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# jazzwise

"The blues is where it all began"

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Photos: Kristi Sutton Elias

# BLACK EARTH & MONSOON BLUES

Over the last decade Nicole Mitchell has proved herself a progressive force to be reckoned with, recording a slew of albums where quality matches quantity. Her *Mandorla Awakening 11 Emerging Worlds* was one of the key releases of 2017 and she continues the rich vein of form with a new set, *Maroon Cloud*. In a wide ranging discussion with Kevin Le Gendre, Mitchell talks about the gender (im)balance in jazz, the importance of Chicago's venerable AACM and the need to speak out in the age of social media

*Arcana: Musicians On Music* is a collection of articles edited by John Zorn in which, as the title suggests, artists tell it like they hear it. Now in its eigth volume the book provides a platform for all manner of anecdotes and insights into the creative process. The discourse is refreshingly wide and deep. Marilyn Crispell breaks down improvisation, Ikue More dissects drum machines, Marc Ribot takes apart earplugs. Nicole Mitchell also features in the latest edition. However, the flautist's piece was actually not based on any formal analysis of her own compositional process.

"I decided to do something different," she says on the line from North Carolina, where she is currently on holiday. "I wanted to talk about my musical lineage. Obviously, we have cultural lineage, but there's musical lineage, like for me it's members of the group Samana, an all-woman ensemble that was the first group I played with in Chicago. Well, that group was a place for me to have a lot of key development."

Mitchell's desire to share this information helps to fill some vital gaps in the bigger picture of black music in America, bringing to the foreground figures that have largely been obscure. Samana, co-founded by Shanta Nuurullah, 'the sister with the sitar', was also part of the Association For The Advancement Of Creative Musicians (AACM), the organisation that has yielded a number of innovators since the mid-1960s. The likes of Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton and George Lewis, to name but a few, spring to mind, but Mitchell, who moved to Chicago in 1990 after studying at Oberlin, the first American college to admit both blacks and women, and University Of California in San Diego, is keen to point out that there is a distaff side to the history of the AACM that has exerted a very decisive influence on her.

"I'm definitely thankful to musicians like Amina Claudine Myers, who's still performing great music and is one of the earliest women members of the AACM," she points out. "There were a lot of mentors who were great musicians and composers… they didn't necessarily have the opportunities I've had, but they've opened the door to make things possible for me, for example, like Maia, a multi-instrumentalist. She's a vocalist, poet, actor, dancer and choreographer; she's the one that brought me into the AACM. That became an amazing opportunity for me to have even more mentorship."

As a musician who has been active for the best part of three decades Mitchell is as good a person as any to sound out on the current gender balance in jazz, and she argues that there is now considerably greater receptivity towards women in a number of roles other than that of the decorous singer, who, for the most part, is not a composer, or largely not encouraged to be. Yet, a 'hidden' history of female players, from trombonist-arranger Melba Liston in the 1950s to guitarist Monette Sudler in the 1970s and saxophonist-electronics experimentalist Jane Ira Bloom in the 1980s, still needs to fully come to light. "Yeah, the more people hear, the more they're gonna be amazed and not make assumptions, because the best compliment I used to get was 'you sound like a man!'"

From her vantage point the achievements of an artist like the late Geri Allen, who she considers to be 'another amazing role model', should be recognised, along with the struggles she also had to endure. Things have loosely come full circle insofar as Mitchell is now a figurehead to whom many others, male and female, willingly look.

She strengthened her ties to the AACM, being elected vice-president, co-president then president in the five-year period running from 2005 to 2010, and if there is a surge of passion in her voice when discussing the subject it is possibly because she knows the epochal socio-political backdrop of the organisation's genesis. Mitchell likens racial division in late 1960s America to apartheid in South Africa and argues that the triumph of the AACM was its spirit of independence and self-determination as a rebuttal of stereotypes placed on black musicians.

Whether the groundbreaking work produced by its members – from Abrams to Art Ensemble Of Chicago (AEC) and beyond – was deemed free jazz or avant-garde is ultimately not as important as the philosophy of the practitioners. There was an empowerment from within, not without.

"These limitations that were put on them in terms of what kind of music people are expecting them to play, they don't want these limitations, they're gonna create an idea that they can put into action that will transform our possibilities, creating new venues to perform the music," Mitchell states. "And having the freedom to make whatever music they imagine and then to play it around the world, with an impact globally, with these concepts defying boundaries on all fronts, that's an amazing invention."

As Roscoe Mitchell stated at the AEC's Cafe OTO residency last year, "we took the AACM banner wherever we went", notably the memorable Paris sojourn in the late 1960s, and a dynamic exchange, right across cultures and borders, is an important complement to what Nicole Mitchell calls "the system of intergenerational community" that reinforces the mentorship, in the sense of giving as well as receiving, that the flautist willfully acknowledges as an influential force in her career to date.

**"Social media has made it pretty much impossible for you *not* to know what's going on"**

Mitchell's discography certainly bears this out. Since her 2001 debut, *Vision Quest*, she has released around 20 recordings, featuring both revered seniors such as the aforesaid Roscoe Mitchell and Ed Wilkerson and younger musicians such as Tomeka Reid and Mike Reed. A string of albums, such as 2007's *Black Unstoppable* and 2014 *Intergalactic Beings,* saw Mitchell emerge as a zestful, forward-thinking improviser and composer comfortable with both spontaneous and scored materials, and her longstanding outfit, Black Earth Ensemble, is an exemplary modern small group.

Another central strand that runs through Mitchell's music is the use of spoken word as well as sung lyric. The input of poets such as Haki Madhbuti, heard on 2017's superb *Liberation Narratives*, is an explicit manifestation of this, but what is no less interesting is the texts that Mitchell writes herself as a basis for her own compositions. *Mandorla Awakening 11 Emerging Worlds*, another outstanding release from last year, and her new album, *Maroon Cloud*, featuring cellist Reid, vocalist Fay Victor and pianist Aruán Ortiz, which maintains the imaginative scope of her previous work, stemmed from Mitchell's growing confidence when creating text as well as notes.

"It takes me a really long time to write, but I do feel compelled to write, as words and poetry do have a place in my music," she explains. "I guess I've been writing about the same time that I've been playing the flute, so there's a direct link between my compositions and the idea of narrative. For example, on *Mandorla Awakening* I had a narrative that helped me to develop the actual composition for that, and it's the same thing with *Maroon Cloud* – I had a piece of writing that I used to create the music and that's a pretty core aspect of my process. I feel that it's important to have words now. When I was first starting out much more of my music was instrumental than it is now, but I've started feeling really compelled to say something and to have words.

"I mean you can't hide when you use words, as you have to express who you really are and what you're thinking. And you're exposed, in a sense you're vulnerable, but at the same time you're being clear where you stand, and I feel like in our times it's important for people to be clear. People can't hide and say they don't know what's going on anymore. Social media has made it pretty much impossible for you *not* to know what's going on. You know people used to act like they were ignorant about certain things, like 'Oh, I didn't know!' We don't have that excuse anymore."

She keeps her train of thought without pause. "But because everything is exposed, well, that's what makes things seem more horrible in some ways. Everybody knows everything that's happening and you have to be clear on things. I mean that's responsibility, everyone's responsibility. That's another aspect of using words in my music that means that I believe that our thoughts are powerful and that we can impact the future with our thoughts. But I don't necessarily wanna always be direct; that's why I love science-fiction, because you're looking at things more in a fantasy, but it helps you to look at the world in a new way. So you can still deal with social issues.

"Which is one of the reasons why Octavia Butler is so amazing to me. She used fiction to help audiences look at social issues in a way that allows them to be open to think about things differently. Science-fiction is an amazing window for music, and creative music especially, because it gives another pathway for people to understand, to expect the unexpected and be open to not having a specific idea that the music is *supposed* to make them feel a certain way, then it's like, 'Oh, music can do all that.'"

Butler, a monumental presence in contemporary literature who is largely perceived as one of the key progenitors of the Afro-futurism movement, which is enjoying a bit of a mainstream bounce this year through the success of *Black Panther,* wrote, as Mitchell argues, very perceptively about aspects of the human condition that have proved challenging, if not intractable, over time. The first science-fiction writer to be awarded a prestigious MacArthur fellowship, she excelled with stories such as 1984's *Bloodchild* and the *Xenogenesis* series (Mitchell also dedicated an original work, *Xenogenesis Suite*, to Butler in 2007). She had a brilliant imagination that led her to envision worlds beyond earth and tackle themes such as

genetic modification, hybridisation and alternative evolutions of species. The fact that her narratives were set in anything from spaceships that survive horrific nuclear meltdown to the Mojave Desert to barren post-apocalyptic California, and involved highly complex explorations of DNA and the notion of a third sex does not mask the underlying focus she placed on the tragic fracturing of communities, conflict and co-existence.

Needless to say, the question of 'Why can't we live together?' has been a recurrent one in music for many years, but an artist such as Mitchell takes an entirely assertive if not optimistic slant on the subject, believing as she does in will power, knowledge and the better side of humanity. Her emails bear the maxim: "Welcome to the beginning of a new era. The time for justice, clarity, co-operation, awakening."

Whether or not people see the motto as undue optimism or stouthearted resolution rather than resignation in the face of a world lacking justice, clarity, co-operation and awakening, the one thing Mitchell can hold up is concrete examples of her pursuit of said wishes. Throughout her career she has led bands that have a gender balance as well as ethnic variety. For Mitchell diversity is anything but a superficial concept.

"Definitely," she concurs. "That's what I was saying about having intent, to be aware when you put a band together it's like a micro manifestation of a community. So you can develop communities through just having a band in rehearsal, coming together and creating something as a unit; that's an expression of co-existence right there. So each group may have different personnel, especially Black Earth Ensemble; it was designed to change and to have different people coming in and out depending on the projects, and that's something I definitely have a deliberate intent with."

**"The best compliment I used to get was 'you sound like a man!'"**

*Maroon Cloud*, as was the case with *Mandorla Awakening 11 Emerging Worlds*, is a layered, intricately crafted piece of work, yet its communicative energy remains strong. The quartet Mitchell has assembled for the music is a potent example of how a drummer-less ensemble can create sufficient momentum so as snare and cymbal are not missed, and the music has a creative and emotional depth that says as much about the leader-composer's commitment to the cultural and philosophical base of her material as it does her own technical ability.

Like many significant musicians, especially those who have grown from the seedbed of the AACM, Mitchell has an all-consuming interest in the history of the world as it courses through a number of different channels, namely literature, choreography and visual art, as well as music.

While the sense of modernity in her output can be ascribed to some thrilling combinations of western and non-western sounds, such as *Mandorla*'s patchwork of shakuhachi flute, oud and electric guitar, her faith in the bedrock of the black diaspora's imagination is hard to ignore. It's not just in the use of the banjo, one of the first instruments used by slaves. There is the visceral storytelling, the lengthy passages of impassioned recital, the ambiances in which deep truths are conveyed in the most affecting way. Mitchell is more than happy to acknowledge that one of the boldest and most enduring of manifestations of culture in the world informs much of this.

"The blues is essential to African-American expression, it's really where it all began in terms of the black experience in America," she asserts. "It's a memory, there's some memory of a previous life, of an African culture in some way that's fragmented through the experience of being here and then re-cultivated through the experience and imagination and resilience into the blues. So it encapsulates a lot. It's like a feeling more than it is a sound and it's a feeling that I think is resistance and resilience, even though a lot of people assume that it's sadness, and it's mournful. But it's a lot more than that, it's strength and self-determination and creativity, and it's making something out of nothing, really, taking what you have, whatever that is, or how little that is and making something beautiful out of it that you can share with other people." ■