

# SKULL TONES



By MIKE BOURNE

## THE REAL ART MUSIC

With RCA Victor, one of the all-time square labels, recording Carla Bley's *Genuine Tong Funeral*, a coming direction in music may perhaps be imminent, i.e. if they can expose such heavy sounds, maybe the wider listening audience will soon be offered a music once too often unrecorded in the economic fear of its limited popularity. Before the advent of ABC's Impulse label, only ESP-DISK (for years the most valiant independent record makers) ever produced such albums, both sadly restricted in sales by the prevailing unenlightened attitude of listeners unable to transcend the negative physical response; after all, New Thing music has always been "ugly" to those uneducated (inexperienced) toward its beauty.

Now, however, those musicians once considered the avant-garde (Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, Coltrane) have become the mainstream, and in their fairly general acceptance (especially among the hipper community) is the foundation for a naturally evolved new New Thing, the real art music. To take significant advantage of such an aesthetic breakthrough, then, two organizations have risen to foster programs of creative musical accomplishment, very often with little or no profit return: the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in Chicago and the Jazz Composer's Orchestra Association in New York. And in their absolute dedication and drive, both groups now represent the healthiest trend for the future of contemporary American music, and will hopefully survive to move us.

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The AACM and JCOA both grew essentially from communal reactions by concerned artists against the general sterility and lack of opportunity in the American music scene. As the JCOA brochure explains, the organization "was created in 1966 by a group of individuals who believe that a place should be found in American cultural life for jazz as an original and major American art form, and in particular for a large permanent jazz orchestra devoted to the performance of the most valuable new jazz works." The AACM, on the other hand, grew not so concerned with such a formal medium as it was with a more fundamental cultural ideology: while the JCOA structure is really a realized end for artists fairly well established and desiring a situation for creative improvement, the AACM seems much more oriented toward establishing the most fertile of atmospheres for both the neophyte and proven artist. And as it is also considerably more multi-dimensional (more arts than music alone, tho still focused on music), the AACM is likewise more educationally directed than the JCOA really seems to intend.

But my purpose is not so much to compare or contrast the various merits of each, but to discuss the new trend as both, in their particular ways, are furthering the spread of American art music; and this spread, after all, is what the AACM and JCOA are really about, despite any semantic differences between their manifestoes. What must be pre-eminent, then, is that the music the two create is certainly among the most important to rise since the daze of the Coltrane-Coleman emotional revolution. For one thing, the social implications of the old New Thing, especially by cats like Archie Shepp, were much angrier, perhaps even aesthetically negative in one sense. The new New Thing, on the other hand, while still emphasizing such a cultural conscience, offers considerably more positivism toward apolitical artistic goals; JCOA composer Mike Mantler, for example, is white while his music remains fundamentally black, and yet he is certainly an innovator in the evolution of Black Art, nonetheless heavy for his lack of the artistic violence that characterized his predecessors.

Hopefully, then, with such achievements as both the AACM and JCOA have made in their relatively brief initial appearances, the movement they have begun may gain its needed momentum to revolutionize a musical environment so in danger of falling static.

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What demands to be witnessed, then, is the product the AACM and JCOA have created: the several Chicago albums on Delmark and Nessa (owned by Chuck Nessa who

runs Bloomington's Discount Records joint to get bread to produce) and the first venture by the JCOA, five of Mike Mantler's "Communications." This latter, of course, is probably the most structured of any of the work by the very nature of the JCOA orientation: featuring a fortune of avant-garde superstars in the new direction, Mantler manipulates them thru a score based more on shifting texture control than formally arranged passages. Spot-lighting Roswell Rudd, Gato Barbieri, Larry Coryell, Don Cherry, Pharaoh Sanders, and Cecil Taylor in showcases particularly conceived about their individual musical characters, Mantler swirls the orchestra in and around each solo as tensions characterize the motion of each piece; Mantler's texts, in fact, included in the deluxe package, are thus actually innovative in themselves in their design for specifically ordered effects (as opposed to traditional methods of notation). By far the most successful of the five pieces, then, is easily the 33-minute "Communications #11" featuring Cecil Taylor which perfectly captures what Mantler describes as coming "From the association with one man. The orchestration of his piano." And since no merely literary means is adequate to convey the experience of such art, I will once again note that the new New Thing is still intended to be witnessed, not discussed.

The music of the AACM, though, is considerably easier to touch, especially as concerns the noticable innovations the various AACM artists have developed. For one thing, the atmosphere created on each of their albums is certainly the most artistically eclectic of any music happening now: "The Bird Song" on Richard Abrams' *Levels and Degrees of Light* (Delmark), for example, combines the poetry of David Moore and the impressionistic group improvisation of Abrams' ensemble with all the sensory impact of witnessing an impressionistic painting transformed into aural experience. Furthermore, this kind of group improvisation is hardly as ferocious as similar excursions on the later Coltrane Impulse jams, but subtler, seemingly more controlled, as if rising from a quiet central impulse instead of the core of vitriol that once characterized the avant-garde; when one hears the beauty on Joseph Jarman's *As If It Were The Seasons* (Delmark), it should be clearly evident that the AACM, before any other musics that claim so, offers the most human of loves as expressed music self. And though there are certainly other pertinent qualities to be covered in the work of the AACM, this latter effect seems the most beautiful of any to be mentioned; in this sense particularly, then, the AACM evolves from the glory of Trane. Finally, as C. Jinarajadasa writes in his manifesto: "We (among ourselves) work towards the brotherhood of giving, the light, the fact of love, we dig ourselves (the knowledge of it, the self) keeps us together. We see light. We are love the whole universe sends us music." And that's what it is.

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In conclusion, then, let me re-emphasize that this new New Thing is still wholly intended for a cultural aristocracy, despite any pronouncements to the contrary: in no way is the music of the JCOA and AACM yet a democratic art, even if they so state. Obviously, any listener incapable of the simplest empathy to Coltrane or Ornette Coleman not only will not relate to this more complex (tho still comparatively simple) movement, but

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