the word 'original' to promotion of ourselves and our own material to benefit ourselves."

Berry was persistent. "Give it a definition."

"The cards originally said 'creative music,'" said Easton, "and creative music can only be original anyway, in a true creative sense."

"When we say 'originality of the music,' ventured Jackson, seeking further assurances, "I want to know, now this 'original thing,' like we say 'original music'—this is original personal preference."

Abrams tried to meet Jackson's concerns halfway. "I think what we mean by 'original,'" Abrams eventually answered, "is direct output from your system, your personal system.

"Your personal preference," Abrams added, "but original as far as you writing the music yourself."

“Wait now, this is where you’re taking on a dictator part,” Jackson objected. “Maybe I don’t care to write, but I still care to play good music.”

Jackson’s observation gave Abrams pause. “You made something come to mind that I hadn’t thought about,” said Abrams. “I’d like to think that to participate in a group like this it wouldn’t stifle anybody whether you wrote a tune or not. We are in need of not only composers, we have to have musicians to play it.”

One should not mistake this comment for an attempt to reproduce the division of labor between “composer” and “performer” that characterized Western classical music. Rather, to these musicians, being “a musician” meant working out of a hybridized model of creative practice that negotiated between individuality and collective membership, and which assumed primary creative agency for each artist. “It is clear that we have performers and composers, you know,” Abrams continued. “But basically, musicians are performers, composers and all, at the same time. You write music when you stand up and practice your instrument.” Here, Abrams draws upon a tradition that regarded “composition,” or the creation of music, as a cooperative, collective practice, responsive to the conditions and histories from which the individual musicians sprang.

Abrams and McCall felt strongly that the imperative of original music went beyond narrow strategies of self-promotion. “When we speak of ourselves,” Abrams declared, “we not only speak of the group as registered members, we speak of ourselves as a whole, as a people.”

“That covers a lot of territory,” Jerol Donavon mused.

“As we begin to give concerts and maybe concerts with cats in other groups in other cities and things,” Steve McCall predicted, “by saying the promotion of ourselves, that might mean playing Lee Morgan, ‘Sidewinder,’ to promote *me* on the concert stage.” McCall’s conclusion expressed a certain finality. “So now we got to say, original music—of *us*. Our original music.”

Without objection, Abrams called the question. “We’re gonna take a vote right now. All in favor of promoting ourselves, in the form of presenting our own music, within the scope of this organization, signify by saying ‘Aye.’” In quick response came a unified shout of “Aye.”

Even though the meeting had already been in session for more than two hours, no one was ready to adjourn. The meeting continued, point by point, through the postcard agenda. Philip Cohran began by suggesting that the group present a concert each week, with a rotating order of groups

to ensure that all members had a chance to perform. Reggie Willis suggested that it might be possible to present more than one group per week. At the same time, however, Willis brought up an important issue regarding salaries. "This is just an assumption on my part," said Willis, "but it seems to me salaries are pretty set in accordance with union rules."

A 1968 *Down Beat* article about the AACM noted that "one of the musicians' primary concerns was to avoid coming into conflict with the bylaws of the musicians' union."<sup>66</sup> In the 1960s, the power of the union effectively controlled the musicians' very livelihoods, and Chicago's Local 208, the black musicians' local, exercised very tight control of clubs and theaters on its circuit, sending officials to spot-check ensembles for union membership. A leader who featured nonunion members could be fined or even suspended from the union, effectively foreclosing future work. Union musicians performing with nonunion musicians could be similarly sanctioned. Venues that employed nonunion musicians would be branded as "unfair," and union musicians would be barred from performing there. The musicians in the meeting worried about how to present concerts with more than one group if a union wage could not be provided for every musician. Featuring more musicians at a concert than were specified in the union contract constituted an infraction with potentially serious consequences.

Melvin Jackson suggested pursuing a variance with the union to waive the normal contract process. "I know personally that these things can be gotten around," said Jackson. "By this being a new organization, you can do these things with the sanction of the union, man. All you got to do is just go down there and talk with them."

Jodie Christian disagreed strongly. "I don't care for this 'sanction of the union.' The only dealings I want to have with the union is, I make up my contract and pay my dues. That's the only way I want to become affiliated with them. If we would have wanted to make this a union thing, we would have gone down there and had their permission and formed right there. But we decided this was our own thing, so we handle it our own way."

"This is sort of like self-employment, right here, what we got going," Christian reminded the meeting. "If we feel that we need a second group to be featured with that first group, we can do that without going to the union to do it—at all."

"See, we're dealing with concerts," Abrams agreed. "We're not dealing with these joints. They got that. They got all of that. We are dealing with concerts, and we are privileged to eliminate any middleman that we are pleased to. You can walk up to a man and say, I want to rent this hall and

here's the money. Now he can either rent his hall or not. But if you walk up and say, look, I'll call you tomorrow, I'm gonna see if I can get the money from these cats, what you got?"

Up to this point, most of these musicians had been working for other people on a fee-for-service basis. Now that they were proposing to set themselves up as producers, they suddenly found themselves on both sides of the negotiating table, wondering how to pay themselves. It was becoming obvious that the musicians themselves would have to contribute to the group's welfare via payment of dues, just as they were contributing a union-stipulated percentage of their salaries to Local 208 as "work dues." As Abrams reminded the meeting, "This is a self-supporting organization," a fact that was underscored when Philip Cohran took the floor as the meeting stretched out past five in the afternoon. Cohran's remarks offer some idea of the extreme undercapitalization that marked the origins of the AACM. "It takes money to send out cards and all, the tape costs money," announced Cohran, "So we are in need of a collection from the people gathered, whatever you can afford."

"I suggest twenty-five cents, all around," Abrams said. "All in favor of the suggestion, signify by saying Aye." After a murmured general assent, Abrams declared that "the ayes have it. There will be a twenty-five-cent collection for those who can afford it."

"I got eleven cents," one member announced with some alarm. "Others, don't worry about it," said Abrams. After the collection was taken, a date for the next meeting was arranged. "The first thing that we should do," suggested bassist Charles Clark, "is try to elect officers, provided there's enough people."

"Alright," said Abrams. "All in favor of adjournment, signify by saying Aye." The room roared "Aye."

"This meeting now stands adjourned. Signed, Chairman Richard Abrams."

"Alright, baby," someone shouted.

### **Naming Ceremony: Black Power and Black Institutions**

The second meeting took place a week later, on Saturday, May 15, 1965. Some of those who attended the first meeting did not return for the second, but others came with the expectation that officers were to be elected. Trombonist Julian Priester, who had been a regular member of Sun Ra's Arkestra and was now performing with Art Blakey, was visiting Chicago and was present at the meeting.<sup>67</sup> "I'd like you to tell myself and anyone else

in the room,” Priester asked the meeting chair, “what is the exact purpose, or purposes, of this organization?”

“Well, it was voted on and passed by everyone present,” Abrams replied, “that we in this organization will play only our own music—original compositions or material originating from the members within the group, in the sense of concerts, exploitation around music that we write.”

“But it would seem,” Priester ventured, “that if you put too many restrictions on the activities, at this point of just getting organized, you’re going to put a lot of obstacles in your way. For instance, to me, everyone in here is not a composer. Everyone in here is not writing music, and so right there you exclude them.”

“No, no one’s excluded,” Abrams insisted. “We have to have performers *and* composers. We realized at the time that everyone is not gifted to a great deal of writing. But now, I feel this way, that 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.”

“But taking into consideration economic factors involved,” Priester continued, “as musicians we’re going to be working in front of the public, and different people, club owners or promoters . . .”

“No, no, we’re not working for club owners, no clubs,” Abrams interrupted quickly. “This is strictly concerts. As far as this organization is concerned, we’re not working taverns, because we believe we can create enough work in concert. See, there’s another thing about us functioning as full artistic musicians. We’re not afforded that liberty in taverns. Everybody here knows that.”

“When you say ‘us,’” Priester asked, “are you speaking strictly of the physical members of the organization . . . excluding race or anything, anybody who is, uh . . .”

“Well, the members of the organization, whoever happens to be a member of the organization,” Abrams replied.

“And how do you become a member?” Priester asked.

“Well, we’re here now becoming members, since it was voted on and agreed upon that we elect officers today,” Abrams said. “Now after the election of officers, I would say, then we have the start of an organization. After that, I’m sure we will decide on how we will accept other people in, after we’ve organized—whether they’ll be screened in some way or whatnot like that.”

“Before we get to the election of officers and some of the other points,” Ken Chaney suggested, “we should think about exactly what we’re going to

be—if we’re going to be, say, a society, something, for the advancement of creative music, or something like that.”

Gene Easton agreed. “If we had a stated philosophy, and we knew whether we were a nonprofit organization, just how we plan to operate,” Easton observed, “it would help to clear the thinking on some of the points that we are going into more or less cold.”

The discussion began to wander around these points until the singer Floradine Geemes stepped in. In an impromptu yet confident and deliberate manner, the structure that the AACM was still using in the twenty-first century seemed to spring forth fully formed from her head. Geemes was able to directly identify, perhaps in a way that the overwhelmingly male membership was unable to countenance, the major issue evinced by the meeting’s lack of focus. “Seems like most of the people here have fear,” Geemes noted quietly, going on to present a lesson in basic organizational structure and function to the assembled artists. “When you say ‘elect officers,’” Geemes began, “they have fear of president, vice president, secretary, chairman. But with basic parliamentary law, there shouldn’t be any fear of a chairman.”

Perhaps referring indirectly to the previous discussion, in which the union was depicted as an autocratic force vis-à-vis the musicians, Geemes was reassuring. “That doesn’t mean that the officers have control of it and you have no say-so. ‘Officers’ only means that as president you have control over the meetings. “‘Vice president’ only means that if the president is not there, you got someone to carry on,” Geemes continued. “‘Recording secretary’ is now recording whatever we have to discuss now, taking down the most important points. ‘Financial secretary,’ once we’re organized, will eventually come into the picture.

“And that’s all basic parliamentary is,” the singer concluded. “It’s the order of this group, and from there you’ve got your organization started. You can go into anything you want from there.”

Perhaps stating the obvious, Easton observed gravely that “I think that the young lady spoke more clearly and evidently understands more about parliamentary procedure than the rest of us.” Shortly thereafter, the task of nominating and electing a board was completed, and Abrams called out the names of the newly elected officers. “Richard Abrams is president; Jodie Christian is vice president; Flora Geemes is secretary, Phil Cohran, financial secretary; Sandra Lashley, recording secretary; Ken Chaney, business manager; Jerol Donavon, sergeant-at-arms; and Steve McCall, treasurer.”<sup>68</sup>

The officers convened their first meeting a few days later at Philip

Cohran's 75th Street apartment, on Thursday, May 20, 1965 at around 7 p.m. Bassist Malachi Favors also took part in the discussion, as this first "executive board" developed policy suggestions to place before the organization as a whole for approval. The very first issue taken up, however, was not strictly organizational, but spiritual. At the May 15 meeting, bassist Nevin Wilson had remarked, "I'm concerned with what happened when we started this meeting—facing the East, and all that. What's the faith in this? Is it Islamic?"

"Well, that was for prayer purposes," Abrams explained.

"You could be any faith you wanted?"

"Any faith you wanted."

Now, Jodie Christian, a Jehovah's Witness, brought the issue up again, and Malachi Favors explained that "the planet rotates to the East. When you face the East you're standing proudly. Somebody might think that facing the East has something to do with the Muslims, or Islam, or something like that."<sup>69</sup>

"I picked the East simply because life feeds out of the East into the West," Abrams said. "And it returns to the East. It returns home. It's man's written role, it's an example, each day, of what he is here to do . . . among many other explanations, and I'm sure there could be quite a few."<sup>70</sup> The meeting turned to questions of fund-raising. "Let's take number eight first, which is dues," Abrams began, referring to the original postcard agenda from May 8. "Now I had thought of, say, a dollar a week for each member, which could give us a pretty fair cushion for promoting the first concert, maybe the first two concerts."<sup>71</sup>

"When Sandra [Lashley] was trying to collect," Floradine Geemes remembered of the May 15 general meeting, "someone said, 'I wasn't there last week,' or 'I can't afford it this week.'" A dollar a week may not seem like very much to those familiar with other, better-funded experimental music subcultures. The dues issue, however, underscores the point that the AACM's grass-roots community activism started literally from nothing—with all of the stresses that this implies. "All of us are in a strain at times," Abrams ventured, "and we may tend to get behind in our dues, not because we're lax, but simply because we're not able to pay 'em. Sometimes we're not working and sometimes we are. There are days when we don't have a dollar—at all. All the money goes right out of your pocket into . . . your responsibilities."

"I think the strictest rule that we can have on this, man," said Jerol



Donavon, “is that everybody has to be paid up when their time comes to playing the concert. And if their dues are not paid up, then they make arrangements to come before the executive board to explain why, and the executive board determines whether they can play or not.”

The next agenda item was to work out the basics of becoming a non-profit organization. “You have to state your purposes and everything,” Cohran explained, “and then draw up a set of rules and by-laws, with a lawyer, and then you put it before the state.”

“But a gig is for profit,” Christian wondered aloud. “Isn’t this a profit organization?”

“No, not really,” Abrams replied. “We are promoting creative music as an art—culture.” Talk of culture, in turn, brought questions regarding the new organization’s relationship to traditional philanthropy. “Once we get our name and our charter and everything,” said Cohran, “I think we should approach some businessmen, like Fuller, some of these people that’s got some money. They might not do anything, but I think we should approach them on the basis of what we’re trying to do culturally.”<sup>72</sup>

“I disagree,” McCall responded sharply, perhaps fearing that deviating from a strategy of full self-reliance could compromise the organization’s independence.

“It’s just to subscribe to what we’re doing with no strings attached,” Cohran ventured, “merely to run an ad on the program that says that he supports what we’re doing.”<sup>73</sup> No final agreement on this point was reached, and the meeting moved on to discuss promotion.

“To open up strongly,” suggested Steve McCall, “means to open up with a plan in mind for more than just one concert. Instead of running more or less random concerts or what have you, we should have a series of concerts, so we have a program.”

“It’s going to take more than two weeks to promote an event,” said Donavon. “Will we have placards and things made up?”

“We had these little things we passed out, and they were all over the city, just everywhere,” said Abrams. “They were just as good as placards, ’cause a lot of people got ’em.”

In the meeting’s final moments, the question of who would give the first concert was approached whimsically by Cohran. “I think that the following Saturday, we should have all of the musicians to bring their instruments to the meeting. Everybody would get up and play for so many minutes,” Cohran jokingly suggested, and then the whole body will vote on who

they want to represent them in the first concert.” To general laughter, the trumpeter evoked the spirit of the cutting contest, now clearly viewed as an artifact of a bygone age.

On Thursday, May 27, 1965, the second meeting of the executive board of the as yet unnamed organization took place at Philip Cohran’s home. Answering the roll call were Richard Abrams, Steve McCall, Jerol Donavon, Ken Chaney, Philip Cohran, Sandra Lashley and Floradine Geemes. The first order of business was point eleven on the postcard agenda, a name for the organization. A name was necessary, not only to focus public attention on the new organization itself for purposes of advertising and promotion, but also to obtain a state charter, and to help consolidate the organization’s membership behind a suitable image. “I have a name, but I’m not satisfied with it,” ventured Cohran. “The name that I’ve finally come up with is ‘Association of Dedicated Creative Artists,’ It says everything I want to say, but it seems like it could be put in another way.”<sup>74</sup>

“What you had on the card,” Ken Chaney reminded everyone, “was ‘a meeting for the advancement of creative music.’”

“That sounded good,” Cohran mused. “‘Association for the Advancement of Creative Music,’ That was what got everybody there.” The ensuing discussion demonstrates that the AACM, as with most African American organizations, did not eschew the spiritual as part of its organizational philosophy. “What initials would that give?” Abrams asked. “‘A.A.C.M,’ That would put a Nine on us, initial-wise.”

“Really?” McCall responded, “That’s good.”

“Sandra wanted to know how I arrived at the number nine for the letters in the name,” Cohran said to Abrams, “and I told her that this was your conversation, not mine.”

“Numerology,” Abrams replied. “‘A’ represents ‘1,’ ‘M’ represents ‘4,’ ‘C’ represents ‘3,’ M and C would be 7, and the two A’s are one apiece. That’s nine. All the letters in the words might present something else,” he warned, “but what you are called, a nickname or whatever it is, that’s the vibration they put on you in numbers, regardless of what your name is.

“So we’ll be referred to as the A.A.C.M most of the time, which would signify that this is a Number Nine organization,” Abrams observed.

“That’s as high as you can go,” someone responded.

“True,” Abrams replied, “but that’s a high vibration to live up to. It could cause as many low things as high things if you don’t live up to it. We think and feel in a spiritual manner about what we’re doing.”

Jacques Attali has asserted that the advent of “free jazz” was provoked

by “the organized and often consensual theft of black American music.”<sup>75</sup> Certainly, this understanding extended right into the naming of the new organization. “What are we calling it?” asked Sandra Lashley, who was taking notes. “‘The Association for the Advancement of Creative . . . ‘Music,’ or ‘Musicians?’”

Cohran’s thoughtful response evinced a keen awareness of that long history of exploitation. “If the association is to advance the creative musicians, they are the ones who need advancing,” Cohran declared. “We can all create music and somebody else can take it and use it. The musicians are the ones who need the help.”

“We’ve been advancing creative music all along,” declared Donavon, and McCall finished his sentence: “but nobody has been advancing us.” That seemed to settle the matter. The name, “Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians” and its acronym, “A.A.C.M.,” were adopted unanimously by the board.

On Saturday, May 29, 1965, at 2 p.m., the next general meeting of the organization took place at the Abraham Lincoln Center, a local community-assistance institution located at 700 East Oakwood Boulevard, in a building designed and built in 1905 by Frank Lloyd Wright and Dwight Heald Perkins that now lay in the heart of Bronzeville. Steve McCall persuaded the center staff to make its facilities freely available to the musicians,<sup>76</sup> and as the tape was rolling, the sounds of musicians practicing could clearly be heard.<sup>77</sup> The first order of business was the membership roll call, which is given on the tape.<sup>78</sup> After the meeting was “called to order with prayer,” Sandra Lashley read the minutes of the May 27 executive board meeting. The two name choices, “Association of Dedicated Creative Artists,” or “A.C.D.A.,” and the board-recommended name, “Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians,” or “A.A.C.M.,” were presented to the general body. A clear preference for the name “A.A.C.M.” quickly emerged, and with little further comment, the name Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians was unanimously adopted. Gene Easton asked that the new organization be referred to henceforth as “the association” instead of “the club,” reflecting a shift in self-image toward a more solid basis for imagining community.<sup>79</sup>

A number of housekeeping matters were pursued, moving toward the final agenda item, the election of a four-person board of directors, along the lines that Julian Priester had suggested in the May 15 meeting. Elected were Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, Fred Berry, and Gene Easton. A seemingly innocent question by pianist Bob Dogan led the group into a heated debate

about race. “I got two members of my band who are not in the group and they are interested in getting into the group,” Dogan ventured. “I’d like to know if I can take it upon myself to invite them into the next meeting so they can become members.”

“Well, we’re open for membership, aren’t we?” Abrams asked.

“You know, they’re not on the mailing list now,” Dogan hesitated. This observation that the musicians “were not on the mailing list” seemed to be a tacit message that the musicians in question were white. On the other hand, Dogan himself was white, and by all indications, he was “on the list,” as one of those specifically invited to the meeting by the original call. Thus, embodied within the issue brought to the table by Dogan was a complex dynamic of personal and professional interaction, crucially mediated by race and culture, where mappings of whiteness and blackness to insider-outsider binaries were defined not so much by phenotype as by issues of trust, collegiality—and power.

“We have a consideration to make too, in reference to what we’re doing,” Abrams began tentatively. “Actually, we haven’t said it, but the membership is confined to a certain area or group of musicians.

“This is not in reference to whether a person’s group can perform,” he added. “As it stands now, the members in your group will perform with your group. We’re going to have to make a consideration as to whether we’re going to have an interracial organization, or have it as it stands now in reference to membership.”

“You mean that if someone is a certain race then they can’t come into the group,” Dogan queried.

“I mean that we are going to have to decide whether we will have an interracial group or not,” Abrams replied. “Being frank about it, when we started we didn’t intend to have an interracial group. Not as opposed to another race, but we made it on the premise that each has his own, up to a certain height. Then, the collaboration and contact with the other races or body takes place.”

“Yeah, but that would throw some low blows to a lot of cats that might really be interested,” said Dogan.

This discussion mirrored developments taking place in the larger context of black political positions that were developing in the 1960s. A younger generation of black activists was sharply critical of what they saw as the failure of biracial coalition politics to advocate radical change. As Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton wrote in 1967, “The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: *Before a group can enter the open so-*

*ciety, it must first close ranks.* By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.”<sup>80</sup> Many of Chicago’s newer black cultural organizations were moving in a similar direction. For Carmichael and Hamilton, “The point is obvious: black people must lead and run their own organizations.”<sup>81</sup> This point was articulated in greater detail by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1966, and by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1968, when these organizations removed whites from their ranks.<sup>82</sup> Many activists also noted that black-white coalitions were frequently subject to fracture, due to unequal expectations of power between whites and blacks.

Operating in the midst of a social system that routinely invests heavily in white privilege, even the most committed organizations could be fatally compromised from without. In Will Menter’s account of the Jazz Composers Guild, Bill Dixon resented the apparent fact that after the demise of the guild, Carla Bley and Mike Mantler managed to receive the grants that the JCG had been trying for. Dixon attributed this to the fact that the JCG was known for having black leadership. “When I was trying to get money, no one had any,” Dixon observed. “The minute I left them these people gave them money to do things that they wouldn’t give me to do. It’s incredible. I can almost say that in America you don’t want a Black man showing people anything if you can avoid it. And the same thing can be advanced by a white person and it’s good—it’s valuable and should be subsidised.”<sup>83</sup>

At the same time, Dixon recalled that many black musicians, in this era of heightened black cultural nationalism, questioned the reasons for creating a multiracial, rather than an all-black organization. “People said why did you have a mixed group? But I thought even the White musicians weren’t doing that well and I thought we had more chance if we made it mixed.”<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps with this history in mind, Abrams argued that “an interracial organization has to be awfully strong, brother, because it can be torn apart. We see evidence of it in the Composer’s Guild in New York. People are trying to contribute things to the white members and withhold it from the colored members—in the same group.

“This was stated by one of the originators of the organization, if you read the account in *Down Beat* magazine,” Abrams continued, probably referring to the Robert Levin article on Bill Dixon that had been published in *Down Beat* just weeks before.<sup>85</sup> “He as much as said that he feared the organization was gonna crack because of it.

“This is not opposed to white musicians,” Abrams declared. “We know

that we clearly have economic, social and other obligations to ourselves because of our position as black musicians. We've been lacking a lot of things, and we have to bring up ourselves. We know what is going on with ourselves personally, as musicians at large, as participants in this organization, and as participants in this country, period." The remark indicated an implicit understanding of the difference between a notion of "racism" as the individualized practice of "prejudice" and the institutionalized exclusion to which they and their forebears had long been subjected. On this view, forming a black organization as a primary strategy of empowerment constituted a challenge to white-controlled economic, social, and discursive networks. At the same time, clearly present was the hope that with the eventual empowerment of black people, the need for race-specific political and economic strategies might be diminished. As Abrams explained to Dogan, "We're not fighting a racial fight. We're promoting ourselves and helping ourselves up to the point where we can participate in the universal aspect of things, which includes all people."<sup>86</sup>

Philip Cohran, perhaps as a way of fostering more careful consideration of the issue, put forth a motion that "the racial aspect of the membership" be the first order of business at the next general meeting. Cohran's attempt to table the topic was swept away by Abrams, again articulating an institutional rather than an individualist analysis. "There are good musicians on the North Side too, I mean white musicians," Abrams insisted. "It's not their fault the way these people manipulate things. The musicians don't do it. It's the people that control the thing." The rising tone of Abrams's soliloquy began to take on the tone of a revivalist preacher. To a rising chorus of murmuring assent, prior to the adjournment of the meeting, Abrams declared, "Our ticket is to get ourselves together as a body. They got the thing set up in a certain way, but they can't control us, because we have the music, and this is what they're after. Now, if that's not a good reason for organizing, I don't know what is. Don't think in terms of, 'Aw man, I ain't prejudiced,' That's not the point. We're talking about getting an alliance."

## JEAN DUBUFFET: ANTICULTURAL POSITIONS

An important change appears to be taking place in many minds within the field of art as well as so many other areas. Certain values long held to be definite and indisputable are now beginning to seem dubious if not completely false; others, formerly neglected or even despised, are now turning out to have great worth. This change is, no doubt, largely due to the knowledge we have been gaining during the past fifty years in regard to so-called primitive civilizations and their specific ways of thinking. Their art works have greatly disconcerted and engrossed the western public.

We are beginning to ask ourselves whether our Occident doesn't have something to learn from those savages. It could very well be that in various domains, their solutions and approaches, which have struck us as simplistic, are ultimately wiser than ours. It could very well be that we're the ones with simplistic attitudes. It could very well be that they rather than we are characterized by refinement, mental ability, and depth of mind.

I, personally, have a very high regard for the values of primitive peoples: instinct, passion, caprice, violence, madness. Nor do I feel that these values are in any way lacking in our western world. Quite the contrary! But the values celebrated by our culture do not strike me as corresponding to the true dynamics of our minds. Our culture is an ill-fitting coat--or at least one that no longer fits us. It's like a dead tongue that has nothing in common with the language now spoken in the street. It drifts further and further away from our daily life. It is confined to lifeless coteries, like a mandarin culture. It has no more living roots.

I aim at an art that is directly plugged in to our current life, an art that starts out from this current life, that immediately emanates from our real life and our real moods.

I would like to enumerate certain points in our culture with which I disagree.

One of the chief traits of the western mind is its habit of ascribing to humankind a nature quite different from that of all other creatures, a refusal to identify our nature with, or compare it in any way whatsoever to, such elements as the wind, a tree, a stream--except in jest or in poetic figures. Western man despises trees and streams. He hates the very thought of being like them. The "primitive" however loves and admires trees and streams. He takes great pleasure in resembling them. He believes in an actual similitude between a human being, a tree, and a stream. He has a very strong sense of the continuity binding all things, especially humanity and the rest of the world. These "primitive" societies certainly have a greater respect than western man for all the creatures on the earth. They do not see humankind as the lord of other creatures but merely as one of them.

Western man believes that his mind is capable of acquiring a perfect knowledge of things. He is convinced that the rest of the world keeps perfect step with his reasoning faculties. He strongly believes that the principles of his reason and especially those of his logic are well founded.

"Savages" feel that there is something weak about reason and logic, they rely on other ways of gaining knowledge of things.

This is why they so greatly esteem and admire those states of mind which we refer to as delirium. I must confess that I have a very keen interest in delirium. I am convinced that art has a great deal to do with delirium.

I would now like to speak about the western world's great respect for elaborated ideas. I do not regard elaborated ideas as the better part of the human function. They strike me as being a lesser degree of the mental processes, a level on which the mental mechanisms are impoverished, a kind of outer crust formed by cooling. Ideas are like steam that condenses into water upon touching the level of reason and logic.

I do not believe that the best part of mental functioning is to be found in ideas. The workings of the mind does not interest me on that level. My real aim is to capture thought at a developmental point prior to the stage of elaborated ideas.

All art, all literature, and all philosophy in the West operate on that level of elaborated ideas. My own art, my own philosophy, derive entirely from subjacent areas. I try to seize a mental motion at the greatest possible depth of its roots, where I am sure the sap is far richer.

Western culture dotes on analysis, but I have little taste for analysis, little confidence in it. People think that everything can be revealed by disassembling and dissecting all the parts and then studying each individual one.

My own impulse moves in the opposite direction. I am much more apt to treat wholes rather than parts. The moment an object is dismembered even in two, I feel that it's lost for my study, I feel further away from it rather than closer to it.

I believe very strongly that an inventory of parts does not render an account of the whole.

When I really want to view an object, I tend to look at it within the context of everything surrounding it. If I desire to know the pencil lying on my table, I focus my vision, not on the pencil but on the center of the room while trying to see as many objects as possible at once.

When I see a tree in the country, I don't transport it back to my laboratory to look at it through a microscope, because I feel that the wind blowing on the leaves is crucial to any knowledge of the tree and cannot be subtracted. The same holds for the birds in its branches, for the singing of these birds. My cast of mind is such that I always add more of what surrounds the tree and what surrounds the things that surround the tree.

I have dwelt on this point because I feel that this cast of mind is an important factor in my art.

The fifth point is the fact that our culture is based on complete trust in language (particularly written language) and on a belief in its capacity to translate and elaborate thought. Now this strikes me as a mistake. Language, I find, is a gross, extremely gross stenography, a system of highly rudimentary algebraic signs, damaging rather than serving thought. The spoken word, more concrete than writing, animated by the timbre and intonation of the voice, a bit of coughing, some grimaces, a whole range of mimicry, seems a lot more effective.

I consider written language a poor tool. As an instrument of communication, it conveys merely the carcass of a thought: what slag is to fire. And as an instrument of thought, it overloads the fluid and adulterates it.

I believe (and here I am in agreement with the so-called primitive civilizations) that painting, a medium more concrete than the written word, is a far richer instrument for communicating and elaborating thought.

I have said that what interests me about painting is not so much the moment at which it crystallizes into formal ideas as the preceding stages.

I want my painting to be seen as a tentative language fitted to these areas of thought.

I now come to my sixth and last point: I would like to talk about the western notion of beauty.

First I want to tell you how my conception differs from the usual viewpoint.

For most western people, there are objects that are beautiful and others that are ugly; there are beautiful people and ugly people, beautiful places and ugly ones.

But not for me. Beauty does not enter into the picture for me. I consider the western notion of beauty completely erroneous. I absolutely refuse to accept the idea that there are ugly people and ugly objects. Such an idea strikes me as stifling and revolting.

I think it was the Greeks who invented the notion that some objects are more beautiful than others.

The so-called savages do not believe in this at all. They do not comprehend what you mean by beauty. This is precisely the reason why we call them savages. A name reserved for anyone who fails to understand that there are beautiful things and ugly things and doesn't really worry about it either.

The odd thing is that for centuries and centuries (and today more than ever) western man has been arguing over which things are beautiful and which are ugly. No one doubts for an instant that beauty exists, but you'll never find two people who agree on which objects are beautiful. The objects differ from one century to the next. In each new century, western culture proclaims as beautiful something that was proclaimed as ugly the century before.



The rationale given for this uncertainty is that beauty, while definitely existing, is hidden from the view of many people. The discernment of beauty would require a special sense with which many people are not endowed.

People also think that this sense can be developed through exercise and even instilled in people lacking it. Schools are set up for this purpose.

The teacher in such a school tells his pupils that there is definitely beauty in things, but he instantly has to add that there is disagreement on which things are endowed with it, and that we haven't as yet managed to establish which they are. He urges his pupils to examine the question themselves, and thus from one generation to the next the whole matter remains up in the air.

And yet this notion of beauty is one of the things to which our culture attaches so much value. It is customary to regard this faith in the existence of beauty and the cult devoted to beauty as the chief justification of western society. The very principle of civilization is inseparable from this notion of beauty.

I find this idea of beauty a meager and unintelligent invention. I find it mediocrely stirring. It's distressing to think about those people who are denied beauty because their noses are crooked or because they are too fat or too old. The idea that our world is mostly made up of ugly objects and places while the beautiful objects and places are scarce and hard to find does not strike me as very exciting. I feel that if the West were to discard this idea, then good riddance! If we came to realize that any object in the world may fascinate and illuminate someone, we would be in much better shape. This idea would, I think, enrich our lives more than the Greek notion of beauty.

What will happen to art? For the Greeks, the goal of art was allegedly the invention of beautiful lines and beautiful color harmonies. If we abolish this notion, what's to become of art? Let me tell you. Art will then revert to its true function, a far more effective one than arranging shapes and colors for a supposed delight to the eyes.

The function of assembling colors in pleasing arrangements does not strike me as particularly noble. If this were all there was to painting, I wouldn't devote a single hour of my time to it.

Art addresses the mind and not the eyes. That is how it has always been regarded by "primitive" societies; and they are correct. Art is a language, an instrument of cognition and communication.

I think that our culture's enthusiasm for writing, which I mentioned earlier, has led us to view painting as a crude, rudimentary idiom good only for the illiterate. In order to allow art some kind of *raison d'être* we invented the myth of plastic beauty, which I feel is utter flimflam.

I have said and I repeat that in my opinion painting is a far richer language than the language of words. It is quite useless to seek any other *raison d'être* for art.

Painting is a far more immediate language than that of written words and at the same time it is charged with far more meaning. It operates with signs that are not abstract or incorporeal like words.

The signs in painting are much closer to the objects themselves. After that, painting manipulates subjects that are in themselves living substances. This is why it permits us to go much further than words can in approaching objects and their evocation.

Painting (and this is quite remarkable) can more or less evoke things at will, that is, with more or less presence. At any degree between being and non-being.

Finally, painting can evoke things not in isolation but linked with everything surrounding them: a huge quantity of things simultaneously.

Furthermore, painting is a much more spontaneous and much more direct language than words: much closer to a shriek or to dancing. This is why painting is a means of expression for our inner voices and far more effective than words.

It lends itself, as I have said, much better than words to translating thought in its different stages, including the lowest levels (those on which thought is close to its birth), the underground levels of mental spurts.

Painting has a twofold advantage over language. First of all, it evokes objects more forcefully, it gets closer to them. Secondly, it opens wider gates to the inner dancing of the painter's mind. These two properties make painting a marvelous instrument for provoking thought--or, if you like, clairvoyance. And also a marvelous instrument for exteriorizing this clairvoyance and permitting us to share it with the painter.

By utilizing these two powerful means, painting can illumine the world with magnificent discoveries. It can imbue man with new myths and new mystiques, to reveal the infinitely numerous undivined aspects of things and values of which we were formerly unaware.

This, I think, is a much more engrossing task for artists than assemblages of shapes and colors to please the eyes.



Franklin and Penelope Rosemont  
Chicago, summer 1966

## TO BE REVOLUTIONARY IN EVERYTHING: THE *REBEL WORKER* STORY, 1964–68

Teenagers the world over are all walking firecrackers,  
and everybody's scared of 'em.  
Nobody knows why they're acting this way.

—Ed Lacy, *Harlem Underground* (1965)—

**T**HE *REBEL WORKER* WAS A MIMEOGRAPHED magazine published in Chicago in the mid-1960s by a group of recalcitrant workingclass youths who regarded themselves as far to the left of the far left. I was one of them. In fact, largely because I was a fast two-fingered typist and nobody else wanted the job, I was the editor.

Our aims were simple: We wanted to abolish wage-slavery and to smash the State—that is, to make a total revolution, and to have lots of fun—really *live it up*—in a new and truly free society. Early in the game one of our many detractors sneeringly called us “the left wing of the Beat Generation.” The tag caught on quickly in the local activist community, and we ourselves never bothered to disown or dispute it, for it clearly distinguished us from the squares who owned and operated the business-as-usual left. Ironically, by that time we no longer really identified much with the increasingly irrelevant Beat scene. For our part, we preferred to call ourselves anarchists, or surrealists—or Wobblies, for we had all taken out red cards in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Most of us were under twenty-one, but we had been active radicals for years, some since our early teens. Veterans all of the 1950s Beat ferment, as well as of the civil rights and peace movements, a few of us had also taken part in one or another socialist group. Our experiences in these movements and groups were very different, but all of us had come to recognize the futility of reformism and knew that nothing less than social revolution could make life truly livable. For many of us, the experience of *poetry*, more than anything else—poetry as the exaltation of freedom and the marvelous—hastened this evolution.

By 1964 we were convinced of the inadequacy of the many single-issue protest groups as well as the would-be “revolutionary” parties. The revolution *we* dreamed about went deeper than any and all “politics.” Already criticized as “ultraleft,” we grew more and more radical. We were sickened by the dull routine and lack of imagination of what we called the “traditional left.” One and all we yearned for

Something Else (the title of Ornette Coleman's first album). Tired of "senile dogmas . . . irrelevant concepts and old platitudes," we soon concluded that "the revolutionary movement, in theory and practice," had to be "rebuilt from scratch."

It was in that daredevil, all-or-nothing spirit that we started *The Rebel Worker*, and in the same spirit that we sustained our "wild-eyed journal of free revolutionary research and experiment"—along with an equally *outré* pamphlet series—for a frantic and fruitful four and a half years. As had happened before and surely will happen again, it was left to a bunch of naive and irresponsible adolescents, mad at the world but avid for life, to sound a new note—whole riffs of new notes—in American radicalism.

In this introduction I aim to tell the story of *The Rebel Worker*—the magazine, the group around it, our ideas, activities, and interaction with other groups, our successes and failures, our eventual dissolution as a group, and our overall impact. The opening sections—on *The Rebel Worker's* 1950s and early '60s background—may seem a bit heavy on autobiography, but these preliminaries are intended only as one participant's account of where we came from and how we reached our collective point of departure. The experiences of others in the group no doubt differed from mine in many ways, but the similarities are probably just as great or greater. In any event, by the spring of 1964 we had all reached the same basic conclusions on what kind of world we wanted to live in, what needed to be done to make it a reality, and where to begin.

Readers who persist all the way to the end will even find some reflections on the whole adventure, and on its possible meaning(s) for today and tomorrow.

#### HOW TEEN-AGE BEATNIKS BECAME REVOLUTIONARIES

*The Rebel Worker* was a homebrew—a special blend of catch-as-catch-can ingredients. It was about as far as you could get from those carefully planned and promptly forgotten journals issued by sects that pretend to have all the answers. The inspirations we drew on were many and diverse, and—like life itself—had their share of contradictions. Preceding them all was the so-called Beat Generation, an experience each of us had passed through as teenagers, and which gave us an initial frame of reference—a *revaluation of values*, no less—that helped us along as we each in turn grappled with the question: *Who am I?*

It is easy, today, to deride the ambiguity and incoherence of Beat "philosophy," but for many young people who were drowning in the

humdrum horror of American life in the 1950s it was a life-saver that enabled us to make our way to new and unknown shores. It is impossible to grasp the liberating quality of the Beat message without understanding just how devastatingly empty life was for the generation that grew up in the wake of Hiroshima, Taft-Hartley, McCarthyism and Cold War.

Before the academics redefined it for their own confusionist purposes, everyone knew that the term Beat Generation signified a broad radical social/cultural movement involving thousands of young people all over the country and indeed, all over the world. Only much later were the professors able to reduce it to a mere literary current (and even a *respectable* literary current!) with an exclusive membership numbering—depending on which "expert" you consult—as few as three or four (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and sometimes Corso) or, according to Ann Charters, as many as sixty-six. Just as laughably, the academics also restricted the Beat Generation to two cities: New York and San Francisco.

Those seeking a truer picture of the breadth and scope of the Beat ferment would do well to go back to the articles and books written in the mid- and late 1950s and early 60s by observers who actually "made the scene." Lawrence Lipton, for example, whose 1959 study *The Holy Barbarians* was the first and remains among the best, focused on the thriving Beat community in Venice, California, and noted the existence of Beat activity in New Orleans, Chicago, Seattle and elsewhere.

In 1959, however, even the most astute onlookers were probably unaware that America's "beatnik problem" had reached such proportions that nearly every high school and juvenile home in the United States had beatniks of its own, labeled such by worried school authorities as well as the obedient majority of student slaves. Out of 5000 students at Proviso East High School in the Chicago workingclass suburb of Maywood, there were about a dozen of us.

I first encountered the Beat Generation in a dentist's office in late 1958. Looking through a copy of *Esquire* I chanced on a piece titled "Where Is the Beat Generation Going?" It was a tiresome litany of defamations by Norman Podhoretz, but what grabbed me, and changed my life forever, were the fragments of a message of revolt that broke out between the lines. As with many other rebel movements, the Beat Generation's enemies proved to be its most effective recruiters. Hostile sermons like the one in *Esquire* turned us on to the amazing and heartening fact that, somewhere out there in America, there were others like us, dreaming our dreams and living life as we wanted to live it, "to the hilt."

Right there and then, at the dentist's, I resolved to quit high school and take to the road. I didn't really know where the Beat Generation was going but I knew I wanted to go there with it. The next day I took the bus downtown to Chicago and picked up Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. In a few weeks I read all of his books and got my friends to read them.

Some months earlier a small group of us at Proviso High had started a little magazine which, in the spirit of Diogenes—bitterly pessimistic about everything we were being taught—we named *The Lantern*. We mimeographed it on a hand-operated cast-iron antique machine—a “Rotary Neostyle”—that I bought for five dollars at Anderson's Typewriter Shop on Seventeenth Avenue in Maywood. In this paper we attacked every school rule and sparked as many controversies as we could.

With its second issue (April 1959) *The Lantern* became the voice of Proviso's growing interracial Beat community and started publishing Beat poetry. Page one of the fourth issue (June) featured, as a kind of two-line manifesto, Kerouac's warning: “Woe unto those who spit on the Beat Generation, the wind'll blow it back.”

Most of what appeared in *The Lantern* was juvenile stuff, but it created a sensation among the students and faculty, and outright schoolwide scandal when the third issue (May) devoted a page to the horrors of atomic war and announced the formation of a school club to promote the abolition of nuclear bomb testing.

As the editor of this “nuisance,” which is what the Dean of Students called it, I was frequently called into the Dean's and Principal's offices and threatened with expulsion. The “*Lantern* crowd” thus became the best-known kids in the school. More than one teacher singled me out for special ridicule as a “dangerous young man.” A zealous right-wing gym teacher pulled me out of an outdoor gym class and shoved me to the front of his class. Pointing to me as I stood before this amazed assembly, he shrieked that anyone caught possessing the paper put out by “this Communist” (that was me, of course), or even seen talking to me, would be given a failing grade in “physical education,” which meant not graduating at all, for in those gloomy times Illinois law bizarrely denied high-school diplomas to anyone lacking four years of such bullying.

All efforts to suppress *The Lantern* backfired. Some kids admitted that they were afraid to be seen with us at school, but wrote to me at home, and my school locker was always full of friendly notes. Every issue brought new contributors. Opinion polls of the “roving reporter” type, with brief responses to questions regarding school

controversies (“Was the administration justified in sending home students wearing ‘beatnik’ clothes?”) expanded student participation even more.

The attempts to redbait us also fell flat. I doubt whether they had any effect at all except to stimulate circulation of *The Lantern* and to interest a lot of students in subversive ideas. Before I was formally denounced as a Communist in gym class I had not read a single book on the subject and was probably even more ignorant of Marxism than my teachers were. One day a friend and I visited the office of the Chicago Committee for Soviet-American Friendship and brought back a stack of free literature which we distributed all over school just to antagonize the school authorities. The Russian propaganda was boring and repulsive, but we soon learned that there were other currents of socialism. In no time I was reading such books as Otto Ruhle's *Karl Marx: His Life and Work* and Paul Lafargue's *Evolution of Property*, which had been on our bookshelves at home for years (gifts to my father from fellow union printers).

In my third and last year of high school, the “*Lantern* crowd” expanded considerably as the paper became the recognized vehicle of the whole range of Proviso's “misfits,” as some hostile administrators and faculty called us—a title we bore with honor, and used ourselves. (“Don't forget the misfits' meeting at 3:45.”) We also grew steadily more radical.

Notwithstanding the fact that before my second year of high school my conception of Marxism was closer to the Cold War stereotype of *I Led Three Lives* than to the *Communist Manifesto*, my interest in revolutionary ideas could probably be traced back to fourth or fifth grade, when I learned about John Brown, one of the few figures in U.S. history who actually seemed interesting. By eighth grade I was following the progress of the Cuban 26<sup>th</sup> of July movement in the pages of the *Sun-Times* (my father was head proofreader there, and brought the paper home daily) and the Sunday *New York Times*, to which my parents subscribed. Toward the end of my first year of high school, several of Proviso's “26 de Julio” supporters, myself included, made vague plans to go to Cuba to join the revolutionary struggle. Alas, none of us knew Spanish, and we couldn't think of any way that teenage Anglos could find their way to the guerrillas. I can still recall our great rejoicing when news came of the Revolution on New Year's Day 1959. One of the longest pieces *The Lantern* ever published was an enthusiastic review of *Sun-Times* reporter Ray Brennan's 1959 book, *Castro, Cuba and Justice*.

All of us in *The Lantern* group were also excited by the Freedom

Rides and other actions of the 1960s civil rights movement. Since early childhood my parents had told me of the evils of race discrimination; both had been outspoken advocates of integration in the labor movement, my father as a member of Chicago Typographical Union No. 16, and my mother as a member of Musicians' Local 10. I had black friends—Negro was the word then—since the integration of Washington Irving School in Maywood during my sixth-grade year. Only with my discovery of the Beat poets, however, did I begin to appreciate the vitality and richness of African-American culture, and particularly jazz.

At Proviso, neither *The Lantern* group nor the anti-nuclear-weapons group were "recognized" student groups, and hence were not permitted to meet on school property. So we started our own "front group": The Proviso High School Jazz Club. In that heyday of rock'n'roll, *The Lantern* crowd—high-school hipsters—were in fact all militant jazz enthusiasts. I had grown up hearing jazz, thanks to my mother, but only in my second year of high school did I discover the new and wilder sounds. For me, at fifteen, listening to the marvelous music of Thelonious Monk for the first time was a breakthrough experience of unprecedented magnitude. Even today there's no music I listen to more than Monk's.

One morning, almost all the black kids at Proviso stayed outside when the bell rang. A couple hundred or more gathered in front of a student hangout across the street, on First Avenue. Most of them arrived in class about a half hour late; a few stayed outside even longer. The unmistakable *protest* character of this impressive "silent strike" was loud and clear, although I suspect that very few white kids, and probably none of the faculty or administration, had any idea of what was up. During this protest, non-black *Lantern* supporters throughout the school showed their solidarity by creating various classroom diversions.

Few of our "actions," however, were so charged with politics. Most were just pranks. One day a bunch of us brought alarm-clocks to school and set them to go off in our hall lockers. When the alarms sounded during the day, restrained titters grew into loud giggles as outraged teachers tried to figure out what was going on. Silly? Of course! We were *bored* silly. That's what high school is all about.

#### POETRY: THE GREATEST FORCE ON EARTH

Poetry was a crucial part of our rebellion from the start, and grew more and more important as we began to regard ourselves as out-and-out revolutionaries. The first book I ever bought was *The Complete*

*Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, and it meant a lot to me as a tormented eighth-grader. A few months later, on my first day of high school, I showed up in U.S. history class with a copy of Perry Miller's paperback anthology, *The American Transcendentalists*. To my astonishment, the girl seated next to me asked: "Are you a Transcendentalist? I am!"—and it turned out that she too had brought a copy of the same book—which was *not*, by the way, on our assigned or even "recommended" list. Funny as it may seem, the elder William Ellery Channing, Thoreau, Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Theodore Parker were major fomentors of the high-school rebellion that called itself *The Lantern*, and therefore ancestors of *The Rebel Worker* as well.

It was the Beats, however, who gave us—my high-school friends and me—our first glimmer of poetry as a living, breathing, here-and-now activity. Serious students of the work of Kerouac and his comrades—Gregory Corso, Bob Kaufman, Diane di Prima, Gary Snyder and others—we went on to read the work of authors they admired: Rimbaud, for example, and Baudelaire, and D. T. Suzuki's writings on Zen. Such reading was actively discouraged by our so-called teachers, but we couldn't have cared less. How excited I was when Okakura Kakuzo's *Book of Tea* (cited in *The Dharma Bums*) arrived in the mail! For months afterward several of us would get together at odd moments and sit around a circle in the full-lotus position in our own version of the tea ceremony. The spirit of the thing was surely closer to the Marx Brothers than to Buddhism, but that didn't bother us. Breaking out of the repressive machinery of suburbia wasn't easy, and we tried to make use of anything that came our way.

One afternoon in Miss Wolf's insufferable history class, I was doing my best to ignore her lecture by reading bits of *The Reader's Companion to World Literature* when I came to the page on Surrealism and was thunderstruck by the proverb "Elephants are contagious." A measureless new world of imaginative possibilities suddenly opened for me, and all manner of things I cherished—the poetry of Poe and Blake and Han-shan; the music of Thelonious Monk; Dixie Willson's stories that I loved as a child; my all-time favorite Bugs Bunny comic (*The Magic Sneeze*, 1952); the idea of Revolution—all seemed to fit into place in a way they never had before. My first experiences with automatic writing soon followed, and I began to read everything I could find having to do with surrealism, starting with André Breton's *Nadja* (his only book in English in those days), Gérard de Nerval's *Aurelia*, and Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*.

As I explained to friends at the time, I dropped out of high school because it interfered with my education. Never had I studied so hard

and read so much as I did during the last few months of my Junior year and the summer vacation that followed. But it was all "extracurricular" study, to say the least. I began going (eventually almost daily) to the library of the Art Institute and often spent most of the day there reading, rereading and copying things out of the books they had on surrealism in English. I spent whole days, too, looking through *La Révolution surréaliste*, *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* and *Minotaure*.

I was surprised to learn how much of what had attracted me to the Beat writers had been anticipated by the surrealists and their precursors, where its expression tended to be much more powerful. Especially important for me were the poems of fifteen-year-old Philip Lamantia in the fourth issue of the journal *VVV*, which the European surrealists in exile published in New York during World War II. Lamantia's lightning-flash imagery, along with his extraordinary accompanying letter to André Breton, dated October 1943—the month and year of my birth—were decisive steps on my path to surrealism and revolution.

Many years passed before I came across Saint-Pol-Roux's maxim, "Poetry is the greatest force on Earth," but I had *known* it, and *lived* it—as if by instinct—since I was fifteen.

#### NORTH BEACH 1960: ANARCHY IN ACTION

After discovering the Beat Generation, Thelonious Monk, Free Jazz, surrealism, and revolutionary politics at the age of fifteen, I realized there was no turning back. Naturally I dropped out of high school and went on the road. In the next few years I hitchhiked some 20,000 miles from coast to coast: to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, New York and Mexico.

On the first of these adventures, I lived for several weeks in San Francisco's North Beach. Those who had arrived there a year or two earlier assured me that the "scene" in 1960 was in an advanced state of disintegration. For me, however, and for others my age who had made their way there from points all over the map, North Beach was so much livelier than anything we had known before that we found it hard to imagine how it could have been better.

The neighborhood was hit hard by the massive publicity the Beat Generation was receiving—almost all of it hostile, some apoplectically so, like Alfred Zugsmith's ugly movie, *The Beat Generation*, which fostered the ludicrous misapprehension that the Beats were dangerous criminals. Ironically, this disinformation campaign brought square tourists by the thousands, especially on weekends, as well as "hippies," a term then used by Beats to designate the uncreative camp-

followers who parasitically attached themselves to the Beat scene. Even worse, anti-Beat propaganda gave the police a pretext to escalate their war on all nonconformists. Police persecution, much of it aimed at interracial couples or groups, was an everyday fact of life in North Beach. I spent a large part of every day at two of the main Beat hangouts of those days: the Co-Existence Bagel Shop, a bar/deli at the corner of Grant Avenue and Green Street, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore a few blocks away, where I was able to relax in an armchair and read hundreds of poems as well as every book they had on surrealism and Zen.

My San Francisco sojourn retains a special luster in my memory as one of those rare experiences that are truly worthy of one's childhood dreams. My first sight of the Giant Redwoods, a couple of days climbing in the Sierras, hearing Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane live for the first time: How can one measure the impact of such privileged moments?

Intersecting with all the rest was a strong ancestral dimension, for my father's family were San Francisco pioneers, and I had grown up hearing stories not only about the city and its peculiar ways, but also about my grandparents, aunts, and uncles: true "characters" one and all. As I explored the city on foot, the very street-names echoed from my childhood. In 1960 my Aunt Helen still operated the old family printing office, Rosemont Press, at 21 Rosemont Place in the Mission District. In some ways San Francisco was more like home than home.

It was a season of lucky breaks; small incidents had a way of adding up to something grand. With two friends—bass-player John R. White and a black street-philosopher from New York, known only as Ike—I went to Monterrey for the Jazz Festival. By mid-afternoon half the population of North Beach was there. John, Ike and I took seats before the tickets went on sale, so we enjoyed the whole program for free. (None of us had the price of admission in any case.) The music that night had all the magic of dreams; I hear its golden echoes to this day. It was there that I first heard Ornette Coleman live. After listening to his rip-roaring oracular sounds we wandered off in the darkness dizzy with joy.

Brightest of all in my memory of that period is the unparalleled experience of community it provided. Life in North Beach was the closest thing to marvelous anarchy it has ever been my pleasure to enjoy. Despite battles with landlords, harassment by tourists, and mounting police terror, the Beats and their allies—old-time hoboes, jazz musicians, oyster pirates, prostitutes, drug-addicts, winos, homosexuals, bums and other outcasts—maintained a vital community based on

mutual aid, and in which *being different* was an asset rather than a liability. In this community, made up of people of many races and nationalities, the practice of equality and solidarity was second nature. Almost everyone was poor, but no one went hungry, and newcomers had no trouble finding places to stay. In North Beach, 1960, what mattered most was poetry, freedom, creativity, and having a good time.

One of my Bagel Shop friends was a young woman who had taken part in the big anti-HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) protest earlier that year. Now she wanted to go to Cuba "to see what a Revolution looks like."

Police harassment finally shut down the Co-Existence Bagel Shop. The whole community turned out on its last day. Standing-room-only inside, hundreds more gathered out front on the walk and in the street. Many were grizzled old folks who had hung out there for years, but youngsters—my friends and I—were a sizeable and vocal contingent. Widely regarded as a symbolic event marking the end of an era, this was probably the biggest Beat protest demonstration of all time. A poet friend named Chris wrote an ode about it, mournful yet defiant. He hoped to publish it in a rumored forthcoming issue of the local mag, *Beatitude*, to which I too was urged to contribute some poems; as it happened, however, I soon left the Bay Area and never saw another issue.

I returned to Chicago flat broke, but highly charged, and eager to do things. But what to do, exactly? And with whom?

#### CHICAGO BEATS & MAYWOOD RHAPSODISTS

Chicago did not have a Beat "scene" the way San Francisco or Los Angeles or New York did. Nonconformists were far from invisible in the Windy City, but they were scattered far and wide. Among them were numerous individuals who everyone called Beatniks, but there was no Beat "center": no neighborhood comparable to North Beach or Venice or the Village; few hangouts (what passed for "hip" bars in those days were mostly folk-music clubs), and—until *The Rebel Worker*—no periodical that free spirits could gather 'round. In 1959–60 a rather square Catholic college professor named Paul Carroll had edited and published five issues of *Big Table*, which featured "big name" Beat writers, but the journal never became a rallying-point for local poets and rebels: the only Chicago writer to appear in its pages was Carroll himself.

Meanwhile, out in Maywood, several veterans of the "*Lantern crowd*" and a few late arrivals started kicking up a little storm of our own. Militant poets and pranksters all, and not one over seventeen,

we boldly declared ourselves "The Rhapsodist Movement"—probably Maywood's only collective contribution to the last century's long succession of "avant-gardes." I mention it here not only because it prefigured some of the spirit of *The Rebel Worker*, but also and especially because Rhapsodism was a ferment we ourselves—kids of high-school age—dreamed up and put into action.

The expression of poetic exuberance deliberately carried to excess—in writing, speaking, drawing, and above all in living—particularly by means of deliriously extravagant imagery, was not only Rhapsodism's motivating principle but virtually the whole Rhapsodist program. We took the name from Emerson: "The poet must be a rhapsodist."

This is not the place to chronicle the turbulent, shadowy history of Rhapsodism. Few avant-garde movements enjoyed so brief yet so intense a life, and I doubt whether any literary or artistic current before or since produced less than we did in the way of "works." Rhapsodism was in fact less a poetic movement, in the usual sense of that term, than a way of applying poetry to daily life. Recognizing that certain rare moments in our lives radiate wonder, excitement, curiosity, and pleasure, we maintained that the central aim of poetry was to multiply those moments of perturbation and thus to create the conditions for a new (poetic) way of life for all. We saw ourselves, collectively, as the *spurs*—so to speak—of such moments, and just about all that we did together as Rhapsodists was, in fact, strictly spur-of-the-moment.

Our public manifestations were rigorously unpublicized, enjoyed no official sanction, and tended to be clandestine and even against the law. At a Rhapsodist poetry reading at Prince Castle (a burger joint on Roosevelt Road), we asked no permission, and when the Manager angrily inquired of the astonished crowd, "What the hell is going on here?" we simply said, "We're just leaving," read a few more lines, and left.

Another Rhapsodist event took place around midnight on the steps of a large abandoned tomb in Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park, less than half a block from the Haymarket martyrs' monument. Those attending had to climb over a high fence in violation of "No Trespassing" signs. Wine flowed freely as we bellowed poems to each other in the moonlit darkness. Despite the hour, bursts of loud laughter and other noise—not to mention the fact that in no time at all we were unquestionably drunk and disorderly—the police, oddly enough, stayed away.

Such fleeting and occult demonstrations did not enjoy a wide resonance. And yet Rhapsodism had ways of making its subversive presence felt. One week several of us, armed with crayons, pencils and ball-point pens, wrote "Elephants Are Contagious" on scores, probably hundreds of walls, fences, and other surfaces all over Maywood.



Half the village's 27,500 population must have seen this message at one point or another. Several years later, long after I had moved to the City, the words were still plainly visible in the Seventeenth Avenue station of the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railway. In ways impossible for us to know, difficult even to guess, this provocative proverb impinged itself on the consciousness of many a mystified passerby.

#### BEATNIKS & BOOKSTORES

Despite problems of geographical separation and lack of common activity, most of Chicago's Beats and other "disaffiliates" knew each other, and we maintained a loose communications network, largely through the bookstores where, as it happened, many of us had part-time jobs. From time to time I enjoyed talking with playwright Dennis Jasudowicz, when he clerked at Kroch's and Brentano's big store on Wabash, in the basement paperback department. The first and for many years the only Chicagoan to have a book published by City Lights (*Flea Street: Five Plays*, 1965), Jasudowicz wrote short, frenzied, incredibly comical anti-Establishment plays. It was thanks to him that Kroch's carried the complete line of City Lights books and many other small Beat imprints. One day at Kroch's I ran into a San Francisco friend, Shig Murao of City Lights. A few years later *Rebel Worker* contributors Bernard Marszalek and Lester Doré also worked at Kroch's.

Brilliant, soft-spoken Robert Fitzgerald, a University of Chicago philosophy student and Beat "Dandy" in the Lord Buckley tradition, worked a few blocks south of Kroch's at the Summit Bookstore, which specialized in the literature of psychoanalysis and the "avant-garde." Maury's Bookstore, next door to Slim Brundage's College of Complexes on State Street, was more explicitly Beat, as were The Medici Bookstore on 57<sup>th</sup> Street in Hyde Park, and Bill Smith's Sedgwick store under the El.

My own erratic work-life almost entirely centered around bookstores: Solidarity Bookshop, Roosevelt University Bookstore, and finally, Barbara Siegel's store on Wells Street, which was modeled on City Lights and for several years in the late 1960s/early 70s had the largest selection of Beat, surrealist, and revolutionary literature in the city. *Heatwave* contributor Paul Garon worked there, too.

I've never heard it mentioned, but it's an interesting fact: In 1960s Chicago, the best bookstores fell into the hands of the Beat Generation.

Those Beats who, for whatever reason, were *not* involved in book-selling, nonetheless made the rounds of the bookstores and did much to keep us in touch. One messenger of the local underground was Eddie Balchowsky—Spanish Civil War veteran, one-armed pianist

and abstract painter—who later lived for a time at the Gallery Bugs Bunny. Milton Monson, a veteran of *The Lantern*, peripheral Rhapsodist, practicing Buddhist and future Wob, was another indefatigable street-wanderer for whom bookstores were oases to relax in for a few hours on endless treks across the Chicago desert. And so was the poet/boxer Art Livingston.

The key agent of liaison, however, not only for the city's relatively small Beat and half-Beat population but for all of greater Chicagoland's rebels and radicals, was the one-man revolution known as Joffre Stewart. Constantly strolling from one end of the city to the other, Stewart always made the scene with two shopping bags full of anarchist, pacifist, IWW and other controversial newspapers and tracts, plus samples of his own literary and anti-political offerings. Alone and with no car, he distributed more subversive printed matter than any other five hundred people.

Stewart early on embodied the new rebel spirit that came to be known as Beat. In his teens he was close to the Workers' Party—or at least to C. L. R. James's faction—but he soon found his way to an unequivocally pacifist anarchism, and stuck with it. In his anti-segregationist activities, starting in the late 1940s on, he pioneered the tactics of nonviolent direct action later popularized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

Chicago's most notable participant in the Beat Generation in its late-'50s heyday, Stewart traveled to the West Coast mid-decade. In San Francisco he met Allen Ginsberg, who mentioned him, though not by name, in *Howl* (the long line beginning "who reappeared on the West Coast" and ending with "incomprehensible leaflets"), and in Venice, Lawrence Lipton included his replies to a Peacemakers' questionnaire in his *Holy Barbarians*. In Chicago, during the 1960 Presidential election campaign, he was the Beatnik Party's "anti-candidate" for anti-Vice-President, the running-mate of Bill Smith, a longtime associate of Slim Brundage at the College of Complexes. This anarchistic anti-campaign, typically ignored by the many historians of the Beat movement, was a scathing satire of Establishment politics and an assertion of the rising new radicalism's sweeping rejection of the entire military-industrial-political swindle. Widely covered in the media, the Beatnik Party served notice to a broad public that the social scene was changing fast.

Like the Transcendentalists and "Come-Outers" of the 1840s and '50s, we—dropouts of the next mid-century—were saying no to the whole despicable system: school, jobs, elections, government,

organized religion, sexual repression, "official" culture, consumerism, and authority in all its forms.

### THE ANTI-POETRY CLUB: PROTESTING EVERYTHING

Unlike the upper- and middle-class New Left, which was just gaining a toehold on some of the more well-to-do U.S. campuses, the *Rebel Worker* group was made up entirely of young wage-earners. Notwithstanding the fact that revolutionary theory was one of our major passions, we started out and remained emphatically anti-academic. Curiously, however, we originally came together as students.

Chicago's Roosevelt University in those years was not typical of American academia. Housed in an elegant building designed by Louis Sullivan, it was and is a downtown commuter school with no campus (and only a few dormitories). Its students were overwhelmingly of proletarian background. Our generation (born in the 1940s/50s) was the first in which large numbers of workingclass parents could afford to send their kids to college.

Started in 1945 by dissident faculty from the local YMCA College who had unsuccessfully tried to overturn the latter's race-discrimination policies, Roosevelt in the 1960s still had a well-deserved reputation not only as the university of choice for young subterraneans from all over the Midwest, but also as a hotbed of social radicalism of all kinds. Detractors and admirers alike often called it "The Little Red Schoolhouse." An impressive number of its faculty and students were in fact outspoken leftists. The student population included what racists called a "disproportionate" number of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as of foreign students, mostly from "Third World" countries.

Because of its workingclass and minority student population, Roosevelt was a fertile recruiting ground for radicals of every description. Several top organizers of the Young Socialist Alliance—full-time students at such high-priced schools as Northwestern and the University of Chicago—enrolled in one class at Roosevelt just so they could "hang out" in the cafeteria and "win people over" to their version of Trotskyism.

The YSA (youth group of the Socialist Workers Party) always had an animated table of its own in the cafeteria, as did their chief competitors, the Young People's Socialist League (youth group of the Socialist Party). A small group largely concerned with Cuba, an even smaller group of Maoists, and other groups with highly specialized ideologies had tables, too. Each had its own "milieu" of listeners and hangers-on, but a lot of intermingling took place. Roosevelt's Communist Party-oriented students also had a table, but since they were mostly

involved in promoting Democratic Party politicians, those who regarded themselves as revolutionaries usually preferred to go elsewhere.

The Black Nationalists (a.k.a. the Negro History Club) had the liveliest discussions of all, and many of us soon-to-be-Wobblies enjoyed listening in. Indeed, with the exception of the classes taught by anthropologist St. Clair Drake, my best "classes" at Roosevelt were between and after class, in the free-for-all discussions and debates with other radicals in the student cafeteria.

Every day we argued about the Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and African revolutions; problems of the "Third World;" U.S. trade union strategy; race, class and culture; the "Labor Party" slogan, and many infinitely more esoteric issues.

In these discussions, and in the mass actions of those days—for we all took part in civil-rights and peace demonstrations—those of us who evolved into the *Rebel Worker* group developed our own perspectives. Two years before the first *Rebel Worker* appeared we already recognized ourselves as "extremists" or—in the term employed in those days by some of our Very Serious critics—"left-wing adventurers." We disdained what we called the "traditional left" as little more than a "loyal opposition" of the old order. We saw ourselves as the radical *negation* of that order in its entirety, left-wing and all. We rejected, as if by instinct, the stifling ideological compartmentalizations which seemed to us to typify the overall bureaucratic sterility of so many leftist orthodoxies. Their indifference to "culture," for example—except as the direct expression of a "political line"—convinced us that their vision went no further than a "planned economy." What excited us, on the contrary, were the limitless possibilities of the free imagination in conditions of playful anarchy.

It did not take long for us revolutionary outsiders to establish a cafeteria table of our own. Characteristically, the first collective manifestations of what later became the *Rebel Worker* group took place under a banner that at first sight might appear to have nothing at all to do with politics. We called it the Anti-Poetry Club, and its sole aim was to ridicule the school's bourgeois Poetry Club. None of us was against poetry—several of us, indeed, were practicing poets—but the faculty-approved Poetry Club exemplified, in our view, everything that real poetry was not.

Because of a silly rule forbidding first-semester or below-B-average students from serving as club officers, our friend John Bracey of the Negro History Club graciously agreed to be the Anti-Poetry Club's Acting Officer. Active members of the Club included Lawrence DeCoster, Tor Faegre, Robert Green, and a quiet but supportive

fellow named Scott Spencer, who went on to become a well-known novelist (*Endless Love*, *Men in Black*). I opened the first meeting by climbing onto the teacher's desk and, without introductory remarks, reading aloud—at the top of my lungs—an automatic text I had just written in the cafeteria. Others followed suit, and in no time several people were speaking or singing and/or laughing all at once. Joyful chaos prevailed. Aside from a few offended curiosity-seekers, including a spy or two from the Poetry Club, who quickly fled—perhaps in terror—a good time was had by all.

More like an indoor street gang than a student group, the Anti-Poetry Club had two main activities: goofing off and protesting everything. Several of the faculty and more than a few students called us “hooligans” and, truth to tell, unruliness was our only rule. When one of Chicago's dailies sarcastically noted the Anti-Poetry Club's existence—as a particularly hideous example of Roosevelt's Communist-Beatnikism—the great writer Nelson Algren telephoned Elaine Trojan, the Student Activities Director, and told her that the formation of the Club was the best news he had heard in Chicago in years. Algren also invited Robert Green, one of the Club's nominal “officers,” out for an evening at Second City.

In some respects the Anti-Poetry Club could be considered the last bow of Maywood Rhapsodism, but it was also the nucleus from which the *Rebel Worker* group soon emerged. The Club was a souped-up Chicago-style mix of surrealism, Bugs Bunny, the Marx Brothers, Ernie Kovacs, Stan Freberg, and Bob Kaufman's Abomunism, but so heavily spiced with our own humor and revolt that it had a distinctive “flavor” all its own.

Friends and enemies alike had to acknowledge the Anti-Poetry Club's creative/destructive energy—its uncanny ability to draw attention away from allegedly More Serious matters. Dean Hoover, as quoted in the *Chicago Tribune*, went so far as to affirm that the Club was “more active than the Socialist organizations” for which Roosevelt was already infamous (Editorial, *Roosevelt Torch*, May 25, 1964).

After a few meetings, however, it was clear that the Club had nowhere to go—that every meeting would be the same, that the Anti-Poetry Club was getting to be as boring as the Poetry Club. Those of us who went on to start *The Rebel Worker* wanted not only to ridicule the existing order but also to *change* it. Several of us circulated a statement dissociating ourselves from those who had turned the Club into a repetitious farce devoid of even the slightest subversive quality.

By that time, most of the leading figures of the original Anti-Poetry Club now carried red cards in the Industrial Workers of the

World. Still in our teens, we were confident that we could organize One Big Union, overturn capitalism and still be young enough to enjoy a long and exciting life in our newfound freedom. We began calling each other Fellow Worker, the traditional IWW form of address.

And so it came to pass that a new group held its first meeting: the Roosevelt University Wobblies.

#### BUILDING A NEW IWW IN THE SHELL OF THE OLD

Why did we join the IWW? Each of us no doubt had reasons of his or her own, but we all agreed that the IWW had very special qualities that other radical groups seemed to lack.

As one of us (was it Simone Collier?) pointed out a bit later: “The IWW is the only group that is *not* boring!” Wobbly history, for example—its incredible strikes and free-speech fights, its thousand-mile picketlines and direct action and sabotage, its wild humor, cartoons and songs—has no parallel. As a 100% *workers'* organization, moreover, the IWW always put freedom and solidarity first.

In glaring contrast, the left groups we ran into—the many varieties of social-democratic, Stalinist, Trotskyist, and Maoist organizations, as well as others that appeared to be floundering somewhere in-between one or more of these ideologies—were repulsively middle-class, authoritarian, dogmatic, narrow-minded, sectarian, humorless, and utterly incapable of even the smallest original idea. Most of them were hung up on electoral politics, and spent an inordinate amount of time denouncing sects even smaller than their own. Even those that went in for “violent” rhetoric (such as Progressive Labor), were hopelessly reformist.

We recognized the IWW as “Joe Hill's union” and the direct heir of 1880s “Chicago Idea” anarchism—a fundamentally anti-authoritarian group that left open lots of room for individual and small-group improvisation; the only group in which we could develop our wide-ranging inclinations: to rethink revolutionary theory, to explore the subversive possibilities of popular culture, and above all to pursue our passion for *poetic action*: that is, for *life as adventure*. We knew that IWW perspectives had a place for all these, and that no other group would even tolerate them.

I joined the IWW on September 19, 1962, at the union's international headquarters on the second floor at 2422 North Halsted Street. General Secretary-Treasurer Walter H. Westman (who had lined up in the IWW in 1916) handed me red card No. X322339 and welcomed me into the ranks. I was thrilled—all the more because it was not easy to join the union in those days. Fellow Worker Westman felt obliged to warn all applicants that the union was on the U.S.

Attorney General's list of "subversive organizations," and that IWW members were automatically disqualified for Federal government jobs of any kind. He would say: "Think it over, and if you still want to join, come back in a few months and we'll see what we can do." It took me several visits before I convinced him that I had thought the matter over carefully, agreed wholeheartedly with the IWW program, and really wanted to join.

I have often wondered how many prospective Wobs, less tenacious than I, never bothered to return.

On the 8th of April the following year, after the six-month waiting period required by the IWW Constitution, I was given organizers' credentials and immediately began signing up everybody I could think of.

At the first Chicago Branch meeting I attended, all seven of the old-timers present rolled their own cigarettes. They were a colorful and lovable lot, their basic unity enhanced by a charming diversity. Most of them had hoboed all over the country for years. Several, most notably Fred Thompson and Jack Sheridan, were fine storytellers—a result, no doubt, of decades of union soapboxing. Thompson, the IWW's own in-house historian, had served a few years at San Quentin in the 1920s for "criminal syndicalism" (i.e., IWW organizing). Sheridan, a poet and great reciter of poetry, had longstanding hobo-hemian connections as a survivor of Chicago's old Dil Pickle Club. Walter Westman—IWW General Secretary-Treasurer for decades—had lost a leg leaping from a boxcar during a harvest drive way back when. Carl Keller edited the *Industrial Worker*. Softspoken Charlie Velsek had chaired the union's General Executive Board (GEB) in the 1930s. George Roby, a one-time carnival-worker, was a diehard Esperantist; at every meeting he made a motion that the IWW issue some literature in Esperanto. Carlos Cortez, linocut artist and poet, lived in Milwaukee but came down to Chicago for the monthly Branch meetings; the son of a Mexican Wobbly father and a German socialist/pacifist mother, at forty-something he was the youngest Chicago Wob besides me (I was nineteen).

At my first Wobbly "social," some months later, I met a few dozen more Fellow Workers: Czechs, Swedes, Finns, Hungarians, Russians, and others whose nationalities I never learned. Several had been "class-war prisoners." A couple were nudists. Some had been close to Ralph Chaplin and James P. Thompson in the old days. One elderly Swede cherished a 1920s letter in which his friend Big Bill Haywood told how discouraged he was living in the USSR. There was James "Bozo" Kodl, an actor/playwright who had appeared in several movies (including *Female Jungle*, with Jayne Mansfield) and on TV (often cast as a

drunken cop). Among the many women Wobs were Aino Thompson, active in Women for Peace; Jenny Lahti Velsek, who had studied at Work People's College; the dynamic activist Ruth Sheridan; and Fannie Keller (Carl's wife), who told me that before we—the *Rebel Worker* group—showed up, the office mimeograph had hardly been used since she herself was our age, in the 1930s. "Just think," she said, "every page you print helps make the world a better place. Hearing that old machine is music to my ears!"

Some of the old Fellow Workers we met were no longer paid-up members, and a few had never even joined, but all were part of the broad Wobbly community. To give an idea of IWW non-sectarianism in those years, this milieu also included the anarchist Free Society Group, assorted oddballs from Slim Brundage's College of Complexes, and the old Proletarian Party, a jovial band of philosophy-minded worker-intellectuals who regarded themselves as America's only genuine Marxist-Leninists.

At this social, Fred Thompson introduced me to these oldsters as the "Fellow Worker who is responsible for the fact that there are some younger faces here for a change." Thompson called the 1960s IWW "a union of grandparents and grandchildren," for an entire generation had been skipped. Of the local old-timers, he was the most serious about reactivating the union, and more than any of the others he made it a point to keep in close touch with us younger Wobblies. After Branch meetings he often joined us for further discussion at the nearby Marquis Lunch on Fullerton, and several times invited us over to his and his wife Aino's apartment to plan leaflets or actions, or just to talk about IWW history and what kinds of things needed to be done now. Fellow Worker Thompson was a thoughtful and generous man and a walking encyclopedia of IWW history and lore; we all loved him and we all learned a lot from him.

We, of course—the soon-to-be *Rebel Worker* group—were bursting with ideas of all kinds. Thompson liked them all: a new Chicago Branch magazine, an IWW bookstore (the soon-to-be Solidarity Bookshop), a revival of farm-labor organizing. He also considered the Roosevelt University Wobblies an excellent starting point, particularly since Roosevelt was a workingclass school.

Indeed, the entire Old Guard turned out to be very supportive. They agreed that our proposals would benefit the IWW and help it grow, but they also pointed out how much work was involved, and made it plain that it was *we* who would have to do the work. The union would help, but basically it was up to us.

Our discovery of the works of the wonderful Wobbly writer

T-Bone Slim (Matt Valentine Huhta) provided clinching proof that the IWW was the group for us. Struck by the proto-surrealist quality of his text, "Electricity," in the October 1925 issue of the IWW magazine, *Industrial Pioneer*, I began reading his columns in the bound volumes of old IWW papers in the hall. In no time at all we were hooked. T-Bone's audacious imagination, flamboyant wordplay, and black humor, along with his marvelous maxims ("Wherever you find injustice, the proper form of politeness is attack"; "Half a loaf is better than no loafing at all") and his ability to regard old problems from the most improbable new angles (with results worthy of Alfred Jarry's Pataphysics), convinced us that the IWW project of workingclass self-emancipation went hand in hand with all that we meant by the word *poetry*.

### FREE-SPEECH FIGHT AT ROOSEVELT UNIVERSITY

Forming the R.U. Wobblies broadened our field of action at Roosevelt. What had been a raucous gang around a cafeteria table had now become an organized presence and a real force. As a recognized student group, we were able to set up literature tables, and to bring in speakers, with the University paying the expenses. Several hundred students and faculty turned out to hear Marxist-Humanist Raya Dunayevskaya speak on the "Cultural Revolution" in China. *Industrial Worker* editor Carl Keller spoke on the contemporary relevance of the IWW. But when Roosevelt alumnus Joffre Stewart spoke on the anti-war movement, he incidentally precipitated the biggest scandal in the history of Roosevelt.

Stewart was an impressive speaker, with a flair for the controversial. In his Roosevelt talk (April 22, 1964) he exemplified anarchism's rejection of the State by burning several small flags, including a U.S. flag. The meeting was written up as a front-page feature in the *Roosevelt Torch* (April 27), and the following day President Robert J. Pitchell announced that the Wobblies group was suspended. We were charged with violating fire-safety regulations and an Illinois ordinance prohibiting flag-desecration. Pres. Pitchell added that the IWW—as a "subversive" organization, identified as such on the U.S. Attorney General's list—was also "in clear violation of the Smith Act" and therefore had no business on campus.

No group had ever been suspended at Roosevelt, and the news made all the Chicago dailies. "Fiery Substitute for Panty Raid" was the headline in one. Student papers at the University of Chicago, University of Illinois and other local and faraway campuses gave the suspension prominent coverage.

Pres. Pitchell and his henchman Dean Hoover found little support

for their war on the Wobblies. Roosevelt founding president Edward Sparling defended us by telegram from his retirement in California. For weeks the affair dominated the pages of the *Roosevelt Torch*. The May 11, 1964 issue, for example, includes nine stories about it, plus an editorial, a letter to the editor, a cartoon, and even a mention in the gossip column.

The literature generated by the R.U. Wobblies' suspension was indeed enormous. Almost every campus political group issued at least one statement on the matter, as did the Student Senate and the Faculty. Several faculty members made individual statements. Except for a right-wing Republican club that demanded our "punishment," virtually everyone recognized it as a question of free speech, and demanded our immediate reinstatement. The most interesting response was a letter to the *Torch* from well-known social critic Paul Goodman, emphasizing how lucky Roosevelt was to have a group as relevant as ours (reprinted here on pages 282–283).

Throughout this crisis we Wobblies had a merry time. "Suspended" though we were, new people kept joining, and interest in the IWW and our ideas spread through the student body and beyond. Of course we continued to meet regularly, albeit "unofficially," in the school cafeteria. One day a group of six or seven Illinois Central Railroad conductors came to meet us. Dissatisfied with their own union, they wanted to learn more about the IWW. Nothing much came of it, but some of them did come back, and more than once, to buy IWW pamphlets and stickers.

In and out of school, we kept up a whirlwind of activity. The first issue of *The Rebel Worker* appeared a week after the free-speech fight started, and helped fan the flames of that struggle. We also held a big "Wobblies-in-Exile" meeting—with songs, music, and soapboxing—in Grant Park across the street from Roosevelt. We distributed thousands of IWW leaflets all over downtown Chicago. We set up an IWW literature table at the Maxwell Street open-air market on Sunday mornings. We soapboxed and sold IWW literature at Bughouse Square, and later on Wells Street in Old Town. Wobs were among those arrested at a big anti-HUAC demonstration. And we walked picket-lines galore: at the Spanish Tourist Bureau, demanding freedom for political prisoners in Franco's Spain; at a police graduation ceremony near the old Haymarket cop statue; at Mayor Daley's house, for his stand on school segregation. We joined John Bracey and other Black students in shouting down a racist speech by the Mayor in Grant Park, and took part in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Freedom Day marches. Most of us were also active in CORE, as well

as in the Student Peace Union (SPU), and several members of these groups also took out red cards.

Meanwhile, Paul Goodman's letter (reprinted in *Liberation* and elsewhere) and a write-up by Sarah Murphy in a New York Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) bulletin brought our victorious free-speech fight—and more generally, the IWW revival—to the attention of students and young rebels all over the country.

No doubt about it: Thanks to the R.U. Wobblies and the *Rebel Worker* group, the IWW was noticed, talked about, and written about in the press more than it had been in many years. Several of the old-timers told us how pleased they were to see the union making headlines again.

#### MAY DAY 1964: *REBEL WORKER* 1

The first issue of *The Rebel Worker* appeared on May Day 1964. As editor, I solicited the articles, wrote a lot of copy, typed the stencils and stayed up all night running it off—one page at a time—on the antique electric mimeograph machine at Wob headquarters. It was nearly sunrise when I collated and stapled the first few copies and bicycled twelve miles to my parents' home in the suburb of Forest Park.

We took the name *Rebel Worker* from an old Wobbly paper, circa 1919. For us it signified not only the worker as rebel, but also—and no less important—rebellion against work.

The original *Rebel Worker* group—those who planned and put out the first issue—consisted of Tor Faegre, Robert Green and me, soon joined by Bernard Marszalek, and then, in September, by Penelope Bartik.

Torvald Faegre had been active in the Committee for Non-Violent Action (CNVA), and had taken part in direct actions against the Polaris nuclear submarine on the East coast. His parents were "left of center," and a number of older radicals (Paul Mattick for one) were family friends and neighbors. Tor's own friends included many anarchist-pacifists, including Holley Cantine, Dachine Rainer, Virginia and Lowell Naeve, and Karl Meyer. Tor himself was definitely inclined toward anarchism, though also interested in the left currents of Marxism, and paid more attention than the rest of us to questions of wildlife preservation, ecology, nutrition, air-pollution, and what would later become known as "appropriate technology." A carpenter by trade, and an artist by inclination—always sketching—he was also deeply interested in traditional crafts, most notably calligraphy. His interests were impressively wide-ranging. When we met, he had just designed an italic font of the Cherokee syllabary, to be used in a revival of Cherokee print-

ing. He did the covers as well as headlines and other lettering for all but two issues of *The Rebel Worker* as well as most *Rebel Worker* pamphlets and leaflets. It is also chiefly to him that we owe the beautiful series of Solidarity Bookshop Anarchist-Revolutionary Calendars.

Robert Green was born in rural Wisconsin and grew up on a small farm near Baraboo—a town best known as the summer quarters for circuses—where he became a skilled mechanic/machinist/carpenter, and eventually sculptor/cartoonist/inventor. A born agitator, he was also skilled in the art of getting into trouble, and spent more than his fair share of days behind bars. The day I met him in the Roosevelt cafeteria—he had just returned from a peace march in Indiana—he was wearing a foot-wide nuclear disarmament "button" he had made himself. That was his first semester at Roosevelt; before that he had gone to Wright Junior College, where he was active in civil-rights struggles.

Green was the first of us to move to Lincoln Park, in those days a semi-slum. His "pad"—to use the terminology of the time—was just a few blocks from the IWW hall. Not long afterward he was arrested in a ruckus at Bughouse Square, Chicago's famous free-speech park; the next day he took out a red card. His wife Judy joined shortly thereafter.

From early spring to the late fall of '64, Robert Green was a dynamo of IWW activity. When we revived Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union No. 110, he served as its secretary, and was instrumental in the Michigan organizing drive and The Great Blueberry Strike (the first IWW strike in many years). As Chicago Branch Secretary, he was also—with Faegre, Bernard Marszalek and me—a co-founder of Solidarity Bookshop. Even after he got involved in the short-lived Beatnik Coffee House (formerly The Erechthon Café) and transformed it into a co-op bicycle shop, he was still active in the IWW, although to a lesser degree.

I first met Bernard Marszalek at the Socialist Party office on Van Buren Street, downtown, and later noticed his name listed as the Chicago representative of Colin Ward's *Anarchy* magazine, published by Freedom Press in London. We met again at a demonstration at one of the big Chicago hotels, protesting the visit of the notorious Madame Nhu of Vietnam. Bernard promptly announced that he now considered himself a Bakuninist and favored direct action. His views seemed entirely compatible with ours, and we remained in close touch thereafter. Although he took no part in the first *Rebel Worker*, and was represented in the second only by a letter, from then on he was an integral and energetic figure in the group.

In our milieu, Bernard came closest to fitting the role of "left-wing intellectual," although he probably would have despised such a