

Interview

“I Dreamed of Other Worlds”: An Interview with Nicole Mitchell, May 8, 2008

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In a recent *Downbeat* article, Anthony Braxton (via Taylor Ho Bynum) describes Nicole Mitchell (www.nicolemitchell.com) as, “the greatest flute player I have ever heard, bar none. State of the state of the state” (qtd. in Jackson 48). Braxton’s opinion is borne out by Mitchell’s recent Jazz Journalists Association award of “Jazz Flutist of the Year” (www.jazzhouse.org). The Chicago-based Mitchell has made a huge mark on the international jazz and creative improvised music scenes in recent years, not only for her vibrant improvisations, but for her compositions, her Black Earth Ensemble, and her leadership in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music. The conversation recorded here explores some of Mitchell’s recent work and probes the strong social ethics of her artistic vision.



(Photo by Brad Walseth)

[Click on the link](#) to hear “Double Voiced Praises,” a solo flute improvisation by Nicole Mitchell.¹

EW: Nicole Mitchell, you’re an incredibly accomplished musician: flutist, vocalist, improviser, composer, organizer, and community activist. You’ve broken new ground for the instrument—creating a highly original voice on the whole range of flutes; for women in jazz and improvised music—recently becoming the first woman leader to record for the famous 55 year old Delmark Label with your Black Earth Ensemble’s *Black Unstoppable*; and for women in Great Black Music—as first woman co-chair of the AACM.

I’d like to begin our interview by having you speak to a poem about you written by Kalamu ya Salaam and presented in the liner notes of *Black Unstoppable*. It’s called “Nicole Mitchell’s Judgment Day Testimony”—a theme that points to the prominent social conscience that seems to pervade your work and life. Salaam describes you as “a life force for beauty and betterment”—which strongly suggests that music has far more than an aesthetic value for you. The first line of the poem is, “I never dreamed of being a part of what already was; I dreamed of other worlds.” What does that line mean to you? How would you describe your vision?

NM: I would have to start with the inspiration of my mother, who loved to paint and to write creatively, and who was constantly expressing ideas of other worlds through her art. She impressed that upon me—how

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to take blankness or nothingness and create a combination of what's familiar and what's unknown, or what's never existed before, with creativity—whether with music, or visual art, or with writing a story. That always fascinated me, so I like working with that idea of a bridge. There's where we are, there's how we perceive our reality. Then there's always those special moments, whether they be of fear or of inspiration, when it's like the world has suddenly cracked open and it's way more than we ever imagined. That's what I seek when I improvise. That's why I love to improvise. Because improvisation is a practice that allows you not to be focused on the smallness of who you are and your reality, but to actually experience the greatness of possibility and surprise and spontaneity. But also with composing there's the idea of creating music that can be transformative and inspirational. I tend to be visually oriented when I'm writing music, so I'm thinking about these ideas. I'm seeing different things, or feeling out some type of story. Some people criticize me for that, saying that I tend to be too programmatic. I do draw my inspiration from those other visual concepts. I guess my other take on that idea (of embracing the otherworldly) is the idea of visionary art. I see a lot of especially African American artists or Black artists whose work is inspired by history and reality. Say, for example, a movie that's dealing with relationships, that's dealing with life—with *real* life, that's very tangible, regular life—but they're glorifying life's problems through art. Or in some ways, to me, not only glorifying it, but perpetuating the problems in it. I also reflect on history and reality in my work, but what I really want to do is get you to think about some other possibility. I seek to be inspired by artists that try to do more visionary things with their work, rather than just to be reflective.

EW: Who are some people who have inspired you that way?

NM: Octavia Butler is one. I just did a piece called *Xenogenesis Suite* (on [Firehouse 12](#)) that was inspired by her book *Dawn*. She's considered an Afro-futurist, being a science fiction writer, and she definitely used her imagination, almost scientifically, to explore different possibilities and social situations—and not necessarily utopian ones. It was a real challenge to do Butler's work, because I think my music tends to be very joyous and celebratory. So this was exploring another part of myself, to face head on the process of fear through the music and convey that feeling through the music. That was a really challenging project, and I felt that I grew a lot as a composer doing it. It helped me to explore parts of myself that I might otherwise avoid. You can be all happy and cheerful, but when you're making a transformation you still gotta deal with those hard times. Everything's not all strawberries all the time! (laughs)

EW: (laughing) But it should be! I connected that with the line in ya Salaam's poem that says, "I did whatever was necessary to face down the dragons of survival. I never surrendered to despair." This seems true of the protagonist in *Dawn*, who is a black woman abducted by aliens in the wake of a nuclear war and on whose courage the fate of humanity rests. In one of the press releases for the *Xenogenesis Suite*, you are quoted as saying that the book "deals with the condition of fear and our ability to adapt in inhumane circumstances" (*Nicole*). I really thought that you are trying to get at something about our need to face fear head on and to foster courage in this particular time. Is this a political statement for you?

NM: I have a lot of hope and love for humanity, but I'm also being real in observing the scary side of humanity—the fact that as human beings we really don't cherish life. The human race is suicidal. When we're killing other people we're really killing off ourselves. That concept of superiority, or hegemony, or domination—the idea that one idea is better than another—leads us down a road to destruction. Yet it's a part of who we are, and it's scary and it's disturbing. I guess I was facing that [in the *Xenogenesis Suite*], because it's a universal reality that's repeated itself over and over again. We've got all this technology, but spiritually we haven't really evolved beyond the idea of domination versus making connections and partnerships. We need to focus on sharing and be more holistic. I hope that's a transition we can get to, eventually.

EW: It seems to be something that's important to you, perhaps underlined by the line in Kalamu ya Salaam's poem that says, "I am a creative soul who honors the feminine of myself; the blackness of my people, and the life of all humans." When we first met in 2005, you talked about your 2003 piece *Vision Quest: Hope, Future and Destiny*, a "multi-dimensional community project" that brought together musicians, dancers, artists and young people. When I listened to your CD *Black Unstoppable* I saw that the theme of empowering young women was still there. I wonder if you could speak to your continued commitment to empowering young women in particular in your work.

NM: I would say that it's in my playing. A lot of people ask me about my use of the voice in my playing. I sing into the flute, I sing with the flute, I sing and then I just play the flute. So I have all these combinations of the relationship between the voice and the flute. Part of that comes from the desire to leave evidence that a woman was here. Because, you know, it is a very male dominated field. Even without a video or picture of

that music, I want to leave that mark, that aesthetic of whatever is coming through me as a woman, as a channel for that feminine energy. I think that people get this idea about what that creative feminine aspect is, and it's usually not understood. Because there's a real power and strength, just as there is to the power of nature, and the power of mother—and the fact that each living being comes through a mother. That power isn't really celebrated in our society right now.

In terms of empowering young women, I enjoy working with lyrics that address their concerns. There's just no music out there for them! You know, I am a mother and my daughter is a teenager. The music that she listens to, half of it I want to turn off because it's just talking about "going in the club" and "smoking reefer" and all this stuff that doesn't have anything to do with being a 14-year old girl. The commercial culture really tries to sell sex to young people—early!

EW: In the track "Life Wants You to Love" on *Black Unstoppable*, there is a sense of the joy of emerging sexuality—it's a very sensual song—but there's also this strong note of caution.

NM: Yeah—"You've still got a lot to learn! Your mind is still a child!" I hope that it sinks in a little bit. (laughs) I'm often criticized for my lyrics being too "positive," which I think is kind of goofy. It's goofy on the critics' part to want to hear a bunch of depressing stuff all the time—for that to be cool.

EW: But I think that the idea of hope is very sophisticated in your work. I'm reminded of the way that you described your *Vision Quest* work to me. What do you do when you're a young woman, you've had a child, and you don't have a partner? You're working on your own, and suddenly now you're off the rails in our society. You have no longer got a place to be. You're not ostracized, but you're not supposed to be young anymore, or creative, or have a life in front of you . . .

NM: Or have a dream . . .

EW: Right—so what's happened to her vision, what's happened to her voice? I think that it's a very potent message to offer that young woman—that she may have all kinds of challenges in her life, but that it doesn't have to shut her down.

NM: That was a very empowering experience doing *Vision Quest*. Hopefully I'll get a chance to do it again, or even make a video out of the story so that other people can see it.

EW: This is a huge problem with multi-media work. Amazing things happen, but if they're not documented others can't benefit from them. What kinds of projects are important to you now, when you think about your vision?

NM: A few different things. When I expanded the Black Earth Ensemble to a larger, big band instrumentation, I simultaneously maintained Black Earth Strings, which is a quartet with violin, viola, cello, and bass along with flute. I'm writing a different program of music for that. But I'm also trying to develop the *Xenogenesis* project to make a new phase of it that will have completely different music, collaborating with a solo dancer and expanding the instrumentation to include a string ensemble. My next big challenge is to try to compose something for orchestra. I have a project I want to do called *Flights of Freedom* to celebrate Harriet Tubman, because I think she's really one of our greatest American heroes. It's amazing, the lack of celebration that we have of her life. She is an extraordinary example of courage, determination, and intelligence. Her story is not only empowering—her goal was to support others' human rights and she had success in spite of her hardships—but it's an exciting story! She continually faced fear and was so courageous. I'd like to use her story as a foundation to create a piece for flute and orchestra that could be expanded to include video or collaborative dance.

EW: Again you have that theme of facing up to things, of courage and perseverance. This is a real thread in your work . . .

NM: I don't think there's enough stuff out there like that. Especially the way times are now. People need to feel that there is still hope. I don't want to get super political, but I think that's why people are so excited about [Democratic presidential nominee Barack] Obama, because he inspires hope in people again. We *can* look at this constitution, we *can* find something beautiful, and there's a possibility of creating beauty out of this mess we're in now.

EW: You were recently commissioned by the Jazz Institute of Chicago and Estrada (Poznan, Poland) to

create the *Harambee Suite* addressing the complex interactions of race and society in the United States. What a huge topic that is! I wonder if you could say something about that work?

NM: What's so funny is that the piece was only performed once! It premiered in Poland in November 2006. Originally the intention was just that I would do Black Earth music, but of course I wanted to do something new with the opportunity, so I created the *Harambee* project. It was a multi-cultural ensemble that also included *taiko* drummers, Tatsu Aoki on bass, and there were some AACM musicians on the roster. It was definitely another "journey" piece. It dealt with the chaos and conflict that is created by misunderstanding and ignorance between people who come from different experiences, clashing and not making connections. But then there's an anticipation, or hope, to make that connection. Finally you can find some way to make harmony. *Harambee* is a Swahili word that means "to come together." The development of the movements is from chaos into order.

EW: Your music moves flexibly between very clear structures, beautiful melodic statements, and all this mixed genre hopping that you do, but there's also a lot of room for individual expression on the part of band members. And I felt the same thing listening to the *Xenogenesis Suite* and *Black Unstoppable*, even though the music is quite different. There's still all this room for individual voices. I was struck by an interview in George Lewis' new book on the AACM, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, where you told him about first learning to improvise as a student in San Diego. You said it was like "learning how to crawl and walk all over again, it definitely fit more with who I am" (465). I wonder about the relationship between improvisation and composition in your work? What's the relationship between individual voices and self-discovery in your ensembles, versus your overarching ideas of structure?

NM: Each composition has its own aesthetic and its own structure that I'm reaching for. The Octavia Butler work was definitely more collectively focused. People listening felt that there wasn't all that much "soloing" going on, because the approach to improvisation was actually so guided by the aesthetic of what I was trying to do in each movement. The improvisations had a definite relationship to the fabric of the composition, and there was a certain direction that I wanted the improvisations to go. The musicians had a clear role. In some ways that contrasts with the greater freedom that the musicians had on *Black Unstoppable*, which is probably seen as a more mainstream work. It seems that unless I'm playing in a small group formation, I'm more focused as a composer. So I'm just listening for all the voices and how they can express the meaning of the work, rather than "ok, it's time for the flute solo, everybody else play backup!"

EW: I'm reminded of hearing you with Anthony Braxton's 12 + 1tet ensemble at the FIMAV.² That music is tightly composed, but the players have the power to choose their music in the moment and invite other members of the band to play duets within the texture. So there's another large ensemble leadership model that nevertheless makes room for individual musicians to have their interpretive voice, but that is definitely embedded in a strong leadership model. One could also say that about your large ensemble pieces . . .

NM: Definitely. I've been blessed by the musicians that I work with—I've always had a group of people that has this great chemistry together. So there's a real relaxed connection and friendship that goes along with playing the music. When you have that you can have spontaneity. People can be inspired in the moment to make their statement, those completely unrehearsed and unplanned moments that can open up and make something new. It's based on trust.

EW: I don't know where you find the time to do everything you do! You are so prolific as a composer, player, and leader, and then you've done all this other work! There's another line in Kalamu ya Salaam's poem that says, "I gave children the art of music, unstinting love and creative energy. What more was there to give?" Last time we met you told me that you had founded a Creative Youth Orchestra at the AACM School of Music, and you've just done a Unity Orchestra in Paris for the Banlieues Bleues jazz festival. I'm interested to hear more about your pedagogical work.

NM: I'm going to Vancouver in June for my third season of leading the Vancouver International Jazz Festival's High School Jazz Intensive,³ which is a big band of high school students that come together from all over B.C. I really enjoy working with them. I usually do a composition competition where students compete to have a song chosen for me to arrange for the band. Then I bring some of my music, and also from other composers out of the legacy of the music. That's one of my favorite things to do—working directly with young musicians.

Part of that pedagogy is also just working with my bands. In my string group, there's this great violinist and violist Renee Baker who is the principle violist of the Chicago Sinfonietta (the second orchestra next to the Chicago Symphony), and she had never improvised in her life. I brought her into my string group because I knew from her personality that she was fearless. I just knew that she would be an exciting addition to the group! It's really exciting for me when I can give someone an opportunity to be exposed to the music. And someone like her, she goes and brings ten other string players into improvisation! Within two years of playing with me (Black Earth Strings), she had started two of her own groups, and she's written over a hundred compositions. Now she's a new member of the AACM. Part of the AACM pedagogical idea is connecting, whether that's intergenerational or to inspire someone new into the music.

I've been doing a lot of teaching as well. I've been teaching jazz history at the University of Illinois to two hundred students, and I have the large ensemble jazz band at Wheaton College. But I really love doing residencies; I think that's my favorite thing. I did a residency at Carthage College in Wisconsin where they did my big band charts. I got to meet the band, rehearse, and play with them. That's similar to what I did in Paris with the Banlieues Bleues Orchestra in 2007. And the Creative Youth Ensemble was a group of high school students who were really into jazz but had not been exposed to creative music. I brought that group together, wrote some charts for them, and we did a performance at the International Society for Improvising Musicians.

EW: Was that just a one off?

NM: We actually haven't done that much lately. It's interesting: there are so many opportunities and programs for high school students that I felt that it was kind of over saturated. They're all competing for rehearsal time with the same kids so I kind of pulled back. Maybe I'll work with some elementary school students.

EW: As part of our Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice project, we've been running a research project on improvisation and pedagogy in Guelph high schools, documenting the Guelph Jazz Festival's "Jazz in the Schools" program. This year it was Lori Freedman who worked with the kids. And we're really just trying to ask ourselves how to reach out to kids who haven't encountered this music before, or even the idea of improvising. There's all this freedom that for some students is like a gift, but for other students is terrifying.

NM: Exactly.

EW: What age of student do you find is best prepared to encounter creative improvisation?

NM: I think high school is good. That's when they're really getting serious. There are students who are really passionate about learning about jazz and improvisation. It's good to give them a more holistic experience and exposure, so that they can see what all the possibilities are. Then they can develop a certain versatility versus developing a limited idea of improvisation—this language that's in a box. I think that's just a really good age. Elementary students are great, but at the same time they're just learning the rudiments of their instruments. But that can be good too. Right now I have about 20 beginner violinists in a fourth grade class. I'm just doing a short, experiential thing with them, because they're just getting used to the instruments. They're at a school where they have no music program, no art program. I just wanted to get some instruments in their hands!

EW: How did you get 20 violins?

NM: A friend of mine just happened to have them. She had collected them but wasn't using them so she let me borrow them.

EW: Are you a fiddle player?

NM: I'm really not, but my first instrument was viola, so I know enough to get them started.

EW: It's one of those instruments where you're *gonna* make "experimental" sounds when you first pick it up!

NM: Exactly!

EW: Can I bring us back to the AACM?

NM: Sure.

EW: In most of the interviews and articles I've read about you, your work with the AACM is not mentioned all that often. I've been interested for a while in the (mostly unmentioned but very influential) support roles that people play in arts organizations. There's a great deal of work that gets done through administration, through clear headedness and the ability to organize people—the will to put large amounts of volunteer effort into a cause. What made you want to get involved in the AACM on an organizational level?

NM: Actually, I almost always speak on the AACM, but of course there's not room for everything to be printed. For several years now I have seen myself as a bridge between two generations of members. We have a core of members that are about fifteen to twenty years older than me, and then there are the new members that are in their twenties and thirties (ten to fifteen years younger). Then there's me right in between! I've been trying to help develop the bond between these two very different groups that have different perspectives about themselves and the world. I've been involved in the executive board since 1997, starting as secretary, then vice-chair, and for the last two years I've been co-chair. I felt I was needed to help move the organization forward.

EW: The AACM has huge resonance for those of us who aren't from that milieu, but who are committed to the idea of what music can do to foster models of social engagement that are positive and inclusive. What are your thoughts about the AACM's role now that it has passed its 40th anniversary, and George Lewis's history has come out?

NM: I think the title of George's book is the perfect definition of the AACM: *A Power Stronger than Itself*. There have been definite accomplishments that people can rally around, be inspired by, and even use as a model. At the same time there's so much more that it can be, that hasn't manifested yet. It's just a vehicle, as any organization is. It can be a vehicle for people to get together and make things happen, to manifest their ideas and their goals. So we've accomplished a few things in the last few years that are good. We have some new members. We had a nice partnership with the Son d'hiver festival in Paris, where we had an AACM-coordinated night that brought together AACM musicians from Chicago and New York. Bringing AACM musicians that had never played in Paris or who are lesser known there, but that we really revere here in Chicago.

There are so many more educational programs that we can do. We have this history going back to 1969 of providing music lessons for the neighborhood surrounding the school which is located on the far south side. There's still so many other types of educational programs we could do—like the Creative Youth Ensemble or symposia that are more oriented towards college musicians.

Because it's a collective of musicians, you definitely have broad skill sets. Some people are really good at writing grants or doing the business thing. Other people play really well or they compose. But because the membership *is* all musicians (it's not like we have professional grant writers or lawyers—all the different types of people that can make an organization like a business, run like a sports car, run really well) that has its ups and downs. It comes down to the most important element, which is the music itself. As long as the music is still vital, still growing, and is still bringing inspiration to people—that's the core of what the organization is.

Through that music, my own personal experience would say that mentorship and the connection between the generations is the most vital force behind the organization. You know, my own relationship with mentors like George Lewis, Ed Wilkerson, Avreeayl Ra, and Fred Anderson—people that you can talk to and get their experience. There's a sense of family and community and support. Doing your own thing, developing your own voice—that's the other strength. It's philosophical. The strength is the idea of openness and a real diversity of ideas between the members, yet still being able to get along (laughs).

We need to honor the differences. If you listen to all these different composers and musicians and music, everyone is very individual. Even though some people try to define this "sound of the AACM," there really isn't a sound of the AACM. It's a concept. I think that Muhal [Richard Abrams] and the co-founders were really smart to define their purpose in creating the AACM as making "original music," which allows people to find their own voice in it. The connection and playing together in the large ensemble, things like that, you learn each others' music and each others' language, and you develop your own language. That's the part

that I think a lot of people from the outside are inspired by. We seem to survive!

Notes

¹ Thanks to Nicole Mitchell for generously providing this music and photo (Editors).

² Festival International de Musique Actuelle in Victoriaville, Quebec. www.fimav.qc.ca.

³ TD Canada Trust Vancouver International Jazz Festival, and TD Canada Trust High School Jazz Intensive. http://www.coastaljazz.ca/index.cfm?page_id=10031.

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